Confronting Sectarianism: Islamic Civilizational Renewal and the Management of Deep Differences

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Introduction

"Hold fast to the rope of Allah all together and do not be divided"—this command from the Allah Almighty (Āl ʿImrān 3:103) is not a suggestion or a choice; it is the very foundation of our religion. But what does it truly require of us? What kind of unity is Allah commanding? And in the face of profound and long-standing divisions — grounded in political conflicts, doctrinal disputes, and/or foreign influences — compounded by centuries of mistrust, how ought we to respond to this imperative? As believers, naturally, we are committed to our particular sub-tradition as being the truthful one. Does this commitment preclude any possibility of dialog and/or cooperation with those we believe to be in error beyond debate or refutation? To phrase the question in Islamic terms, What is our Islamic obligation toward those we deem to be in error?

The entrenched sectarianism in Muslim life — which extends beyond silent animosities to open hostilities, from brawls and sporadic violence to regional politics and even grand geopolitical strategies of hostile powers, including colonial invasions, occupations, and genocides, built upon its perpetuation — flies in the face of the divine imperative of unity. We cannot limit our response to mere rhetoric, romantic depictions of the past, deferring Muslim unity to the distant future, or the coming of some messianic figure, although each of these responses have their place. We must, rather, work toward it tirelessly, leveraging scriptural guidance, our knowledge of the past and the possibilities of the present, and with a realistic plan.

In this paper, I argue that it is possible to address the challenge of sectarianism without denying or wishing away the existence of *deep differences* among us or ceasing to defend our theological positions and refute what we believe to be incorrect doctrines and practices. It is often assumed that sectarian differences are timeless, unchanging, a given. A careful understanding of Islamic history, the contemporary world, and the nature of sectarianism call this assumption into question. Instead of resigning to it helplessly, we must and we can address and manage it. The solution starts with our knowledge and attitudes, and hence, our ʿulama. We must develop a new discipline to study the effective *management of Muslims' deep differences* in a way that upholds the divine command of maintaining unity. To this end, this paper offers some provisional suggestions presented to elicit feedback and guidance from our scholars and community leaders, particularly those based in the West.

This study begins by framing both the urgency and the possibility of confronting sectarianism in the modern context before clarifying the key concepts necessary for addressing it. It argues for a vision of Islamic unity that is both feasible and desirable, grounded in an understanding of sectarianism as a pervasive human tendency, its mechanisms and manifestations, and historical efforts to contain it. Despite the many trials and conflicts in Islamic history, Sunni Islam — at its best — has served as a stabilizing force, managing deep differences rather than suppressing them. The study then surveys scriptural, classical, and contemporary Muslim scholarly efforts aimed at this goal. Drawing on these sources, alongside historical experience and contemporary social science research, it proposes a framework for managing deep differences as a distinct area within traditional Islamic studies and applies this framework specifically to Sunni–Shiʿa relations.

The Modern Context

As I write these words, a genocide is unfolding in Gaza — the Land of Ribāṭ, the Blessed Land of the Prophets — under the watchful eyes, and often the active complicity, of neighboring Sunni-majority states. These regimes are not merely silent; many are directly

aiding the aggressor, shielding it diplomatically, and supplying it with essential support. Whatever their immediate motives — strategic calculations, fear of Iran, or alignment with global powers — this collective betrayal would be unthinkable without the groundwork laid by decades of sectarian division.[1] For years, political and religious elites across the region have fostered and weaponized the Sunni–Shīʿa schism. Amplified by both local regimes and foreign powers, these divisions have so fractured the political will and moral compass of Sunni leadership that siding with Israel has become, for some, an act of self-interest rather than an unthinkable treason.

Rightly enraged by Iran's murderous role in Syria and Iraq, but also largely indifferent to the suffering inflicted by Sunni rulers on the Shia, many of us have long consoled themselves with theories suggesting that it is Iran and not their own ruling elites that are the true allies of Israel and the West. That narrative has become harder to sustain since Israel's genocidal war on Gaza since 7 October 2023. But it lingers. Recently, when Israel launched a major unprovoked attack on Iran's nuclear enrichment facilities and cities, many Sunnis reacted in support and solidarity for Iran. But the reaction of some of the more vocal voices can be expressed in the words of one Sunni shaykh that, "Today the people of Islam, the Ahl al-Sunna, are caught between two projects, the Zionist-Crusader one and the Safavi-Rafidi one."[2] Note that this categorization by the respected shaykh gives away the disparity even of categorization: the Jews and Christians are saved from condemnation; the culprits are Zionists and Crusaders. But not fellow Muslims: Iran's actions are connected to a five-centuries-old empire and the Rafidi sect. As we will note below, the deployment of Twelver Shīʿism is a strategy of the Iranian elite's soft power, just as until recently Saudi Arabia presented itself as the champion of Islam, or of Sunni Islam; neither should be accepted at face value. Regardless, this is just one illustrative example; both far more vituperative and more reasonable critiques can be easily cited. The engagement in the comment section to this clip, presumably mostly Sunnis, split equally between those sympathetic to the shaykh, thanking him for not letting them forget the real enemy, and others who disagreed, some accusing him of blind sectarianism.

From the standpoint of a neutral observer, is it really so difficult to recognize that Iran's crimes against Sunnis in Iraq and Syria are of the same nature as the Sunni regimes' crimes against Shīʿa — not to mention their crimes against other Sunni populations? Iran's weaponization of Shīʿism and its support of a Baʿthist tyrant in Syria is no less heinous than the crimes of a Baʿthist tyrant in Iraq who, after provoking a catastrophic war that claimed millions of lives, massacred Shīʿa while invoking Sunni and Arab nationalist rhetoric. Nor is it different from Sunni-led states starving and bombing millions of Yemeni Sunnis while claiming leadership of the Sunni world. Both sides have also oppressed impoverished minorities of the other sect within their own borders. It may be true, as Shaykh ʿAbd al-Ḥayy suggested, that while Iran represents a Shīʿa project, there is no coherent Sunni project in the world today. But this raises a deeper question: Why is that so? Why is it that the Shīʿa project, for all its flaws, is the only one resisting genocide, while Sunni leaders and elites actively support it — even signing agreements that erase Sunni Palestinians and surrender Islam's First Qibla? Can anyone honestly believe that Sunnis are in this moment the defenders of Islam and Shīʿa now and always its enemies? To answer this rhetorical

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[1] A recent diplomatic history by Bahraini-American scholar Elham Fakhro in her book *The Abraham Accords*, for instance, concludes that the Accords, which effectively erased Palestine from the map, were driven by the signatories' belief that the Zionist colonial entity is their ally against their Muslim rivals.

[2] موقفنا من اعتداء دولة الإحتلال على إيران .. د. عبدالحي يوسف

question, I will invoke the words of Imam Abu Ḥanifa in his letter to the great traditionist ʿUthmān al-Battī: We are the people of justice and people of Sunnah![3]

By global power brokers, Muslim sectarianism is viewed as a defining feature of "primitive" societies, incapable of contributing to the modern world. In an age dominated by multinational organizations and corporations, Muslims are relegated to an era of old prejudices and irrational hatreds, seen as unable to unite for collective action. The global elites, who largely perceive Islam as a threat, base their strategies on these divisions. "Divide and conquer" remains their core approach, relying on Muslims remaining fragmented, unintegrated, and underrepresented—even by their own governments.

President Barack Obama, for instance, explained the Syrian conflict as a function of "ancient sectarian differences" that are "rooted in conflicts that date back millenia." "Sunnis and Shiites have been engaged in a sectarian civil war since 632," according to Senator Ted Cruz. Right-wing TV pundit Bill O'Reilly gleefully observed that "the Sunni and Shiʿa want to kill each other. They want to blow each other up. They want to torture each other. They have fun … they like this. This is what Allah tells them to do, and that's what they do."[4]

More importantly, Benjamin Netanyahu's bold strategy to expand Israel's regional influence—and its borders to realize a Greater Israel—rests on deepening and exploiting ongoing conflicts, while preventing representative Islamic governments from rising in neighboring states.

Western colonial powers and their regional allies have long operated on the assumption that sectarian divisions between Sunni and Shiʿa Muslims are both enduring and exploitable—and that efforts toward Muslim unity must be deliberately thwarted. As a farcical example of this larger campaign, Israeli General Avichay says addressing Sunni-Salafi Muslims in particular,

"whoever acts like a people is one of them … You [Hamas] have officially become Shia in line with the prophet's saying … Have you not read the works of the classical jurists, scholars … who have clearly warned you about the threat Iranian Shiism poses to you and your peoples?"

He then goes on to cite MuḤammda b. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb and Ibn Taymiyya to the effect that the Rāfiḍa are worse and more dangerous to religion than Jews and Christians.[5] In light of Gaza, Netanyahu's wager on that fragmentation is, once again, paying off. Not only that, Israel seems to have successfully ended not only pan-Islamic cooperation, but also pan-Arab unity.

Must this be so? What prevents the diverse Muslim regions and cultures—united by Islamic civilization and shared linguistic ties—from forging a cohesive entity that preserves their rich diversity and local identities? Do the imperatives of preserving Muslim lives and

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[3] Abū Muqātil al-Samarqandī (d. 208 H), *K. al-ʿĀlim wa-l-mutaʿallim*, p. 38. This text was published as a collection of epistles attributed to Abū Ḥanīfa, compiled and edited by M. Zāhid al-Kawtharī (n.p., AH 1368/CE 1949). The collection comprises the following treatises: *K. al-ʿalim wa-l-mutaʿallim* as reported by Abū Muqātil, followed by *Risālat Abī Ḥanīfa ilā ʿUthmān al-Battī*, followed by *al-Fiqh al-Absaṭ* as reported by Abū Muṭīʿ al-Balkhī.

[4] Hashemi and Postel, *Sectarianization*, 2-3.

[5] See: James M. Dorsey, "Israel Adopts Abandoned Saudi Sectarian Logic," 19 June 2018, https://www.fairobserver.com/region/middle_east_north_africa/israel-videos-anti-iran-shia-saudi-arabia-world-news-32349/ and this video as an example: https://x.com/AvichayAdraee/status/1004454954088706049 (posted 6 June 2018; accessed 14 July 2025). In this vein, we may point out Oded Yinon's 1982 essay *A Strategy for Israel in the 1980s* argued that Israel's long-term security would be best served by the fragmentation of neighboring Arab states along sectarian and ethnic lines—particularly in Iraq, Syria, and Egypt—though the essay reflected a personal viewpoint and not official Israeli policy. But like Israel's unacknowledged nuclear arsenal, this plan to create sectarianism and fragmentation is more attestable as a policy in the real world than what is officially spoken. It is no secret that since at least 1982, Israelis and Americans have dreamt of 'rebuilding' the region, and sectarian fragmentation is the cornerstone of that strategy: https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/10/02/how-israel-is-trying-to-impose-a-new-regional-order-in-the-middle-east_6727932_4.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com

safeguarding Islam, along with the modern threats of further division and destruction, not offer sufficient incentive to confront and manage our seemingly timeless conflicts through dialogue, scholarship, and institutional innovation?

The opportunities and threats of the modern era

In the modern era, new threats and opportunities have profoundly reshaped global human solidarities, transforming communities once locked in persistent conflict or isolated from integration—spanning Europe, China, and India—into unified and influential nations. India, historically never united, always a mosaic of linguistic diversity and religious conflicts, lacked cultural homogeneity for much of its existence, with political unity emerging only in the modern period through colonial and postcolonial frameworks. China, despite its image of historical continuity, also endured centuries of dynastic disunity and ethnic complexity. Its re-emergence as a unified modern state followed centuries of fragmentation and a colonial "century of humiliation," shaped as much by internal reform as by the demands of a transforming global order. Likewise, Europe, bound by a shared Christian heritage yet fractured into warring states, unleashed unprecedented violence in the two world wars, only to forge a remarkable economic and political union within decades, with open borders and a common currency, overcoming its legacy of ethno-nationalist strife.

Every powerful state in the world today, not least the United States, is a result of adoption of certain institutions that have helped, or forced, their populations to overcome ethnic, linguistic, and sectarian differences. Some had been at each other's throats in the past for centuries. The French and the Germans have entertained hatred for each other for some 1200 years since Charlemagne's time, and fought two world wars claiming the lives of millions just in the last century. The English-French rivalry, too, dates back a thousand years. The rise of the European Union in 1993 has clearly shown that such age-old animosities between people do not determine their behavior and future possibilities.

All modern nation-states, in short, were born by erasing or mitigating old communal boundaries and creating new ones along the lines of what may be called the secular religion of nationalism.

By treating sectarianism as an incurable condition of the Ummah, some Muslim scholars unwittingly suggest that while others — bound by narrow ideologies like nationalism or tribalism — can overcome their divisions, we, despite being united by the truth of the Two Testimonies, somehow cannot. Ethnic and ideological solidarities thrive despite lacking a truthful and rational basis; yet Muslims, called to holding on to Allah's rope in unity, must remain fractured. What explains this defeatist attitude? Colonialism, authoritarianism, and geopolitical exploitation have all contributed to our disunity and erosion of hope — but they continue to triumph largely because of our inability to fully grasp and confront the roots of the problem.

The urgency of confronting sectarianism stems not only from external threats but also from the internal decay it breeds within the Muslim community. Nor is this problem confined to Sunni-Shia divisions. A sectarian culture that passively inherits ancient animosities—unchecked by Islamic ethics, rigorous scriptural reasoning, and informed historical and social analysis—becomes vulnerable to distortion, manipulation, and divide-and-rule tactics by hostile forces.

It is worth noting that many modern scholars regard the "Information Age" as a distinct epoch in human history.[6] This shift presents a particular challenge for mainstream Sunni Islam: reverential silence can no longer safeguard peace or piety among the masses. The Information Age has not only intensified these challenges but arguably demands a qualitatively different response. Just as state institutions, social media, and modern technologies offer unprecedented opportunities to address these issues through dialogue and engagement, failing to harness them risks fueling sectarian hatred on a scale greater than ever before.

The era of innocence—when one knew only a single religion or culture—may seem appealing, but it is long gone. Today, most Muslims are aware of other religions and, within Sunni Islam, of multiple legal and theological schools. Recognizing the existence of diverse theological interpretations, both within and beyond Sunni Islam—even if we consider them incorrect yet still within the fold of Islam—is unlikely to cause harm. Recognizing this diversity could, in fact, be beneficial: it can strengthen one's own understanding through critical engagement, foster humility and patience in disagreement, and build solidarity on shared essentials without compromising theological integrity. Moreover, it may help immunize Muslims against anti-Islamic attacks that exploit internal ignorance and division by turning Muslims against one another based on distorted representations of their own tradition. Most important of all, such an attitude may induce reciprocity that will bring all of us closer to the truth.

In fact, scholars based in the West may hold greater potential in this regard than our counterparts in the Muslim world, where such initiatives often carry significant political risk. Less constrained by authoritarian regimes that exploit sectarianism, we benefit from exceptional freedom to engage, experiment, and access a broad range of voices. This places us in a unique position to pioneer a tradition of principled intra-faith dialogue. Rarely elsewhere do scholars from such diverse backgrounds — Sufi, Salafi, Ashʿari, Deobandi, Barelvi, Sunni, Shiʿa — enjoy comparable opportunities for meaningful engagement.

The Unity We Need

Let us heuristically distinguish two contemporary Muslim conceptions of unity.

The first is monolithic unity — the belief that unity can only rest on the one correct interpretation of Islam in all matters, with any other basis seen as a dilution of religious truth. On this view, the Umma must unite around a single creed — tolerance of difference, if any, being limited to highly circumscribed, ritual practices. The only response to misguidance is refutation followed by suppression or elimination. Since Muslims have disagreed deeply from the outset, barring mass excommunication or bloodshed, we are left resigned to enduring endless schisms. This outlook denies us agency and absolves us of responsibility to confront sectarian violence, hatred, and bigotry. Since disagreement is endemic to the human condition, unity under this model can only be authoritarian and coercive — rarely sustainable, and even then only within small, exclusive circles for brief periods. While it offers the comfort of homogeneity — shared books, authorities, and practices — it inevitably breeds tension, doubt, fragility, and burnout. Its short-term

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[6] Many similar frameworks exist, but perhaps the most authoritative is Manuel Castells', who argues that the Information Age marks a fundamental historical shift, comparable to the Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions, in which information technologies have reshaped economic production, power relations, and social structures through global networks — giving rise to what he terms the "network society." Castells emphasizes that these transformations are driven not merely by technology, but by the interaction of technological innovation with economic, political, and cultural forces. Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society, 2nd ed.* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 1–28.

certainty collapses under the weight of complexity, making it a hopeless model for an Ummah of two billion souls.

A second vision of unity is grounded in shared higher norms of Islam, and embraces, tolerates, and manages diversity. This *ordered unity*, in contrast to the first kind, is not compatible with blind allegiance to the in-group, nor does it condition rights and belonging upon near-total agreement of beliefs and practices. At the same time, it is not the liberal kind of unity in which all opinions are equal and the principle of association is nothing but maximization of individual freedom. Rather, this unity is ordered and discursive.[7] It is open to disagreement and dialog, yet within the order of priorities given by Islam. Clearly, some general agreement is necessary to be able to disagree, and some boundaries are necessary. But unlike the top-down and censorious unity based in authoritarianism, imposed by a strongman from above — as evident in most Muslim-majority states today — the impulse for this unity is both grass-roots and discursive, even if it cannot be perfected without the political and institutional aspects of Islam. It is grounded in the Islamic ideal of *walā'*: every believer is part of the Ummah and has certain minimal rights of loyalty and solidarity, with the proviso that those who are closer to truth and righteousness are proportionally more deserving of our respect, love, and solidarity.[8] It is an "ordered" unity because it requires discriminating higher norms from lower ones.

The idea of ordered unity does not contradict our belief that the truth is one and we must champion it assiduously, and expose errors when appropriate. Rather, it also accepts the divine imperative that "There is no compulsion in religion, truth has become distinct from error" (2:256), which means that just as Allah has commanded us to seek the truth, He also commands us to tolerate disagreement, even when we are certain of the other's party's error. Instead of an exclusivism and intolerance, it calls for managing our differences through intellectual, social, and political institutions. In this type of unity, there is room for debate, but dialog comes before debate. It accepts and celebrates the great diversity of cultures, languages, and circumstances with the Ummah, and rather than impose a prefabricated judgment on all things unfamiliar, it encourages constant mutual learning and dialog (*taʿāruf*). Psychologically, this form of unity fosters harmony despite internal imperfections, allowing for cohesion without requiring uniformity. It is more resilient in the face of disagreement, but it also demands a higher degree of knowledge, wisdom, and institutional support to function effectively.

This vision of unity requires addressing the problem of **sectarianism** rather than ignoring it. And although the age-old Sunni-Shiʿa conflict is what first comes to mind when thinking of Muslim sectarianism, we believe that the problem is general and is applicable to

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[7] In keeping with the spirit of Islam, ordered unity requires the guardrails of a legitimate Islamic political authority; in the absence of one, this extraordinary burden falls on the ʿulama and their institutions. This is in keeping with the advice of Imām Abū al-Maʿālī al-Juwaynī (d. 478/1085) advised in *Ghiyāth al-umam fī iltiyāth al-ẓulam*, when the office of the imamate is vacant, it becomes incumbent upon the scholars to assume those functions of leadership and governance that lie within their capacity. For a discussion of this work, see Ovamir Anjum (2016), "Political Metaphors and Concepts in the Writings of an Eleventh-Century Sunni Scholar, Abū al-Maʿālī al-Juwaynī (419 – 478/1028 – 1085)," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 26, pp 7-18 doi:10.1017/S1356186315000711.

[8] The idea that *al-walā' wa-l-barā'*, love and hate, or more precisely, loyalty and disavowal, can be graded and ordered, such that the full loyalty of a believer is merited by a righteous believer and full disavowal by an unbeliever, but an unrighteous or misguided believer deserves loyalty to the extent of his faith and virtue, is an old and established Sunni doctrine. Although this is a key Qur'anic doctrine, historically the idea of disavowal, especially as directed against other Muslims, was championed in an exclusionary vein by the Khawarij and the Imāmī Shiʿa (where is it an article of faith, attributed to Imām Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq, see J. Calmard, s.v. "Tabarru'", *Encyclopedia of Islam, 2nd Ed.*, vol. 10, p. 21), and has become associated with the followers of Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb and generally to Salafi and Hanbali Islam. The Hanbali American scholar Dr. Hatem al-Haj, *Love and Hate in Islam: Revisiting the Doctrine of al-Walâ' wal-Barâ'* (2022; www.drhatemalhaj.com), p. 5ff, provides a learned apologetic in its defense as a key scriptural doctrine. Regardless, students of early Islam will note that the notion of *walā'* and *barā'*, especially in its ordered form such that even a misguided or sinful believer merited a measure of *walā'*, was a widely shared doctrine by Sunnis as well as other, adjacent groups. For instance, it is referenced as a key doctrine of Abū Ḥanīfa by disciple, Abū Muqātil al-Samarqandī (d. 208 H), *K. al-ʿĀlim wa-l-mutaʿallim*, p. 32.

intra-Sunni disagreements. Therefore, for the sake of analytical rigor, general utility, and comparative insight, it must be defined as a broader attitude of division and exclusion. The Sunni-Shia conflict is thus just the most significant, and in our time, perhaps most acute, expression of a wider phenomenon that is found more generally. Indeed, as a general phenomenon, sectarianism is not unique to religion, and is found in every community. Before we turn to defining sectarianism, let us take stock of the stakes of failing to address it.

Schism and Sectarianism: The Qur'anic Concepts

Before we define sectarianism analytically, let us consider the categories of analysis that can be derived from the Qur'an. The Qur'an emphasizes that schism (*iftirāq*) is born not out of genuine debate or lack of access to proper knowledge, but rather, it results from moral failure, such as mutual envy, transgression among the faithful: *baghyan baynahum*. Consider:

"Humankind was [once] one community; then Allah sent the prophets with good tidings and warnings, and sent down with them the Scripture in truth to judge between the people concerning that over which they differed. But none differed over it except those who were given it — after clear proofs had come to them — out of transgression among themselves. So Allah guided those who believed to the truth…" (2:213); "Indeed, the religion with Allah is Islam. And those who were given the Scripture did not differ except after knowledge had come to them — out of jealous animosity between themselves" (3:19); "And they did not become divided until after knowledge had come to them — out of jealous animosity between themselves" (42:14); "And We gave them clear proofs of the matter [of religion]. And they did not differ except after knowledge had come to them — out of transgression among themselves" (45:17).

This is the typical sequence suggestion in these verses.

(A) Disagreement [ikhtilāf] + Transgression [baghy] → Schism [iftirāq]

One verse suggests progression from disagreement to fighting and possible bloodshed (*iqtitāl*):

(B) Disagreement [ikhtilāf] … → Bloodshed [iqtitāl]

The order implied in these verses is as follows: sacred knowledge is given, then disagreement appears. Disagreement may be natural, but once it is accompanied by mutual transgression (*baghyan baynahum*), it leads to schism (*iftirāq*), and may also lead to bloodshed. Schism leads to factionalization, silo-formation, and breakdown of dialog (*kullu Ḥizbin bimā ladayhim farihūn*). Divine punishment ensues, and the blessing of guidance is withdrawn.

However, verse 49:9 suggests a possibility of intervention and restoration.

"And if two groups of believers fight each other [*iqtatalū*], make peace between them [*aṣliḤū*]. But if one of them transgresses [*baghat*] against the other, then fight against the transgressing group until it returns to the command of Allah. And if it returns, make peace between them with justice and act fairly. Indeed, Allah loves those who act justly."

One possibility is that two groups of believers fall into dispute, even armed conflict, but knowledgeable and wise peacemakers intervene in time, preventing the dispute from escalating into a lasting schism or further bloodshed. The other possibility is that one faction persists in its aggression, in which case the peacemakers are commanded to fight against the transgressor until justice is upheld and peace is restored.

(C) Disagreement [*ikhtilāf*] + Reform [*iṣlāḤ*] → Justice + restoration of brotherhood

(D) Bloodshed [*iqtital*] + Reform [*iṣlāḤ*] → Justice + restoration of brotherhood
     This frozen conflict eventually solidifies into a general culture of sectarianism.
(E) … Bloodshed [*iqtitāl*] → Schism [*iftirāq*] → Frozen Conflict → Sectarianism

This verse speaks of an active conflict, and demands action: we must get involved and try to resolve the conflict justly. As we know, Allah so willed in his infinite wisdom that two civil wars (*fitnas*) took place in the lifetime of the Companions, and the transgression and bloodshed that occurred has left its consequences with us until today. The question of sectarianism arises when the transgression and bloodshed remains unresolved and becomes a schism, a religious discord leading to long-term separation, hatred, and conflict.

It is crucial to recognize that the sectarianism that we face today — and throughout much of Islamic history — is different from the type of active conflict this verse describes. (**REF: the way in which Ali and Kharijites understood this verse**) Over time, as schism festers and transforms from a heated dispute into a frozen conflict, it becomes obscure, passive — possibly forgotten, but sometimes resurrected in an entirely new form, and inherited across generations. Most members of the communities that are defined by a schism may not understand or even know the initial causes. The vicissitudes of human memory — selections, distortion, and at times outright fabrication — combine with accumulating wrongs by either side and manipulation by the elites (see mechanisms of sectarianism below) to expand the schism's scope, which now reflects in theology, rituals, sensibilities, and worldviews, making its resolution that much harder. However, attempts of scholars and leaders from within and threats from without might also push the parties toward a rapprochement. The imperative of the verse, in any case, remains perfectly clear and relevant, however: Whenever Muslims are in discord, we must take appropriate actions to arrive at a just and peaceful resolution and mitigation.[9]

For guidance on the advanced stages of sectarianism — when it hardens into lasting conflict and culture — the Qur'an offers only brief allusions, such as the fate of divided nations, and, as in other areas lacking explicit scriptural instruction, we turn to the Prophetic guidance, the broader scholarly tradition, and the historical experience of the Ummah.

Sectarianism as the Culture of Frozen Schism

"Frozen schism" is a term I borrow from the field of International Relations, where "frozen conflict" refers to a situation where active, large-scale fighting has ceased, often following a ceasefire or peace agreement, but no final resolution has been reached. The conflict remains unresolved, with ongoing tension, potential for militarization and renewed violence. In our case, the conflict is not primarily militarily, but religious, communal, or theological, thus more aptly described as a "frozen schism".

To return to the distinction we noted between an active dispute and a frozen schism, it is important to recognize that the precise origins of long-standing, inherited schisms are often obscure or unknowable. The facts cannot be retried before a judge whose authority is backed by political power. And even if, against the odds, those original facts could be

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[9] To draw inspiration from a prophetic tradition, making peace between two brothers is one of the three occasions where white lies are acceptable. I take the larger wisdom of these hadiths to be that since believers involved in a conflict are hurt and hence not objective, a white lie might help melt the ice and restore the natural state of affection. The same logic applies to the permission for a husband use flattery to please his wife. For an extensive discussion of hadiths on white lies (*maʿārīḍ*) and their use in Islamic ethics, see Ovamir Anjum, "Al-Ādāb al-Sharʿiyya by Ibn Mufliḥ: Traditionalist Ethics in Medieval Islam," in Mutaz al-Khatib, *Key Classical Works on Islamic Ethics* (Leiden: Brill 2023), 321-323. https://brill.com/display/title/59891?rskey=BJ4pmX&result=9 With sectarianism, we are confronting something similar, where emotions and narratives rather than facts and reason alone need to be addressed.

established beyond doubt, an entire culture — shaped by narratives, emotions, sensibilities, and distinct values — has already formed around the schism. This is the essence of sectarianism. Sectarianism (*ṭā'ifiyya* in modern Arabic) is, in short, the culture that emerges from and perpetuates a frozen schism. To respond constructively to this challenge, Islamic scholarship must engage both with our own historical experience and with insights from contemporary psychology and social science.

Let us begin by clarifying our terms. Schism (*iftirāq*) refers to separation and disunity within an ideological or religious community that once shared a common identity, where the dividing parties continue to operate within a shared higher normative framework — a grundnorm, to borrow Hans Kelsen's term. Schism is marked by discord and, in Islamic terms, the separation of hearts, often leading to the fragmentation of solidarities and the formation of distinct sub-communities. For example, Catholics and Protestants, despite their sixteenth-century schism and the ensuing centuries of conflict, remain within the broader fold of Christianity, united by belief in Jesus's divinity and a narrative grounded in the New Testament. By contrast, when early Christianity broke from Judaism — rejecting the Mosaic Law and affirming Jesus's divinity — the rupture moved beyond schism to the formation of entirely separate religions, severing the shared normative foundations. Sectarianism is not unique to religion but arises in all forms of group identity.[10]

It is important to recognize that not all disagreements lead to schism, nor do all schisms give rise to sectarianism. Sectarianism emerges when disagreements are weaponized to create enduring communal boundaries defined by distrust and hostility. Often, it involves a failure of ethics and reason, as sectarian groups often betray their own professed principles by magnifying peripheral differences while neglecting shared foundational truths.

From a sociological perspective, sectarianism operates through mechanisms of gatekeeping, identity formation, and the memorialization of historical grievances. Intermarriage becomes rare or forbidden, places of worship are segregated, and distinct styles of dress, language, festivals, and — where possible — separate communities emerge. As secondary disagreements are elevated above shared core beliefs, community life increasingly revolves around boundary maintenance, sustained by a culture of suspicion and exclusion. Differences become ritualized, and theological disputes harden into entrenched social animosities. Sectarianism also reflects deeper political dynamics. Minorities or politically insecure groups often adopt sectarian narratives to protect their identity, while politically stable and psychologically secure communities may be more open to dialogue and resolution.

Psychological studies show that it is often driven less by rational self-interest and more by deep psychological anxieties about identity contamination. Sigmund Freud's concept of the narcissism of minor differences explains why groups that are otherwise similar may develop intense hostility over seemingly trivial distinctions — proximity heightens the perceived threat of blurred boundaries. Moral Foundations Theory, particularly Jonathan Haidt's identification of purity and sanctity as core moral intuitions, further clarifies how perceived threats to moral or cultural integrity can provoke disgust and defensive aggression — especially among religious or conservative individuals, though this impulse is widespread. Additionally, the threat of cognitive dissonance in the face of neighboring alternative worldviews can generate conversion anxiety, prompting hostility toward others

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[10] One study, for instance, examines two political groups in Toronto, the Internationalists and Socialist Labor Party, as two sects of Marxism, and compares them to religious sectarianism. Roger O'Tool, "Some Social-Psychological Aspects of Sectarian Social-Movements: A Study in Politics and Religion," https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-322-84128-5_10 (Accessed 15 July 2025).

not because they are certainly wrong, but because they might be right. These psychological mechanisms help explain why intergroup conflict often takes on a moral and existential character, even when political or material interests are minimal.[11]

Mechanisms of Sectarianism

Contemporary scholars of sectarianism propose three possible explanations for it. One is primordialism (which sees the origins of sectarianism in human nature, that is, in biology and psychology, that inevitably becomes embedded in memory, tradition, and history); another is instrumentalism (which sees sectarianism simply as the result of elite political machination); and the third is constructivism (which combines the two perspectives).[12] I find the third most compelling, for it acknowledges the plenty of evidence that human beings are "tribal" in nature as well as the equally abundant historical evidence that what counts as one's tribe, ethnicity, religion, and other "primordial" commitments has been constantly shifting and is socially constructed.[13]

This means that although specific sectarian conflicts are socially constructed, shaped by historical, political, and institutional forces, the underlying impulse they mobilize—a deep-seated human tendency to distinguish and defend one's identity group—is rooted in human nature. This helps explain why, in any sufficiently large community organized around shared norms and beliefs—whether religious or secular—internal divisions and splinter groups tend to emerge over time. Indeed, it is difficult to identify any major religion (such as Islam, Christianity, Judaism, or Buddhism), secular ideology (liberalism, communism, nationalism, feminism), or modern state that has remained free of such internal differentiation. The consequences of these divisions, however, vary widely—depending on a range of factors, some within human control, others not. They may erupt into civil war and enduring hostility, or remain contained as intellectual disagreements and tolerated diversity.

Sectarianism does not begin with disagreement—even violent conflict—but with the justification of schism, often codified in theological narratives and sustained through communal habits. What follows are key mechanisms by which sectarian culture takes shape. These processes are not linear or inevitable; they can be reversed or repeated across generations.

Consolidation. Transforming a conflict into a long-lasting sectarian identity requires framing it as morally or theologically necessary. This involves explaining, justifying, and often exaggerating the division, embedding it in the group's worldview.

Sublimation. Here, personal, political, or economic grievances are reinterpreted through religious language. For instance, the revolt against Caliph ʿUthmān, rooted in economic frustrations—such as reduced stipends and political shifts—was cast as a crisis of piety and justice. Preventing this requires cultivating self-awareness (*tazkiya*, *murāqaba*), understanding broader sociopolitical dynamics, and engaging in respectful, self-critical dialogue.

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[11] For Moral Foundations Theory, see Haidt, Jonathan (2012), *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided By Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon Books), 9–11; the term "narcissism of minor differences" appeared in Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1929–30), where he wrote, "[i]t is precisely communities with adjoining territories, and related to each other in other ways as well, who are engaged in constant feuds and in ridiculing each other." This sectarian behavior is found in all groups, not just religion; for instance, see "Democrats and Republicans Despise the Other Party More Than They Love Their Own: Supporters of political parties now operate like warring sects," November 1, 2020, https://www.ipr.northwestern.edu/news/2020/finkel- druckman-political-sectarianism-in-america.html.

[12] Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel, "Introduction" in idem. (ed.), *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 6-7.

[13] See, for instance, Harvey Whitehouse, *Inheritance: The Evolutionary Origins of the Modern World* (Hutchinson Heinemann, 2024). This, like other popular presentations, is typically a mixture of hard data and modern mythmaking, and should be read with care.

Evolution. Over time, sectarian identities shift. Communities reinterpret inherited doctrines under new pressures, sometimes softening or altering beliefs. This may look like revisionism to outsiders but often reflects a human need for communal dignity. Scholars must attend to lived Islam — the real beliefs and practices of people today—not only historical texts. Guiding these evolutions toward Qur'anic and ummatic values is often wiser than confrontational correction.

Reconciliation. History offers many examples of bitter conflicts that once seemed irreconcilable but eventually faded. Such moments of rapprochement should be studied and emulated. More importantly, the Qur'an commands believers to pursue reconciliation grounded in justice and fairness. Sectarianism may seem entrenched, but it can be undone—through knowledge, sincerity, and a shared commitment to God's guidance.

Sectarianization or politicization. Political science offers a related concept — sectarianization — which highlights the role of power players in weaponizing sectarianism. Left alone, sectarian tensions tend to fade as people intermix and forget past divisions, unless continually reinforced through narrative and ritual. Historically, sectarianism was sustained by theological boundaries, segregated institutions, polemics, and cultural practices. In the modern era, however, states — even secular ones — have often exploited sectarian divides for their own interests, using media, education, entertainment, and propaganda to inflame or revive dormant tensions for power, control, or stability. Unlike sectarianism, which is primarily theological and social, sectarianization is a deliberate, strategic use of these divisions for political ends.

Islamic Resources to Address Sectarianism

Having acknowledged sectarianism as a group-based human weakness and irrational tendency, we now turn to examine it through the lens of Islamic teachings. As a moral failing, sectarianism demands a conscious response. It must also be distinguished from the legitimate love of truth — the moral duty to uphold it, call others to it with wisdom and compassion, and defend it with sincere jealousy, such that heresy or falsehood becomes as personally offensive as injustice is to sound human nature. Sectarianism is different.

Love of Truth vs. Sectarianism

Aspect	Love of Truth	Sectarianism
Motive	Seeking truth, defending justice, sincere care for others	Group loyalty, identity protection, us-vs-them mentality
Focus	Truth itself, regardless of who holds it	Group identity, often regardless of truth
Approach	Wisdom, compassion, constructive engagement	Suspicion, hostility, exclusion
Emotional Driver	Zeal for truth and moral integrity	Fear of contamination, pride, resentment
Effect on Community	Builds bridges, invites correction, respects differences	Deepens divisions, provokes hostility, entrenches animosity

While its basic impulse cannot be fully eliminated — any more than greed, lying, or fornication can be — it must be detected, restrained, and minimized in light of divine guidance. Islam equips us to confront it not as an inevitable social fact, but as a moral challenge. Contemporary and classical Islamic literature from every *madhhab* has an abundance of works on adjacent topics such as the ethics of disagreement (*adab al-ikhtilāf*) and avoidance of excommunication (*takfīr*), but, apart from the listing of sects in *firaq* literature (heresiography), explanations of the well-known *Ḥadīth al-iftirāq*, the topic of sectarianism is rarely addressed directly and systematically; when it is broached, it is only to try and persuade and eliminate error, rather than study and manage.[14]

Very few contemporary works seek to study sectarianism (*iftirāq*) as a problem per se.[15] One is a short work by the Salafi Shaykh Nāṣir al-ʿAql entitled *al-Iftirāq*, which offers a balanced, thoughtful engagement with the painful reality of division within the Ummah, combining theological fidelity with ethical restraint.[16] He sets forth principled guidelines for navigating intra-Muslim disagreements in ways that preserve both unity and integrity. His core message emphasizes the recognition of legitimate disagreements and the need for an ethical framework to manage them. He firmly rejects both denialism (pretending Muslims are already united or that their divisions are negligible) and fatalistic resignation ("division is inevitable, so why bother?"). His approach reflects the Qur'anic imperative of *iṣlāḥ* (reform and reconciliation) and the prophetic mission to unify upon truth, not mere sentiment. A key contribution is his insistence on acknowledging the possibility of sincere interpretive error. Drawing on the prophetic report that Allah rewards the one who strives even when they get it wrong, al-ʿAql argues that belief in a singular, knowable truth is fully compatible with accepting interpretive diversity, recognizing the possibility of sincere error, and upholding the moral duty to seek the truth. He strongly warns against reckless takfīr (excommunication) and stresses the importance of observing the etiquettes of disagreement.

Yet this text also exemplifies a common feature of the contemporary "ethics of disagreement" literature in Islamic scholarship — in not only what it addresses but also in what it omits. While al-ʿAql effectively tackles how to manage active disagreements in principle within the Salafi framework, he leaves unaddressed the deep, historical schisms that have become embedded in Muslim communities and traditions.

Some West-based Muslim scholars today have taken admirable practical steps in overcoming intra-Sunni sectarianism. Notable among them is the effort by London-based Shaykh Ḥaitham al-Ḥaddād, a distinguished Salafī scholar who has worked tirelessly to promote intra-Sunni dialogue. His call for unity is grounded in theological engagement and intellectual dialogue, emphasizing areas of hermeneutic overlap between different Sunni schools. Notably, he has collaborated with Ashʿarī, Māturīdī, and other Sunni-identified scholars to produce a shared statement of creed. While such a project may not convince

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[14] Much has been written about the hadith *al-iftirāq* in the modern period, some questioning its authenticity altogether, some rejecting the exclusivist clause "all are in fire except for one," most accepting it as a ḥasan-ṣaḥīḥ, and some insisting on it being ṣaḥīḥ. For one study that confirms it, see ʿAbdallah b Yūsuf al-Judayʿ, *Aḍwāʾ ʿalā ḥadīth iftirāq al-umma* (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Rayyān, 1998), 24, and numerous ; for those who reject it: Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan wald al-Dedew's evaluation: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p_eY2pAIO8Y; This is Ḥākim al-Mutayri's analysis: http://www.dr-hakem.com/portals/Content/?info=TmpJMEpsTjFZbEJoJVbU1RPT0rdQ==.jsp; the skeptics include Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī and Muḥammad Zāhid al-Kawtharī.

[15] A large number of Salafi-leaning publications call for unity but only through preaching and elimination of error (which they tend to classify these four labels: credal perversion, ignorance, colonialism, and intellectual invasion). When naming particular heresies, they typically identify Sufis, Ashʿaris, Shiʿa, and Murjiʾa. One notable exception is Zakariyya ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Miṣrī, *Waḥda al-umma ʿala usas al-wāqiʿiyya* (Beirut: Muʾassasa al-Risāla, 1412/1992), which addresses the problem from a Lebanese perspective and proposes an innovative theory.

[16] Nāṣir ʿAbd al-Karīm al-ʿAql, *al-Iftirāq: mafhūmuh wa-asbābuhu wa sabīl al-waqāya minhu* (Riyadh: Dār al-Muslim, 1412/1991).

everyone, its wide reception has already had a significant impact in Britain, helping to ease what were once sharp sectarian tensions and guiding many toward what can be described as a vision of "ordered unity." In earlier years, Shaykh Ḥaitham also participated in Sunni–Shīʿa dialogue initiatives led by Dr. Azzam Tamimi. A key figure in the Sunni-Shia dialog was Shaykh Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī. In contrast, Dr. Salim al-Awa and Dr. Tareq al-Suwaydan have remained consistent proponents of realistic Sunni–Shīʿa dialogue, continuing to write and advocate for constructive engagement across sectarian lines.[17]

Although Shaykh al-Qaraḍāwī eventually withdrew from it, he did produce perhaps the most authoritative and theoretically compelling, if rather brief, writings on the question of sectarianism in contemporary Sunni Islam. He outlined ten principles for Sunni–Shīʿa rapprochement (*taqrīb al-madhāhib*). These principles, which combine useful references in Islamic teachings and practical wisdom, are as follows: Rapprochement between the two groups requires, (i) a good-faith effort to understand the other's beliefs, narratives, and sensibilities, even when deemed erroneous; (ii) assuming goodwill and giving the benefit of the doubt; (iii) emphasizing shared beliefs and common ground; (iv) maintaining open dialogue on points of disagreement; (v) avoiding provocation, including hostile labels like *Rāfiḍa* and *Nawāṣib*; (vi) refraining from takfīr of anyone committed to the core tenets of Islam; (vii) steering clear of extremists on both sides; (viii) speaking candidly with wisdom — avoiding both offense and evasion of sensitive issues; (ix) remaining alert to the schemes of adversaries who seek to divide the Ummah; and (x) showing solidarity in times of need and crisis.[18]

These points deserve to be systematically developed and taught. Confronting sectarianism in practice, furthermore, requires moving beyond abstract ethical guidelines to engage with these entrenched historical divisions, including those within Sunni Islam itself. To this task we now turn.

Inspiration from the Sunni Tradition

In the quest of managing deep differences, Islamic history and normative tradition hold many lessons. The early schisms among the Companions during the first two *fitnas* did not immediately crystallize into a lasting culture of sectarianism. It was only in the second and third centuries AH, with the emergence of numerous splinter groups, that sectarianism became entrenched. During this period, *takfīr* became a common polemical tool, especially among the Muʿtazila, Khawārij, Murjiʾa, Shiʿa, and others. Against this backdrop, the consolidation of Ahl al-Sunnah wa-l-Jamāʿah stands out as a remarkable historical effort to transcend sectarianism. Rather than forming a new sect, it served as an inclusive umbrella, bringing together non-radical groups — despite their theological and political differences — under the shared commitment to the Sunnah of the Prophet, the legacy of the Rightly Guided Caliphs, and the broad community of Muslims (*al-jamāʿah, al-sawād al-aʿẓam*).[19]

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[17] See, for instance, Muḥammad Salīm al-ʿAwwā (al-Awa), *al-ʿAlāqa bayn al-Sunna wa-l-Shīʿa* (Cairo: Safīr al-Dawliyya Lil-Nashr, 1427/2006).

[18] Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, *Mabādi fi al-ḥiwār wal-l-taqrīb bayn al-madhāhib al-Islāmiyya* (Cairo: Maktaba Wahba, 2005); idem., *al-Ṣaḥwa al-Islāmiyya bayn al-ikhtilāf al-mashrūʿ wa-al-tafarruq al-madhmūm* (Cairo: Dar al-Shurūq, 1421/2001);

[19] Note that there are two ways to define Sunni Islam, one being historical, whereby all denominations that self-describe as such and have shown sustained commitment to its basic premises (the Qurʾan and the Sunnah) are included within its ambit. These distinct meanings of Ahl al-Sunnah as being an "umbrella group" versus a group of Ahl al-hadith with a list of doctrines is referred to by Ibn Taymiyya in *Minhāj al-Sunnah*: "The term Ahl al-Sunnah could mean those who affirmed the Caliphate of the three caliphs, in which all groups except the Rāfiḍah are included. It could also mean the Ahl al-Ḥadīth wa-l-Sunnah only, those who affirm the attributes of Allah, uncreatedness of the Qurʾan, that Allah will be seen in the Afterlife, His power (*qadr*), and other known principles." https://shamela.ws/book/11743/42

Many of the early theological divides were absorbed into Sunni Islam, becoming "intra-Sunni" differences precisely because they were managed — not eradicated — through scholarly discourse and community norms. While some Sunni schools have maintained that their interpretation alone represents the true Ahl al-Sunnah wa-l-Jamāʿah, such exclusivist claims coexist with a broader, more inclusive understanding of Sunnism. Both perspectives have legitimacy within the tradition, provided one avoids extremes: neither indiscriminate inclusion of all self-proclaimed Sunnis nor the narrowing of Sunnism to a single school is acceptable.

Consider, for example,

1. The doctrine of *irjā'* (deferment), at first an explosive schism, became attenuated and its moderate version, known as *irjā' al-fuqahā'* attributed to the Hanafis (as opposed to *irjā'* of the Khawārij or *irjā'* of the Jahmiyya), became incorporated into Sunnism.[20] Today, very few if any scholars would view the Hanafis as being outside of Ahl al-Sunnah.

2. The dispute of *irjā'* was part of a larger rift between Ahl al-Ra'y and Ahl al-Athar. At first extremely heated, it was moderated through dialog and the rise of uṣūl deliberations, the most prominent being Imam al-Shāfiʿī's *Risāla*. Still, this split, combined with Muʿtazila-Sunna debates, continued to produce much heat and conflict. It took the form of long-lasting Shafiʿi-Hanafi discord, particularly strong in fourth and fifth-century AH Nishapur, leading to bloodshed and ultimate decline of that city.[21] It was ultimately absorbed and mitigated through scholarly interventions in other centers.

3. The nature of īmān and whether it included deeds was once a similarly politically and theologically charged debate, in which the Hanafi position was at first considered outside Ahl al-Sunnah by the Ahl al-Hadith. Today, the actual debate remains, albeit confined to a few specialists, but it is no longer considered a defining issue that merits expulsion from Ahl al-Sunnah.

4. The debate over divine attributes and meaning of worship between the Atharīs (Salafis and Hanbalis) and the Ahl al-Kalām (Ashʿarīs and Māturīdīs) has often produced sectarian tension, and at times, open conflict. In the sixth century AH, this took a violent turn when the philosophically inclined *mutakallim* and reformer Ibn Tumart, leader of Almohads (al-MuwaḤḤidūn), launched a purist campaign against the Mālikī Almoravids (al-Murābiṭūn).[22] In the twelfth century Hijri, a similar pattern emerged in reverse: the Hanbali reformer Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb led a militant movement—also called *al-muwaḤḤidūn*—against his more traditionalist rivals. In both episodes, theological disputes escalated into warfare, marked by mutual accusations of kufr, shirk, bidʿa, and khārijism.

5. Countless historical controversies over the merits and teachings of scholars—such as Abū Ḥanīfa, al-Shāfiʿī, Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, and Ibn Taymiyya, to name only a few, whose books were burned and who were physically harmed—have, over time, been largely mitigated and absorbed into the broader Islamic tradition. Yet unless we consciously invest in confronting sectarianism and cultivating an ordered unity, such disputes may resurface with renewed intensity.

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[20] See, for instance, Ibn Taymiyya's view on this: https://dorar.net/frq/1387
[21] Richard Bulliet, *Patricians of Nishapur*, 32; al-Dhahabī, *Siyar* (Mu'assasa al-Risāla) 18:41, https://shamela.ws/book/10906/11120#p1.
[22] al-Shāṭibī, *al-Iʿtiṣām*, 2:84 https://shamela.ws/book/36558/557.

6. Today, the debate around *istighātha* and grave-veneration and whether it constitutes major shirk worthy of excommunication has similarly produced passionate disagreement and violence among those who fall broadly under Sunni Islam.
7. The Deobandi-Barelvi conflict, escalating to takfir on part of the Barelvis, is a similar schism that shows all the signs of a culture of sectarianism, but one that has been tenuously managed by the general Sunni affiliation.

Numerous examples of such intra-Sunni disagreements could be cited — these are merely illustrative of a much wider phenomenon. The Shiʿa-Sunni schism, in this context, is one among many historical divisions. Many of these conflicts have been forgotten, and in most of these cases, notwithstanding the flare up in limited times and places, rapprochement and peaceful coexistence have been the norm. Sunni scholars thus created a meta-discourse that curbed excessive takfīr and upheld a measure of tolerance.[23] This suggests two conclusions, one descriptive (conflicts occur frequently, they evolve, and are often overcome) and one normative (the need for constant vigilance, and to study and strengthen the factors of that lead to truth and coexistence both).

A Proposal: Managing Deep Differences as an Islamic Discipline

The efforts and insights outlined above are of immense value. However, with the exception of work by a few specialists and dedicated scholars such as those mentioned, much of the Sunni discourse on *ikhtilāf* remains abstract and underdeveloped. There is a pressing need for deeper, more systematic engagement with the realities of division within the Ummah. To that end, we propose the development of a new Islamic discipline: the **Management of Deep Differences** (MDD; *tadbīr al-ikhtilāf*). This includes but goes beyond etiquette of disagreement, *adab al-ikhtilāf*, and studies the legal, historical, psychological, social, and political aspects of the Ummah's ordered unity despite the existence of disagreements and schisms. This field would be dedicated to studying, mitigating, and addressing the challenges posed not only by sectarianism but also by other enduring sources of intra-Muslim conflict.

Let us start by restating the premises that we have argued so far and that underpin the proposal for managing deep differences, followed by a number of imperatives.

The premises:
1. Championing the truth is of the highest priority. Allah has prohibited compulsion in religion, which requires balancing the imperative of truth with the imperative of peace and coexistence. If non-Muslims cannot be compelled and have a right to live by their religion, a fortiori, other Muslims that we deem to be heretical still have rights.
2. Deep differences among Muslims cannot be eliminated through coercion, and therefore, to secure adequate unity and cooperation, they must be managed.
3. Grades of truth. As we move from the major truths (the truth of revelation, monotheism, the Prophet SAA, the hereafter) to relatively less major ones (details of divine attributes, status of the Companions, etc., details of daily prayers), there is a diminishing level of epistemological certainty. The truths that are *qaṭʿī,* or known of necessity by all Muslims, should be the foundation of all Muslims' rights.

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[23] This synthesis emerged largely through discursive engagement rather than coercive political power or formal institutions. Two key developments lay at its heart: the emergence of the hadith sciences, which gathered and systematized reports from the major centers of learning—ʿIrāq, Medina, Yemen, and Syria—centered in the metropolis of Baghdad; and Imām al-Shāfiʿī's formulation of uṣūl al-fiqh, which provided a common methodological and terminological framework that bridged the Ahl al-Raʾy of Iraq and the Ahl al-Athar of the Hijaz, Syria, and beyond.

4. Dialog requires trust. Over time, communities of interpretation develop justifications for all their positions based on epistemic frameworks, pious authorities, and culture. No rational demonstration or interpretation of a revealed text are self-evident, and any reasonable dialog requires mutual trust, agreement on basic premises, and repeated interaction. This means that people generally do not accept their errors in combative refutations.
5. Conflicts and schisms evolve over time; they can be fueled and exploited, and resolved or forgotten.
6. The enemies of Islam always have and always will exploit our differences to keep us weak and divided.

Based on these premises, we can arrive at the following imperatives for Muslim scholars and leaders in our proposed discipline of managing deep differences.

First, we must directly confront the challenge of **frozen schisms**—sectarian divisions whose roots go back centuries earlier (even if their nature and intensity have been evolving). While refuting theological error remains important, it is not sufficient when dealing with communities that have become socially and politically isolated over generations. Before meaningful dialog or effective daʿwa can occur, the underlying social and political estrangement must be addressed. What is needed, therefore, is a renewed ethic and jurisprudence of coexistence—one that identifies and articulates shared grounds for cooperation among diverse Muslim groups without erasing genuine differences.

Second, this emerging discipline must ask: **what are our duties toward a fellow Muslim whom we believe to belong to a misguided sect**? This is not merely a matter of correcting individual error in a book, but of engaging with a person or a people whose beliefs are embedded in a broader historical, communal, and intellectual tradition supported by their own authorities and justifications. Such engagement requires patience, wisdom, and principled refutation—alongside an acceptance of the divine reality that some disagreements are destined to endure. If Allah commands gentleness and beautiful exhortation even toward non-Muslims, then fellow Muslims—despite their theological deviations—are even more deserving of our wisdom, compassion, and forbearance. Moreover, all Muslims are entitled to a degree of walāʾ (loyalty) and to the rights that Islam guarantees them, regardless of the errors held by them or their religious authorities.

Such duties can be broadly divided into two categories. First is the duty of scholars. Genuine coexistence requires a concerted effort by scholars across the spectrum—Sufi and Salafi, Sunni and Shīʿa, Deobandi and Barelvi, conservative and modernist—to engage one another through reading, dialog, and, where appropriate, principled refutation. The aim should be not only to invite others to the truth, but to do so with wisdom, which requires doing so in a way that its acceptance is probable. On speculative (ẓannī) matters, Imam al-Shāfiʿī's ethic of eagerness to being corrected must be cultivated. While existing literature often emphasizes the ādāb al-ikhtilāf (ethics of minor disagreement), it too often fails to provide practical guidance for managing the most divisive and identity-defining disagreements. Second is the duty to the broader public. Common Muslims must be equipped with ethical frameworks and practical opportunities for respectful engagement — frameworks that discourage hostility and harm over inherited theological and historical disputes.

Third, the call for dialogue and mutual understanding does not imply that we abandon the effort to persuade others of what we believe to be the correct position. Truth in religion is ultimately one. While a minority of theologians have held the *muṣawwiba* view—that all sincere *ijtihād* is equally correct—the sounder position, as articulated by Ibn

Taymiyya and others, is the *mukhaṭṭiʾa* (fallibilist) view: that although a sincere mujtahid is rewarded even for an incorrect judgment, there remains a single correct view in any given matter. This understanding affirms the importance of striving to hold the truth and inviting others to it through wisdom, integrity, and persuasive dialogue.

An environment of open, respectful conversation is more likely to serve the cause of truth and justice. Indeed, both historical experience and contemporary social science confirm that people rarely adopt stronger moral or rational positions in combative or isolated contexts, regardless of how compelling the arguments may be or how weak their own narratives appear.

Fourth, the MDD methodology is incompatible with mass *takfir* of groups that declare themselves to be Muslim and have been identified by the mainstream Sunni authorities as such.[24] There are groups, however, that consistently hold beliefs contrary to Islam the majority opinion, such as the *ghulāt shiʿa* who believe in divinity of ʿAli, Qadiyanis, Druze, and so on. They are not being addressed in this paper.

Fifth, MDD requires that authoritative moderates are empowered and extremist views, that inevitably exist in every school, are curbed and disciplined. There may be room for limiting offensive public practices of a particular sect if they are inessential to a given sect. An example of this can be seen in Sh Qaraḍāwī's demand that the Twelver Shiʿa desist from the public cursing of the Prophet's Companions and Mothers of the Believers as part of his dialog, one that has been met with general acceptance by many leading moderate Shiʿa Ayatollahs.[25]

Sixth, any serious approach to managing deep differences must address the political dimension. A theology of coexistence must grapple with the question of how diverse Muslim groups can share power and resources, defend themselves against common enemies, and cooperate in public life—all while preserving the freedom, maturity, and moral clarity to continue debating and disagreeing. In this context, power-sharing is not a concession or compromise of principle, but a necessary condition for sustaining Ummatic strength and flourishing.

To support this, the emerging discipline must ground its teachings and fatwas in a systematic and professional awareness of history and politics. Much of the current literature on ikhtilāf and iftirāq tends to operate in timeless theological terms, often overlooking the historical roles played by political crises, power struggles, and colonial disruptions in shaping sectarian divisions. Without such contextual understanding, scholarly critiques risk sounding abstract or disconnected from the structural realities of Muslim disunity. Moreover, future muftis, teachers, and preachers must learn to discern how sectarian identities and doctrines have evolved across different times and places. This calls for a careful evaluation of the lived Islam of communities, not merely their textual representations or doctrinal labels.

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[24] For Ibn Taymiyya's balanced doctrine on this, see Sulṭān al-ʿUmayrī's collection of his relevant statements, https://www.fnoor.com/main/articles.aspx?article_no=23140
Ibn Taymiyya's following statement sums up the principle expressed here:

"كل من كان مؤمنا بما جاء به محمد فهو خير من كل من كفر به، وإن كان في المؤمن بذلك نوع من البدعة، سواء كانت بدعة الخوارج والشيعة والمرجئة والقدرية أو غيرهم"

Contemporary authorities on both sides have declared the other side to be Muslim and believers (mu'min), notwithstanding their deep theological differences. On Shaykh al-Azhar Aḥmad al-Ṭayyib's declaration, see https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1Hg9Pa4xRe/ ; for leading Shiʿa Ayatollah's views, see Sayyid Muhammad Rizvi, *Mutual Respect & Peaceful Co-Existence Among Muslims: In the Words of the Leading Shiʿa Scholars* (Canada: Maʿarif Publications).

[25] Sunnis are immensely offended by the cursing of the Companions, a truly hideous practice that has a relative late origin, namely, the Safavid period. It is controversial even among the Twelvers authorities. Many authorities, e.g., Sistani (Iraq), Khamenei (Iran), and Fadlallah (Lebanon), have long-standing fatwas prohibiting such practices. The al-Azhar–Najaf dialogue and broader efforts at Sunni–Shia rapprochement have contributed to an official discouragement of divisive practices like public cursing. For a collection of leading Shiʿa Ayatollah's views, see Sayyid Muhammad Rizvi, *Mutual Respect & Peaceful Co-Existence Among Muslims: In the Words of the Leading Shiʿa Scholars* (Canada: Maʿarif Publications).

Seventh, it is essential to distinguish between two complementary but distinct scholarly tasks: **the refutation of error** and the **management of deep differences** (MDD). Both are necessary, but they address different challenges. Earlier, when speaking of the diversity within the umbrella of Sunni Islam, we noted how we already implicitly understand these two ways of engaging our tradition. Refutation aims to clarify truth and expose theological or methodological deviation. MDD, by contrast, seeks to understand and responsibly navigate enduring disagreements within the Muslim community. Everyone should be allowed to debate, dialog, and preach in appropriate ways and venues, but at all Muslims should be guaranteed certain political, legal, and social rights to live by their schools.

For example, in the genre of refutation, we find works such as Imām al-Ghazālī's *FaḍāʾiḤ al-Bāṭiniyya* and Shaykh al-Islām Ibn Taymiyya's many critical treatises. In the spirit of MDD, however, we find al-Ghazālī's *Fayṣal al-Tafriqa* and Ibn Taymiyya's *Rafʿ al-Malām ʿan Aʾimmat al-Aʿlām*, which explore the limits and conditions of sincere disagreement in theological and legal schools, respectively, and the ethics of judgment.

MDD operates at a meta-level—it is a discourse that belongs to both *uṣūl al-dīn* (foundational theology) and *siyāsa sharʿiyya* (Islamic political ethics). Its goal is not to resolve specific disagreement, but to establish the proper terms, methods, and virtues for engaging disagreement. It fosters the conditions necessary for principled dialogue, evidence-based reasoning, and respectful exchange—conditions that allow truth to be pursued without causing unnecessary division.

Eighth, the management of deep disagreement (MDD) is considered part of *siyāsa*—the domain of governance—and thus ordinarily falls under the responsibility of the imām or caliph. However, in the absence of a legitimate Islamic political authority, this duty necessarily devolves upon the scholars. As Imām Abū al-Maʿālī al-Juwaynī advised, when the office of the imamate is vacant, it becomes incumbent upon the scholars to assume those functions of leadership and governance that lie within their capacity.

As Muslim scholars and religious leaders based in the West—where no Muslim government can be relied upon—we are called to attend to the collective affairs of our communities. In fact, given the deep corruption and oppression that afflict many Muslim governments today—where religious ministries often serve agendas shaped by Western neocolonial powers—we may, in some respects, enjoy greater freedom, access to resources, and thus carry an even greater moral responsibility.

Ninth, MDD requires cultivating disciplined scholarship grounded in truthful knowledge of the history and present realities of other Muslim schools, sects, and regions. Sectarianism feeds on ignorance, suspicion, and distortion — and nothing counters it more effectively than fair-minded study and sincere exchange. Sunni and Shīʿa communities alike often harbor deeply entrenched, conspiratorial narratives about each other, built on falsehoods, exaggerations, and selective memory. While we cannot list them all here, confronting these myths is essential to any serious effort at managing deep differences.

Consider, for instance, the stereotypes that many entertain about how the Sunni-Shia conflict is eternal and unchanging. Historically, Shiʿism was deeply internally fragmented, and often the various Shiʿa sects were more opposed to each other than to the Sunnis. A prominent example is the long-standing division between the Twelvers (Ithnā ʿAsharīs) and the Sevener (Ismāʿīlī) Shīʿa during the era of Abbasid-Fatimid rivalry, with the Twelvers frequently siding with Sunnis against the Seveners and never forming a united front with them. Similarly, the Twelvers and Zaydis maintained a strong mutual rivalry. In fact, Zaydi hadith collections, for instance, often align closely with Sunni traditions. Both

Twelvers and Zaydis have historically regarded Seveners as severely deviant, if not outside the fold, and both excommunicated the Nusayris (Alawis). In contrast, Twelver jurisprudence and hadith scholarship interacted and borrowed heavily from their Sunni counterparts.

Prior to the Safavid era, there was no singular or coherent "Sunni–Shīʿa" divide as we know it today. Shīʿism itself was fragmented, with multiple rival sects, and the Twelvers (Ithnā ʿAsharīs) were largely quietist, avoiding direct political confrontation with Sunni powers. Even during the Safavid–Ottoman rivalry, sectarian lines remained fluid. Though the Ottomans were Sunni, they feared Safavid influence in part because many of their own troops adhered to Bektashi Sufism, which shared affinities with the ghulāt-tinged Sevener Shīʿism of the early Safavid militias. The Safavids themselves began as a Shāfiʿī Sufi order and rose to power backed by radical Sevener factions. Yet after consolidating control over Iran, they purged these extremist elements and imported Twelver ʿulamāʾ from Lebanon and Iraq — not out of theological conviction, but to legitimize their rule apart from the Sunni Ottoman caliphate. This history suggests that the Safavid adoption of Twelver Shīʿism was a strategic move to weaponize sectarian identity against the Ottomans. Similarly, after 1979, surrounding Sunni states responded to Iran's revolution with ideological fear, political insecurity and alliance with the United States against Iran, fueling an unprovoked war that claimed millions of lives and deepened mutual hatred — a hostility further sharpened by the language divide between Iranians and Arabs.

Tenth, MDD requires the development of an Islamic framework for restorative justice. In situations of mass violence and sectarian conflict — where conventional justice systems risk deepening cycles of revenge — restorative justice offers a path toward truth-telling, acknowledgment of harm, and community healing. It does not ignore justice, nor assume equal blame, but seeks principled acknowledgment of suffering, accountability, and reconciliation. In the case of Syria, this would mean, for example, that thoughtful Shīʿa leaders and intellectuals recognize the devastating role Hezbollah played in suppressing the Syrian uprising, contributing to widespread Sunni suffering. Likewise, Sunnis must reckon with the crimes of extremist groups like ISIS against Shīʿa communities. Rather than fueling mutual denial or sectarian revenge, restorative justice calls for honest reflection, moral accountability, and a shared commitment to healing — a necessary step if we are to prevent the repetition of such tragedies.

Conclusion: Sunni Theological Strength and Political Vulnerability

This paper has called for an ordered, not monolithic, unity—a unity grounded in principle rather than forced conformity. We examined how theological disagreement can evolve into schism and sectarianism, and argued that managing deep difference (MDD) must be reclaimed as a central Islamic discipline. We then traced Sunni Islam's historical role as a force of consolidation, not division, and highlighted examples of contemporary Sunni scholars working to heal fractures in the Ummah. Finally, we proposed a framework for principled dialogue rooted in Sunni Islam's theological confidence and moral depth.

Yet this theological strength contrasts starkly with Sunni Islam's political vulnerability today. Scripturally grounded, intellectually rich, and embraced by the majority of Muslims worldwide, Sunni Islam remains unmatched in its doctrinal foundations. But the moral leadership expected from this strength is glaringly absent. Sunni-majority regimes are often authoritarian, compromised, and openly allied with the enemies of Islam—abandoning Palestine, suppressing truth, and selling out sacred causes for worldly gain. As the Qur'an

warns, such betrayal invites not only humiliation, but a double humiliation for those who forsake Allah's trust while claiming His name.

This has produced a growing crisis of credibility, especially among younger Muslims disillusioned by Sunni quietism in the face of tyranny. Many are turning instead to the rhetoric of resistance offered by contemporary Shīʿī political theology, which, despite its flaws, appears to embody courage, purpose, and defiance. The damage is compounded by the widespread perception that Sunni Islam has been co-opted by regimes aligned with Western and Zionist powers, who cloak their repression in the language of orthodoxy while betraying the ethical heart of Islam.

In this context, Sunni Muslims must reclaim the moral initiative through principled leadership. We have nothing to fear from honest engagement with those we differ with. With unparalleled commitment to the Qur'an, the Sunnah, and heirs to a rich tradition, Sunni Islam's strength lies in its enduring commitment to truth, tolerance, and unity. Ours is a tradition that flourishes not in polemics and division, but in times of knowledge, reason, and shared purpose. It is this spirit we must urgently revive.