



BRILL

# For the Greater Good: Common Goals and Institutional Sunni–Shi‘a Cooperation in Norway

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## Abstract

Under what circumstances do Sunni and Shi‘a organisations enter into institutional cooperation with each other? This article explores this question through a study of Muslim institutional cooperation in Norway from the late 1980s to the late 2010s, based on both archival sources and qualitative interviews. This period witnessed at first a very tight cooperation between Sunni and Shi‘a organisations, before the cooperation collapsed in the 1990s. In the 2010s Sunnis and Shi‘a again started to cooperate closely. The article seeks to interpret this development through the theory of superordinate or common goals or uniting against a third party. Sunnis seemed to invite the Shi‘a in when they had a clear common goal in the form of an external threat. Even though conditions vary, I argue that this mechanism may have played a role in the development of cooperation between Sunni and Shi‘a organisations in other countries as well.

## Keywords

Sunni–Shi‘a relations – Islam in Scandinavia – Islam in Norway – historical methods – process tracing – Muslim councils – umbrella organisations

## 1 Introduction

Sunni and Shi'a actors in European countries have sometimes been in conflict with each other but, at other times, they have cooperated and even entered into tight institutional cooperation. Why? This article explores this question through a case study of institutional cooperation between Sunni and Shi'a organisations in Norway. The article's main claim is that the perception of common goals or a common good can be of central importance for institutional cooperation across the Sunni–Shi'a divide. Important actors in Sunni and Shi'a organisations in Norway have sometimes looked at each other with suspicion – this has at least been the case on the Sunni side. But when times have called for it and they perceived a strong common interest in joining forces, they were able to put their differences aside.

This analysis is based on a longitudinal, historical study of *Islamsk Råd Norge* (IRN; Islamic Council of Norway), the central Islamic umbrella organisation in Norway. Sunnis and Shi'a cooperated closely during the Rushdie affair in 1989, which served as a precursor to the founding of the IRN four years later. Following this, cooperation between Sunni and Shi'a withered away before resurfacing in the 2010s. These developments are analysed through the lens of social identity theory, which makes the assumption that common goals and common external adversaries can make it easier for individuals and groups to put their differences aside and work together.

## 2 Sunni-Shi'a Cooperation in Norway and Beyond

In recent years, there has been a large increase in the number of studies on Sunni–Shi'a 'sectarianism' in the Middle East and beyond (see the introduction to this special issue). Only a few studies, however, have dealt with patterns of cooperation and conflict between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims in Europe. Are modes of cooperation and conflict between Sunnis and Shi'a in Europe imported from abroad, or are local circumstances in European countries more important for how the Sunni–Shi'a relationship plays out? What conditions can promote institutional cooperation between Sunnis and Shi'a, and what conditions can lead to conflict? The research to date does not provide clear-cut answers.

The existing literature has described discourses of unity as well as discourses of conflict among Sunni and Shi'a Muslims living in Europe. The discourses of conflict have been described by Marius Linge for Norway (2016), Vincent

Geisser for France (2019), Anya Clarkson for the UK (2013) and Susanne Olsson for Sweden (2017). In these conflictual discourses, it appears that both theological and political concerns can play a role. Whereas Linge describes conflictual discourses among both Sunnis and Shi'a, Clarkson, Geisser and Olsson focus on polemics on the Sunni side. But there are also discourses of unity at play. Elvire Corboz (2019) has described how British Shi'a leaders have been articulating discourses of Islamic unity, which she interprets as a way of increasing the relative standing of Shi'a in the British Islamic landscape. Sveinung Sandberg et al. (2018) and Marius Linge and Göran Larsson (2022) also provide evidence of widespread discourses of unity among ordinary young Muslims in Norway, both Sunni and Shi'a, who seem to perceive sectarian conflict as something negative that should be avoided. Linge and Larsson attribute this to the impact of the Norwegian social context, where sectarian identities may be less important.

What has largely not been explored in the existing literature is the actual organisational or institutional cooperation – or conflict – that exists between Sunnis and Shi'a in European countries. The only exception is an article by Asfa Widiyanto (2018), who explored institutional cooperation between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims in the main Islamic umbrella organisation in Austria, Islamische Glaubengemeinschaft in Österreich (IGGiÖ; Islamic Religious Authority of Austria). Widiyanto recounts how they have cooperated in the IGGiÖ over many years, and that this has even resulted in the adoption of a curriculum that addresses both Sunni and Shi'a theology in the Akademie für Islamische Religionspädagogik in Vienna (IRPA; Academy for Islamic Pedagogy of Religion), the IGGiÖ-led educational institution responsible for training Islamic religious teachers in the Austrian school system (Widiyanto 2018, 234–5). Not all Shi'a are part of the IGGiÖ, however. Furthermore, Widiyanto does not address why this institutional cooperation between Sunnis and Shi'a arose in the first place.

There have also been a few studies looking at Muslim umbrella organisations in Europe more broadly, such as a book by Jonathan Laurence (2012), an article by Alice Ciciora (2018) and my own PhD thesis (Elgvin 2020). These studies show that the phenomenon of institutional cooperation between Sunnis and Shi'a in umbrella organisations is not unique to Austria, even though the question has not been explored in depth in a systematic manner. Whereas some European countries have Muslim umbrella organisations that cater exclusively to Sunni Muslims, there are other countries where the umbrella organisations – or councils – cater to both Sunnis and Shi'a, and in some cases even to groups such as the Ahmadiyya and Alevi. We do not know much about

the reasons for this variation, but the studies by Laurence and Ciciora may indicate that more inclusive umbrella organisations have often been created as a result of pressure by the government.

### 3 Research Question, Theory, and Methods

The precise research question addressed by the article is as follows: What circumstances may prompt Sunni and Shi'a organisations in Europe to enter into institutional cooperation with each other? The article does not aim to provide an exhaustive answer. The goal is not to build a theory about every conceivable instance when such cooperation is likely to occur, and when it is not. The factors referred to in the existing literature cited above probably do play a role in Sunni–Shi'a cooperation. Political or military conflicts between Sunnis and Shi'a in Muslim majority countries may dampen the will to cooperate between Sunni and Shi'a actors in countries where Muslims constitute minorities. Pressure from the authorities, or economic and political incentives in general, may make Sunni and Shi'a actors more willing to enter into cooperation. The availability of theological unity discourses may also have an effect on their willingness to enter into cooperation with each other.

In this article, however, I shall investigate a different social mechanism: How superordinate goals – more commonly referred to as common goals – can lead Sunni and Shi'a actors and organisations to enter into voluntary cooperation. This social mechanism is fairly intuitive: when people need to cooperate to reach a common goal, they more easily put their differences aside. In social psychology, this theory has received a complex label: the process of 'superordinate goals in the reduction of intergroup conflict' (Sherif, 1958). Muzafer Sherif's seminal publication was based on an experimental study from 1954, called the 'robbers cave experiment', in which psychologists placed two groups of boys in different camps in the woods. Each group developed animosity towards the other and, once formed, these antagonistic identities seemed difficult to change. But the researchers then made their teams work together for a common goal. This reconfigured their identities, and made them work together again (Sherif, 1958; Sherif et al., 1961). Later experiments have found similar results (Diab, 1978; Folbrecht, 1995).

To what degree can these mechanisms shed light on institutional Sunni–Shi'a cooperation in Norway? I shall assess this by re-using data from a longitudinal historical study of the IRN – even though this study originally addressed a different set of questions (Elgvin, 2020). Methodologically, the present study adopts a form of process tracing: identifying the extent to which certain

historical developments fit with particular theories or social mechanisms (Beach and Pedersen, 2013). I use data from several kinds of sources – written sources, oral interviews, and fieldwork observations gathered in Norway over the course of ten years. Written sources include contemporaneous newspaper records from the central Norwegian media archive *Atekst/retriever*, scholarly literature on Islam in Norway, public statements from the IRN, and the private archive of Professor Oddbjørn Leirvik, who was instrumental in prompting the creation of the IRN and in the initiation of formal dialogue between the Church of Norway and the IRN. I complement these written sources with 29 qualitative interviews with key actors in the IRN and external interlocutors. The analysis is also informed by fieldwork in various Islamic organisations in Norway, from 2008 to 2018.

It must be noted that most of those I interviewed formally in the IRN were Sunnis, with one exception, as Sunnis constitute the overwhelming majority of key actors in the IRN. What I can document is therefore a fairly one-sided story: the willingness of Sunnis to bring Shi'a Muslims and Shi'a organisations into the fold. This does not necessarily constitute a large methodological problem, however. As Fanar Haddad has convincingly argued, there is no equivalence between anti-Shi'a scepticism in the Sunni camp, and anti-Sunni scepticism in the Sunni camp: 'demographics and power relations (in Islamic rather than national terms) have meant that Shiism is more likely to seek Sunni validation of its Islamic legitimacy than the reverse' (Haddad, 2021: 5). As will be shown in the next sections, the key to institutional Sunni–Shi'a cooperation in Norway probably rests on willingness on the Sunni side to cooperate with Shi'a, not vice versa.

It must also be noted that I did not specifically ask about Sunni–Shi'a cooperation in the interviews I carried out with actors in the IRN, as this was not a question I was pursuing at the time of the interviews. My analysis in this article is rather about making sense of the historical patterns, regarding when and why institutional cooperation between Sunnis and Shi'a blossomed, and when it did not. How should we make sense of the ebbs and flows in the extent of institutional cooperation between these groups?

#### 4 Sunni and Shi'a Organisations in the Islamic Arena in Norway

The organised Islamic arena in Norway differs from that in several other European countries, such as France, Germany and Sweden, where mosques or Islamic associations are often organised through larger federations or umbrella organisations. In Norway, by contrast, the main organisational unit is the

individual mosque. Mosques in Norway receive funding from the state in proportion to their formal membership size. This is required by law and has to do with Norway's history of having independent churches alongside the Church of Norway, which was the state church until 2012 (Kirke-, utdannings- og forskningsdepartementet, 1995; Schmidt, 2015). The independent churches and faith communities receive state funding based on the size of their membership, so that they receive the same sum per member as the Church of Norway. When adherents of other religions started setting up congregations in Norway in the post-war period, they were included in this system, which means that mosques in Norway have a strong incentive to enrol people as members. For various reasons, the Islamic landscape in Norway is fragmented between a large number of individual mosques, rather than divided between a few larger umbrella organisations representing different groups of Norwegian Muslims.

Organised Islam in Norway began to emerge in the 1970s following labour immigration from Pakistan (Vogt, 2008). As in many other European countries, the mosque landscape soon became divided in line with country of origin, language and theological orientation. The most salient division on the Norwegian scene in the 1980s and 1990s was between different strands of South Asian Sunni Islam – between Deobandis and Barelwis, and internally among Barelwis. Other nationalities were also present. At the start of the decade, there was a single Turkish mosque, but it experienced internal conflicts during the 1980s and splits emerged. Arab migrants also established mosques, as did Somali and Bosnian Muslims later.

The mosques mentioned above are all Sunni. Even though there has been a steady increase of research on Islam in Norway, research on Shi'a is 'almost neglected', according to an overview by Marianne Bøe and Ingvild Flaskerud (2017: 181). But the existing research does provide us with some basic facts about the Shi'a in Norway. The 1980s saw the foundation of a large Shi'a mosque of the Twelver branch, the Anjuman e Hussaini (Vogt, 2008). At first, this mosque was dominated by Pakistani Shi'a, but with an influx of refugees from Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and Lebanon, Arab and Iranian Shi'a gradually became more influential. Nevertheless, the main Shi'a shaykh throughout the 1980s was Pakistani. Later, competing mosques were established: the somewhat Arab-dominated Tauheed Islamic Centre was founded in 1994, followed by others. Today there are between eight and ten Shi'a mosques and centres in the Oslo region (Bøe and Flaskerud, 2017: 186). In the 2000s and 2010s, the established Shi'a mosques and centres were complemented by various independent Shi'a organisations and associations, which largely catered to young Muslims who had grown up in Norway (*ibid.*: 190–3).

In this diverse Islamic landscape, there have been some attempts at creating umbrella organisations or meta-organisations that could unite the diverse factions of Norwegian Islam and advance the interests of Muslims in the country. How have Sunnis and Shi'as cooperated in these institutional attempts at unification? In the following analysis, various levels of cooperation will be identified. *Formal cooperation* means that organisations cooperate with each other in some formal sense – meaning that they are members of the same umbrella organisation, for example. But formal cooperation does not necessarily entail *actual cooperation* or *deep cooperation* – which means that there are mutual projects where all parties take part.

## 5 The First Phase: Smooth Cooperation during the Rushdie Affair

The first attempt at institutional cooperation between Muslims in Norway across ethnic and theological lines was during the Rushdie affair in 1989. Norway was one of the Western countries with the strongest mobilisation efforts against Salman Rushdie's novel, *The Satanic Verses* (Engelstad, 2013: 55). Soon after Ayatollah Khomeini's *fatwa* (religious edict) legitimising the killing of Rushdie, an ad-hoc organisation was established called *Islamsk Forsvarsråd* (The Islamic Defence Council), which involved most of the mosques in Norway, around 30 at the time. For nearly a year and a half, they contested the publication of the Norwegian translation of the book. In February 1989, they arranged a major demonstration in Oslo in which nearly 3,000 Muslims took part – a large number, given that there were only about 40,000 people from Muslim countries in Norway at the time, 19,000 of whom were members of the mosques. This indicates that opposition to Rushdie's book must have been quite common in the various Muslim communities. The adopted slogans were 'Stop Satan Rushdie' and 'Respect for religion'. Following the demonstration, the Defence Council took Rushdie's publisher to court on charges of blasphemy, without much success.

For the purpose of this article, the unique feature of the Defence Council was that it was able to unite almost all of the mosques in Norway, including Sunni and Shi'a mosques – and it therefore functioned as an important precursor to the IRN. Today, there are only a few publically available written sources about the Defence Council (Vogt, 2008; Austena, 2011; Engelstad, 2013). I was able to interview Trond Ali Linstad, a doctor and former leftist activist, who converted to Shi'a Islam in the early 1980s and was the secretary of the Council at that time. In my interview with him, he stated that the Defence Council did

indeed function as a bridge between three of the main currents in Norwegian Islam in the 1980s: Barelwis, Deobandis and Shi'a.<sup>1</sup>

The Defence Council was formed on the initiative of the Pakistani Barelwi imam from the Ahl-e-Sunnat mosque, the largest mosque in Norway at the time. The Council also set up a leadership board composed of the Ahl-e-Sunnat imam and two other prominent figures with other sectarian orientations. The Deobandi Islamic Cultural Centre – which was the first mosque in Norway – also joined, represented by its imam. Lastly, the Shi'a also participated in the Council's leadership board through the sheikh of the Anjuman e Hussaini mosque, the largest Shi'a mosque in Oslo. All of these Muslim clerics were from South Asia. According to Linstad, they often met informally and drank tea and discussed the cause in Urdu. Linstad himself attended the meetings.<sup>2</sup>

Although the Defence Council did not achieve their goal of stopping the publication of Rushdie's novel in Norway, they did achieve something else: they brought together the multipolar world of Norwegian Islam. Was this difficult to bring about? According to Linstad, it was not exceptionally so. He thought that sectarianism was not a salient issue in the Norwegian Muslim milieu of the 1980s: 'I don't think it was such a demarcating line back then. I ran a Muslim community centre. On our board we had both prominent Shi'a Muslims and prominent Sunni Muslims, and it was never a problem.'<sup>3</sup>

Can we trust this assessment? In our interview, Linstad never emphasised the sectarian differences in Islam. He had initially been inspired to convert to Islam following the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Shi'a Islam seemed ascendant and most promising from a political standpoint. It is possible that Linstad downplays the sectarian divides that existed during the late 1980s because he never perceived them as important himself. Research on sectarian relations in Pakistan does imply that there were simmering tensions between Sunnis and Shi'a in Pakistan at the time (Behuria, 2004). Given that Pakistanis in Norway had strong transnational ties to Pakistan (Sandberg, 2003), it seems somewhat doubtful that there were no sectarian tensions between Sunnis and Shi'a in Norway at all. The fact remains, though, that intra-Muslim cooperation during the Rushdie affair seems to have been remarkably smooth, which lends credence to Linstad's recollection.

1 Interview with Trond Ali Linstad, Oslo, 10 May 2018.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.



## 6 Falling out: Sunnis and Shi'a in the Islamic Council of Norway

Only a few years later, this cooperation seemingly evaporated. In 1991 there were reports in the media that there were internal conflicts in the Defence Council, and the organization seemed to be in trouble (Stanghelle, 1991). When Rushdie visited Norway in August 1992, there was no mention of the Defence Council in the national press, suggesting that the organisation either had ceased to exist or lay dormant. Three mosque leaders protested publicly, including the sheikh from the Shi'a Anjuman e Hussaini mosque who had been a part of the leadership in the Defence Council, but they did so in their own name and in the names of their mosques, not in the name of the Defence Council (NTB, 1992). The other leaders from the old Defence Council were notably silent, suggesting a change of approach.

One reason for this may have been that a new chapter in the institutional history of Islam in Norway was about to be written just around the time of Rushdie's visit. A few months earlier, in January 1992, Mellomkirkelig Råd (MKR), the 'foreign ministry' of the Church of Norway, had sent a letter to all the mosques and Islamic associations they could locate in Norway, inviting them to a meeting intended to 'establish direct contact between the Church of Norway and Muslim organizations in Norway' (Elgvin, 2020: 397). As a result, many of the mosques became preoccupied with dialogue and formal representation, and this may have led them to be less interested in overt forms of protest during Rushdie's visit.

The initiative from the church seems to have originated in a more general preoccupation with inter-religious dialogue in Western Christian organisations, in which people in the Church of Norway took part (Elgvin, 2020: 137–8). The initiative bore fruit: after receiving the invitation, some mosque leaders decided to form an interim organisation which they called *Islamsk Råd* (The Islamic Council), which they thought should officially represent Muslims (Mukhtar, 1992). An overriding concern for some of the mosques seems to have been the desire to exclude the Ahmadiyya, who had initially been included on the list of invitees (Ashraf, 1992). The contemporaneous interpretation of Olav Fykse Tveit – the general secretary of the MKR at the time – was that the creation of the Islamic Council prior to the meeting with the Church of Norway had been partly motivated by a wish to exclude any possibility that the Ahmadiyya would take part (Tveit, 1993). On 15 December 1992, representatives from the Islamic Council met with representatives from the Church of Norway and other organisations, and decided to proceed – both with the formal creation of an umbrella organisation for mosques in Norway, and with formalised contact between this umbrella organisation and the MKR.

In this initial round, representatives from the Shi'a mosque did take part, as documented in the list of attendees at the meeting in December 1992 (Elgvin, 2020: 146–7). That meeting, however, was the last time Sunnis and Shi'a would cooperate institutionally for the next 14–15 years. In October 1993, the IRN was created. Of the over 40 Muslim organisations and congregations that the MKR had invited in January 1992, only five signed the statutes of the new organisation, all Sunni: Ahl-e-Sunnat (Pakistani Barelwi), the Rabita mosque (Arab/international post-Islamist), the Islamic Cultural Centre Union (Turkish Süleymanci), Tanzeem ul Muslimun (Pakistani Tabligh Jama'at), the Moroccan Cultural Centre (Moroccan traditionalist) (Elgvin, 2020: 148). During the following year, the membership base increased to 14 mosques and, during the 1990s, the membership increased to almost 20 (Veiviseren, 1994; Vogt, 2008: 218). The Shi'a were not present, either among the founders in 1993 or among the expanded membership base from 1994 and onwards.

The Shi'a were not the only ones who did not join the newly founded umbrella organisation, however. The Ahmadiyyas had been excluded from the very beginning, given that most of the other mosques did not regard them as proper Muslims (Ashraf, 1992). Among the larger mainstream Sunni mosques, a number of important mosques in both the Pakistani and Turkish communities did not take part either. One of the reasons for their lack of participation seems to have been internal competition, with internal conflicts between the Turkish mosques and between the Pakistani mosques forming barriers to cooperation (Elgvin, 2020: 148–50).

As for the Shi'a, neither written nor oral sources have cast light on why they did not take part; whether there was any formal exclusion, whether they did not want to participate, or whether they did not feel welcome. The statutes that were decided upon in October 1993 do not say anything specifically related to Sunni or Shi'a issues, although they may be interpreted as Sunni-oriented. They were only signed by Sunni mosques, and refer to the 'Sunnah' as a defined singular tradition, even though the canonized hadith collections often differ between Sunni and the Shi'a communities:

1.4. The IRN has no right whatsoever to take decisions which are against the Al-Qur'an and the Sunnah.

[...]

2.5. A **Muslim** is defined as one who publicly confesses the Islamic creed Ash-Shahadat, and who believes in the finality of the Prophet's (peace be upon him) Prophethood. Furthermore a Muslim must accept the Divine Message Al-Qur'an, received by the Prophet Muhammad

(peace be upon him) in its totality, together with the Prophet's (peace be upon him) Sunnah doctrine.<sup>4</sup>

These definitions were probably meant to exclude the Ahmadiyya, given the emphasis on the finality of the Prophet's prophethood, and did not say anything about the Shi'a. In 1997, when a Shi'a mosque applied for membership, the IRN made a decision about whether or not to include the Shi'a. This led to a heated debate, following which seven of the representatives at the annual IRN meeting voted to include the Shi'a, and three voted against (Vogt, 2008: 216, 309). Even though this meant that the Shi'a were allowed to enter the organisation, they did not do so until many years later.

It was not until 2006 that a Shi'a mosque – the Tauheed Islamic Centre – came to be listed as a formal member of the IRN (IRN, 2006). Even then, there are no signs that the Tauheed Mosque played an important role in the organisation. I have not come across any mention of actors from the Tauheed Mosque in any sources from the late 2000s. It was not until well into the 2010s that the Shi'a were really invited in as partners in the organisation – meaning that they took on important roles beyond being members.

Why did it take so long for the Shi'a to be accepted into the organisation? There is not much to be found on this topic in the written sources I have been able to access. During the informal fieldwork I conducted in Sunni organisations from 2008 and onwards, however, I occasionally encountered scepticism about the Shi'a, including among actors who held leadership positions in the IRN. They did not regard the Shi'a as heretics or unbelievers but they did regard them as deeply misguided. Even though the Shi'a were accepted as belonging to the Muslim fold, this did appear to be a genuine question for some of my interlocutors (fieldwork notes, 2008–2010). It is therefore not unreasonable to believe that informal mechanisms of exclusion may have been at play, or that Shi'a simply did not feel very welcome in the organisation, even though they had been formally accepted.

## 7 Coming Together: Inviting the Shi'a In

The situation changed during the 2010s. On 18 October 2018, I attended an IRN conference in Oslo, one of the organisation's first public appearances for over

<sup>4</sup> From the first edition of the statutes of the IRN, my translation. The Norwegian text is reproduced in Elgvin, 2020: 378–85.

a year. One year earlier, the organisation had been split in two in the wake of a prolonged public struggle between two factions, which I have covered at length elsewhere (Elgvin, 2020: 322–34). The organisation also lost its public funding and other sources of income. During 2017 and 2018, the organisation kept a low profile, and it seemed uncertain whether they would be able to keep going. But then, in October, they held this conference, entitled ‘Muslim identity in a modern society’. The organisers stated emphatically from the stage that ‘the IRN is not dead. We will continue’ (fieldwork notes, October 2018). The main speaker at the event, who was supposed to reintroduce the IRN to the Norwegian public sphere, was the sheikh of the Shi‘a Tauheed Mosque. During the meeting, none of the conveners or organisers made a point about his being Shi‘a – he was simply giving the keynote speech, without any fuss.

This was a clear sign that Shi‘a had become full partners within the IRN. Some years previously, the other large Shi‘a mosque in Oslo, Anjuman e Hussaini, had also joined the IRN, and ‘young Shiites were engaged in the Council’s committee work’ (Bøe and Flaskerud, 2017: 189). The decision to invite in the Shi‘a to participate more fully seems to have been internally acknowledged. When I interviewed the secretary general in 2017, the IRN was in the middle of the conflict that would lead it to its splitting in two. The faction that opposed the secretary general had been claiming that he was taking the IRN in a more inward-looking and exclusivist direction, which was less concerned with openness and dialogue. He strenuously rejected this accusation. One example he used was the inclusion of Shi‘a:

They are saying that we don’t want dialogue etc. But look at the Shi‘a! They were never invited in before. Now they play an important role in the organisation. How does that fit with the idea that we don’t want dialogue and cooperation?<sup>5</sup>

At the time of this interview, I was not pursuing the question of Sunni–Shi‘a cooperation, so I did not follow up on this topic. I therefore do not know whether it had in any way been controversial to invite the Shi‘a more fully into the organisation. What this comment does reveal, however, is that the inclusion of Shi‘a was acknowledged as something relatively new within the organisation, and that it could not just be taken for granted.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with the IRN secretary general, Oslo, 8 October 2017.

## 8 Understanding the Patterns

To sum up, we may discern the following larger pattern in institutional Sunni–Shi'a cooperation in Norway: It was smooth during the Rushdie affair in 1989–1990. Cooperation then became non-existent for about 15 years, following the creation of the IRN. From 2006 onwards, one Shi'a mosque was listed as a member of the IRN, but did not play an important role. During the 2010s, however, the Shi'a were invited in as full partners in the organisation and started playing important roles. How are we to make sense of this pattern?

Various explanations may be possible. One may be a lack of interest from the Shi'a side. Did they want to cooperate during the Rushdie affair and in the 2010s, but not in the intervening years? This does not seem likely, given that one of the main Shi'a mosques decided to apply for IRN membership in 1997, even though they probably knew that it was controversial, and they actually became a member in 2006.

Another possibility is that these patterns are simply about arbitrary or contingent factors, given that the organised Islamic scene in Norway is fairly small. It is possible that the personal characteristics of the leaders involved played a role, as leaders can be of decisive importance in smaller organisations. Were the leaders of the various factions simply able to get along better in the late 1980s and in the 2010s than in the intervening years? During the late 1980s, the three most powerful Muslim clerics in Norway – from a Pakistani Barelwi mosque, a Pakistani Deobandi mosque and the multinational Shi'a mosque – were all Pakistani Urdu-speakers. This may have made it easier for them to get along during the Rushdie affair. During the 1990s, the leadership in the IRN mostly hailed from the Arab-dominated Rabita Mosque, and they may not have had the same affinity with the Shi'a leaders, before leadership passed to people from a Pakistani Barelwi background in the 2010s. This explanation, however, does not account for the fact that the Shi'a community in the 1990s and 2000s was becoming increasingly Arab-dominated, with the influx of migrants from countries such as Lebanon and Iraq.

Another possibility is that the Sunni leadership and membership of the IRN in the 1990s and 2010s was more exclusivist and 'sectarian' in theological terms than the Sunni leadership during the Rushdie affair and in the 2010s. Is this explanation reasonable? Many of the leaders of the IRN in the 1990s and early 2000s had a relatively open post-Islamist theological orientation, with a loose ideological affinity with Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood. Much of the discourse in Brotherhood circles is opposed to Shi'ism in theological terms. But according to Shadi Hamid, 'Brotherhood branches and affiliates

have not generally been known for anti-Shi'a sentiment. This does not mean that they find Shi'ism doctrinally acceptable; they simply have not paid much attention to it' (Hamid, 2021: 1–2). It must also be noted that, during the 1990s, the IRN entered into close cooperation with both the Jewish community and the secular humanists of Norway, in a common struggle against compulsory Christian education in the public school system (Elgvin 2020, 202–15). Given the centrality of the Palestine conflict for Muslim communities, and the animosity towards atheism and secularism that can be found in parts of the contemporary politico-theological discourse in some Muslim communities (see for example al-Qaradawi, 2003), this shows that theological or political disagreements did not stop the IRN from cooperating with others during the 1990s, if they had an interest in doing so.

A more reasonable interpretation of the historical patterns in institutional Sunni–Shi'a cooperation in Norway concerns the importance of *supererogatory* or *common goals*: whether the Sunni leadership thought that they had common goals with the Shi'a communities, and whether institutional cooperation would make it easier to achieve those goals (Sherif, 1958; Sherif et al., 1961; Diab, 1978). The Sunni leadership on the Islamic arena in Norway seem to have invited the Shi'a in when they had goals in common. This tendency was also apparent in the 1990s, when joint opposition to the compulsory teaching of Christianity in school led the IRN to join forces with the Jewish community and the secular humanists.

This mechanism accounts well for the historical variation in institutional Sunni–Shi'a cooperation in Norway. It is also in line with insights from organisational theory about how organisations may strategise in various circumstances: organisations often seek alliances that furthers their interests (Oliver, 1991; Ahrne and Brunsson, 2005; Rosenow-Williams, 2012; Berkhout, 2013). During the Rushdie affair, organisations in Norway were still fairly young, most mosques having been established in the 1980s. At that time, the leaders of the mosques had no institutional pathways to influence and status. They were not included in any formal dialogues, and were not in close contact with politicians. Their primary source of power and influence at this point lay in *protest* and *strength of numbers*. This means that it was important for the Sunni leadership to get the Shi'a on board – both in order to increase their numerical strength and to show a unified front.

During the 1990s, however, another road to influence opened up for the IRN: dialogue with important actors in Norwegian society, and alliances with external organisations, such as the Jewish community and the secular humanists. As a result, strength of numbers became less important. For the IRN, it was no longer essential to have the Shi'a on board. They were in any case seen as the

most important mouthpiece for Muslims in Norway, and were formally invited into various formal bodies where they could exert influence. It was only well into the 2000s that a few Muslim actors started to question in public whether the IRN was really representative of Norwegian Muslims (Gead, 2006). Up until then, the IRN did not need to include the Shi'a in order to be seen as representative and have standing and influence in Norwegian society.

In the 2010s, however, things changed. New people joined the leadership of the IRN, and they had new ideas about how the organisation should be run (Elgvin 2020, 291–310). Whereas the IRN had long sought to reach their goals through external dialogue and soft means, the new leadership in the organisation increasingly sought a more independent profile.<sup>6</sup> The backdrop was a perception that mainstream society had become more sceptical towards Muslims, and that the safest bet for Muslim organisations was to build strength from within their own communities. The IRN sought independence from the authorities by relying on income from certification of halal meat in addition to the funding from the state, and began to voice more criticism of the authorities. This created opposition on the part of the old IRN leadership and led to a conflict that lasted for several years, and ended with the organisation splitting up. In this situation, the source of power and legitimacy for the new leadership in the organisation was not so much external dialogue, but rather *strength of numbers* and the symbolic ideal of uniting all Muslims in Norway, irrespective of theological differences.

The new approach may be seen in a text that presented one of their new undertakings in the early 2010s – the 'Safe Muslim' initiative. This was thought of as a kind of insurance fund for Muslims, where Muslims would receive legal help in case they were being discriminated against. The text read:

You may have heard the story about the king who had three sons who fought among themselves about who should inherit the throne after their sick father. The king first gave them each a pen and asked them to break it in two. This was easy to do. The king asked them to do it again, but this time with three pens each. This was more difficult. The moral of this story is that we are stronger together. (IRN, 2012)

During this period, it was not only Shi'a mosques who were invited in. The membership of the IRN had hovered around 20 mosques for many years but, within a short time, it doubled to 40–45. Many Sunni mosques that had

<sup>6</sup> This section is based on chapters 9 and 10 in my dissertation (Elgvin, 2020), where these events are discussed at length.

previously not been part of the IRN were actively asked to join the organisation. The rationale was the same: the more members the IRN was able to enrol, the stronger would be the Muslim community that the IRN sought to represent. Any theological differences between Sunni and Shi'a mosques were therefore probably deemed as less important than the greater good – the overarching goal of standing together as Muslims in order to face hostility from mainstream society.

## 9 Resurrecting an Old Story?

It must nevertheless be emphasised that other explanations and mechanisms may also be important and the incentive of *common goals* or *uniting against a third party* does not preclude other factors being involved. In their treatment of Sunni–Shi'a relations and identities among young Muslims in Norway, Marius Linge and Göran Larsson (2022) emphasise that the Norwegian context may make sectarian identities in themselves less important. The social context provides an opportunity to explore broader Muslim identities, which are not confined to being narrowly Sunni or Shi'a. This may, of course, have influenced the main IRN actors in the 2010s.

Nevertheless, we can still note that the mechanism I have proposed here is in line with historical patterns of cooperation between Sunnis and Shi'a in the early modern era. Many of the most famous and influential cases of Sunni–Shi'a cooperation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries revolved around unity in the light of shared adversaries. One of the most thorough treatments of Sunni–Shi'a rapprochements in modern times probably remains Rainer Brünner's seminal work *Islamic Ecumenism in the 20th Century*, which details attempts at reconciliation on both the Sunni and Shi'a sides. Brünner identifies the roots of the Sunni–Shi'a rapprochement in the pan-Islamic movements, which was championed by Muhammad Abduh, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Rashid Rida in the late nineteenth century (Brünner, 2004: 34–41). Even though the pan-Islamic pioneers seldom explicitly addressed the Sunni–Shi'a divide in theological terms, they did make an effort to overcome doctrinal barriers. The main motivation was that they perceived Muslims as being dominated by colonial forces, and thought that Muslims needed to unite.

Al-Afghani was also involved in one of the first deliberate political attempts at Sunni–Shi'a cooperation, in Istanbul in the 1890s. This episode has been treated in a thorough master's thesis in history by Aytek Sever based on Ottoman primary sources (Sever, 2010). Prior to the 1890s, the Ottoman policy towards the Shi'a had been one of *da'wa* and conversion – the Ottomans



attempted to counter Shi'a influence in Iraq and other areas by disseminating pro-Sunni propaganda and employing religious authorities as Sunni missionaries (*ibid.*: 100–1). In 1894, Sultan Abdulhamid II tasked al-Afghani with an ambitious programme of Sunni–Shi'a rapprochement, intended to unite forces in the mostly Sunni Ottoman Empire and the Shi'a-dominated Persia (*ibid.*: 120–4). The sultan's rationale was that Muslims needed to unite against European powers. The rapprochement programme was abandoned fairly soon for various political reasons, but the fact that there was an external threat was clearly an important backdrop for the attempt.

The same pattern could be seen with the Palestine movement in the 1920s and 1930s. In 1931, there was a pan-Islamic congress in Jerusalem, where Muslim scholars and dignitaries from all over the world gathered to join forces against the Zionist settlement project. According to Brünner, this was the most significant manifestation of Sunni–Shi'a rapprochement up until that time, as prominent Shi'a scholars were given important roles at the Sunni-dominated conference (Brünner, 2004: 88–97). Once again, it seemed easier to unite in the face of a clear external foe, this time the Zionist movement in Palestine. Despite repeated attempts, a pan-Islamic conference of similar stature was not to happen again in the next decades.

The Palestine question, however, again played a role much later in the establishment of an enduring international organisation that has united Sunni and Shi'a states, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). An article that discusses sectarianism in the OIC simply states:

The OIC was established in response to a shared indignation at an external threat: Israel [...]. While Saudi Arabia had already taken the lead in holding Islamic unity conferences in Makkah in 1962 and 1965, the 1967 Six-Day War accelerated the process that led to the creation of the OIC in 1969. (Ahmed and Akbarzadeh, 2021: 5)

## 10 Conclusion

The historical patterns of institutional cooperation between Sunnis and Shi'a in Norway matches well with the theory of superordinate goals, and how such goals can facilitate cooperation. As the preceding paragraph has shown, this pattern is not a novel phenomenon in Sunni–Shi'a relations. At the same time, some limitations in the material and the analysis should be pointed out. The story told here is largely Sunni-centric, and focuses on the role of the Sunni majority in facilitating cooperation. For future research, it would be valuable

to acquire more data on how Shi'a leaders in Norway and other places perceive their relations to the Sunni majority and their views on institutional cooperation. Furthermore, given that I did not ask specifically about Sunni–Shi'a relations in most of the qualitative interviews, I cannot unpack in detail how the social processes looked from the perspective of the actors themselves.

As emphasised at the beginning of this article, the explanation it has put forward should not be seen as exhaustive. The argument is of a more probabilistic nature: common goals are one factor that may be important for bringing about institutional cooperation, and institutional cooperation is probably more likely to take place when Sunnis and Shi'a share some supererogatory goals. But other factors and mechanisms may matter too.

The question is also about the degree to which this mechanism can shed light on developments in other European countries. In some countries, there has been cooperation between Sunnis and Shi'a in national Islamic umbrella organisations, such as *Contactorgaan Moslims en Overheid* (CMO) in the Netherlands (Laurence, 2012: 298), the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB; Khan, Joudi, and Ahmed, 2020: 5–6) in the UK and IGGiÖ in Austria (Widiyanto, 2018). In other countries, such as France and Germany, the Shi'a federations have not taken part in national umbrella organisations such as the *Le Conseil français du culte musulman* (CFCM), *Deutsche Islam Konferenz* (DIK) or *Kordernationsrat der Muslime* (KRM) (Geisser, 2019; Rosenow-Williams, 2012: 167). These umbrella organisations differ from each other: some have been created top-down on the initiative of the authorities, whereas others have been created bottom-up by Muslim organisations themselves (Ciciora, 2018). This means that the social processes in these organisations probably differ from each other.

Is it likely that mechanisms similar to those in Norway have been at play concerning institutional Sunni–Shi'a cooperation in other countries? Perhaps. We may consider the MCB in Great Britain, for example. Besides Austria and Norway, this may well be the European country where Shi'a and Sunnis currently cooperate most closely in a national Islamic umbrella organisation (Khan, Joudi, and Ahmed, 2020: 5–6). Shi'a organisations were active in the foundation of the MCB in the 1990s and currently have several seats on the executive committee. The MCB has also actively advocated for intra-faith unity through official statements (Muslim Council of Britain, 2013). Interestingly, the structural and political conditions within which the MCB operates resemble those that applied in the IRN in the 2010s. They have relied more on legitimacy and support from below than from political acknowledgement from above (Braginskaia, 2015). This may have led the MCB to reach out to various strands within the Islamic landscape in the UK, in order to achieve a broad base of support, especially in the face of public scepticism about Islam.

This nevertheless remains an empirical question. Whether the processes I have described here have a broader significance can only be answered through detailed studies of Sunni–Shi‘a institutional cooperation in other European countries.

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