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# Sunni–Shi'a Relations in Europe

## *Framing an Emerging Field of Research*

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### Abstract

The overall intention of the special issue 'The Dynamics of Sunni–Shi'a Relations in Europe' is to call for a new research initiative aimed at establishing the significance of European Muslim-minority contexts for the study of Sunni–Shi'a dynamics. This article outlines the potential to contribute to the scholarship on sectarianism and the literature on Muslims in Europe. While also previewing the five articles included in the special issue, it proposes a framework to unpack the diverse nature and complex shaping of Sunni–Shi'a relations in European contexts.

### Keywords

Sunni–Shi'a relations – Muslim minorities – sectarianism – multi-diversity – Europe

## 1 Introduction

In the past decade, manifestations of a Sunni–Shi'a divide have drawn considerable public and scholarly attention in the history and contemporary dynamics of sectarianism within Islam.

Cycles of violence in Iraq, the sectarianisation of the Arab uprisings in the Gulf, descent into civil war in Syria and Yemen, the rise of the Islamic State movement, and Saudi–Iranian rivalry have directed the geographical focus of such attention predominantly to the Middle East. Beyond this region, some consideration has been paid to the situation in South Asia (inter alia, Zaman, 1998; Ali, 2010), South-East Asia (Formichi, 2014; Muwahidah, 2016) and Africa

(Thurston, 2021; Vahed, 2022). In contrast, Sunni–Shi'a relations in Europe remain understudied.

Co-edited with Emanuelle Degli Esposti, this special issue is intended as a call for a new research initiative aimed at establishing European Muslim-minority contexts as a geographical area through which to explore Sunni–Shi'a relations. Two related questions guide this endeavour: What is the nature of these relations, and how are they shaped by various internal/external and local/international forces? Our premise is that intracommunal relations are multifaceted and dynamic. They include, but are not limited to, the conflictual relations on which academic, public and some primordialist emic Muslim discourses tend to focus (Majed, 2020: 347). Relations characterised by inclusion, co-operation or indifference also need full attention, as does the oft contradictory and inconsistent nature of these relations. To capture further the dynamics at play, this introductory article suggests a multidimensional contextual approach to Sunni–Shi'a relations in Europe. The five articles contained in this special issue are not intended as a complete mapping of relations between Sunni and Shi'a communities in the countries under consideration – Britain, Denmark, Finland and Norway. Given that actual knowledge of these relations remains scarce, emphasis is placed on fine-grained empirical research through specific case studies.

## 2 Opportunities for a New Geographical Area of Inquiry on Sunni–Shi'a Relations

The study of Sunni–Shi'a relations in Europe engages with and has potential to contribute to two distinct fields of scholarship. One is the wide literature on Sunni–Shi'a sectarianism. While we privilege in this special issue the term Sunni–Shi'a relations, this terminological preference is not an attempt to disengage the study of these relations from the field of research on sectarianism. Too massive to be referenced here, existing scholarship has made undeniable 'progress' towards the conceptualisation, grasping and explanations of sectarianism, albeit without much consensus (Valbjørn, 2021). The Middle East remains the main geographical unit of analysis, particularly the countries with heterogeneous societies in which Shi'a Muslims constitute majorities or significant minorities, but also contexts where their numbers are minimal. Without suggesting that Sunni–Shi'a relations are necessarily comparable across regions, broadening the geographical scope to European contexts can prompt us to engage with and complement the insights developed in Middle

East-centred scholarship, as well as consider new questions to further our understanding of Sunni–Shi'a dynamics more broadly.

Introducing a European perspective can make several contributions in this regard. One prime consideration is to open up inquiry into Muslim-minority contexts. In the case of Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East, state and regime formation, the nature of political systems and governing strategies, socio-economic structures and geopolitical rivalries have affected Sunni–Shi'a dynamics in the region. While these effects can also be felt transnationally, Sunni–Shi'a relations in Europe cannot be disentangled from implications associated with the minority position of Islam and Muslims on the continent. They are subject and respond to forces emanating from the states and the wider non-Muslim majority societies in which they are situated. Furthermore, and without dismissing the importance of top-down and macro-level conditions, research on Sunni–Shi'a relations in European settings offers fertile ground to develop additional insight into the 'from below' and everyday sectarian practices on which the Middle East-focussed literature has raised attention (*inter alia*, Mac Ginty, 2017; Fibiger, 2018; Akdedian, 2019). In this special issue, the articles concentrate on Sunni and Shi'a individuals, groups or institutions as a way to capture how relations are envisaged, experienced and driven within Muslim communities in a geographical context that is less directly subject to the top-down and structural conditions with which everyday sectarianism in the Middle East interacts. Another line of questioning relates to the transnational dynamics not only across the Middle East (Hinnebusch, 2016) but beyond it. Quasi-absent in the scholarship on sectarianism, diasporic Muslim communities provide a useful lens through which to explore the bi-directional interplay between home and host country contexts in shaping these relations (Olszewska, 2013; Kadhum, 2019; Degli Esposti, 2020).

The second field in which a research area on Sunni–Shi'a relations in Europe is grounded is the scholarship on Islam and Muslims in Europe. Reflecting their majority weight within the Muslim population on the continent, Sunni Muslims have been the main subject of academic attention. Long overdue, research on Shi'a minorities in Europe is currently fast-growing. Taken as a whole, scholarship on Muslims in Europe captures Sunni and Shi'a communities in all their internal diversity, be it in terms of religious, doctrinal or ideological affiliation, ethnicity, migration patterns, class, gender or generation. The study of each denominational group remains compartmentalised, however, as is also the case with scholarship on Sunni and Shi'a Islam more broadly.

A research field on Sunni–Shi'a relations offers the potential to go beyond such compartmentalisation. In this regard, one should not subsume the topic

into the sub-field of Shi'ism and Shi'a Muslims in Europe. Quite tellingly, in her overview of various denominational and ideological trends among Britain's Muslim population, Innes Bowen (2014) chose to place the discussion of Sunni–Shi'a relations in the chapter dedicated to the Twelver Shi'a, as if this issue were only relevant to them or to study of them. Research on Shi'a communities in Europe can certainly inform our understanding of intra-Muslim relations. Existing literature has explored the diversity of Shi'a discourses about Sunni Muslims (Flynn, 2013; Corboz, 2019; Scharbrodt, 2020), the othering experienced by Shi'a and the effect on their own self-identification (Ali, 2019), and relatedly the construction of a Shi'a-specific (European) identity distinct from co-religionists (Degli Esposti, 2018; Spellman Poots, 2018). This special issue also includes an article, by Elvire Corboz and Emanuelle Degli Esposti, that addresses Sunni–Shi'a relations as envisioned and practised by Shi'a grassroots organisations. Explorations of the topic should not be limited simply to the Shi'a context, however, as this risks side-lining the significance of intra-Muslim relations in Europe more broadly.

Besides the existing literature offering a Shi'a perspective on intra-Muslim relations, we owe to Susanne Olsson (2017) and Vincent Geisser (2019) an understanding of the othering of Shi'ism among Salafi and *wasati* (middle way) Sunni circles in Sweden and France, respectively. Marius Linge (2016) adds a comparative perspective by considering both anti-Shi'a and anti-Sunni polemics, as well as calls for cross-sectarian unity, propagated by Norwegian Muslim youth groups. Similarly, multi-denominational samples of informants lend themselves well to comparisons of views and attitudes of each side towards the other (Isac Alak, 2015; Jafar, 2017; Fazal, 2018; Ahmed, 2022; Linge and Larsson, 2022). A more interactionist approach consists of exploring identity and boundary making through debates between denominational groups, for instance in the online sphere (Elwert, Tabti and Pfahler, 2020; Pauha in this special issue).

In general terms, we envisage the study of Sunni–Shi'a relations in Europe as a new but not separate area of research within the field of Islam and Muslims in Europe that can inform, and be informed by, several areas of research that dominate the field. To give one example, works on the management of denominational diversity in Islamic schooling and education situate the topic of Sunni–Shi'a relations within broader dynamics, such as social cohesion (Panjwani, 2014; Rissanen and Sai, 2018), the formation of European Muslims (Rissanen, 2014) and the governance of Islam (Sakaranaho, 2018, 2019). Similarly, the articles in this special issue engage several mainstream themes in the literature on Muslims in Europe. These include the institutionalisation of

Islam, its representation and recognition in the public sphere, Muslims' identity constructions and ethical self-fashioning, and grassroots activism.

The significance of this special issue thus lies in its attempt to develop a new research area on Sunni–Shi‘a relations in Europe. As the above suggests, this research initiative can contribute to, as well as bring together, two fields of scholarship. Put bluntly, it aims to take the study of Sunni–Shi‘a sectarianism out of the ‘Middle East ghetto’ (Valbjørn, 2021: 8) and scholarship on Muslims in Europe out of its own regional and disciplinary confinements.

If scholarly attention to Sunni–Shi‘a relations in Europe is long overdue and promising for both fields, putting them in the spotlight requires caution. The Middle East, past and present, has been the object of a ‘sectarian master narrative’ (Visser, 2007) in Western public discourses (Douai and Lauricella, 2014). Occasional media reports notwithstanding (Pauha, 2020), this narrative has not permeated the portrayal of Muslims in Europe. One cannot, however, exclude that Sunni–Shi‘a relations, which are often simplistically conflated with conflict, will become scrutinised as a problem concerning Islam and Muslims on the continent. As Thijl Sunier (2014) warned us in the case of the ‘domestication of Islam’ agenda, academic knowledge production has been intertwined with policy priorities. In the context of the securitisation of Islam, developing a research agenda on Sunni–Shi‘a relations entails such a risk. While one cannot fully mitigate it, our endeavour with this special issue is at least to contribute complexity to understandings about the nature and shaping of these relations.

### 3 The Nature and Shaping of Sunni–Shi‘a Relations

This special issue takes its cue from Brigitte Maréchal and Sami Zemni (2013) by thinking of Sunni–Shi‘a dynamics in terms of relations. The term ‘sectarianism’ is more commonplace in the literature. According to Fanar Haddad’s (2020: ch. 1) extensive review of the use of the term, not only does sectarianism suffer from cacophonous definitional imprecision, but also its meaning is often subsumed under notions of hatred, violence and other negative notions. Haddad proposes to get rid, if not of the concept altogether, at least of the meaningless ‘-ism’. The adjective sectarian should be used instead as a noun qualifier rather than as a stand-alone adjective, such as sectarian identity, on which he focusses. The alternative concept of sectarianisation (Hashemi and Postel, 2017) and the sister notion of de-sectarianisation (Mabon, 2019) capture the processual nature of sectarianism, and help rescue Sunni–Shi‘a

dynamics from the primordialist connotations that the term sectarianism can convey. The exact meaning of the 'sectarian-' which is subject to the process of '(de)-isation' often remains elusive, however. Even a basic definition of sectarian, as what relates to denominations within Islam, can be loaded with normative assumptions.

We prefer the 'Sunni–Shi'a' qualifier of the relations under study to the adjective sectarian. Denominational identifiers, however, raise issues similar to the use of the 'Muslim' category in the literature on Muslims in Europe (Jeldtoft, 2009; Brubaker, 2013), such as their relevance to those labelled as such, the different and shifting meanings of self-ascription, the extent of shared identity and 'group consciousness' (Meer, 2010), or the complex intersection of religious and other identities. Data gathered through worldwide surveys indicate that the binary distinction between Sunni and Shi'a is not self-evident and does not sit well with the percentages of those identifying as 'just Muslim', which are quite significant in some geographical contexts (Pew, 2012: 20–1). For a European example, a question on denominational affiliation in a 2008 survey in Germany did not return neat results, indicating disparities between Muslims of different migration backgrounds (Heine and Spielhaus, 2008). As Jesper Petersen (in this special issue) reminds us, the researcher invested in the study of Sunni–Shi'a relations should beware of a priori assumptions about the influence of denominational affiliations. In the absence of a better terminology, the Sunni and Shi'a descriptors can be used to identify the subject at hand in a way that still allows us to explore and question 'the boundaries upon which these labels rest' (Mac Ginty, 2017: 11; see also Muwahidah, 2016; Pauha in this special issue).

Thinking of Sunni–Shi'a dynamics relationally also requires a broad conceptualisation of relations. First, and at a more macro level, relations entail the positioning of groups *relative to* one another. This relative position may relate to demographic or normative weight (Haddad, 2020: ch. 5), status, visibility, representation or power. Capturing relations from this perspective is about not only comparing the position of groups but also assessing their (shifting) relative positions and the effects on Sunni–Shi'a dynamics (Corboz, 2019; Vahed, 2022; Kühle in this special issue). Second, and as with any type of intergroup relations, Sunni–Shi'a relations encompass both individual and collective perceptions, affects and behaviours *toward* (members of) another group (Hogg, 2006: 497). Third, relations are about contact and interaction *between* groups or members. Interactions may be face-to-face or mediated, as is the case in the online sphere. They vary in regularity and intensity, ranging from one-off or everyday encounters to more sustained social relationships. Interactions are not only direct but also indirect, as through exposure to abstract knowledge

about the other, for instance (Elwert, Tabti and Pfahler, 2020: 417). These types of relations – positioning, attitudes and interaction – should not be considered as separate; they shape and inform one another.

The nature of Sunni–Shi'a relations is multifaceted and dynamic. On one side of the spectrum are relations marred by antagonism and conflict, with different levels of intensity. In the past decade, acts of intra-Muslim violence have occasionally taken place on European soil, such as mosque arson and vandalism. While the actual motivations of the perpetrators should be examined before assuming them to be (only) about sectarian hatred, such incidents have the potential to affect relations between Sunni and Shi'a communities. Besides acts of physical violence, antagonistic attitudes take the form of negative stereotyping and polemics. Complementing works on anti-Shi'a and anti-Sunni polemics (Linge, 2016; Olsson, 2017; Geisser, 2019), Teemu Pauha's contribution focusses on intra-Muslim online debates about *mut'a* or temporary marriage, a common anti-Shi'a trope, which he analyses as an intergroup – depersonalised – boundary marker. According to Olsson (2017), stereotypes may translate into more concrete and violent action. However, as Göran Larsson (2016) cautions, the effect of stereotyping is more likely to depend on other socio-political factors.

Far from being limited to exclusionary dynamics, Sunni–Shi'a relations entail patterns of inclusion or unity, dialogue, cooperation, co-existence shaped by 'everyday cosmopolitanism' (Bayat, 2010: ch. 10) or 'everyday peace' (Mac Ginty, 2014), as well as various forms of mixing, sharing and cross-pollination. Indifference – whether unconscious or strategic – also characterises Sunni–Shi'a relations, as do ambivalence and ambiguity (ibid.; Jafar, 2017; Thurston, 2020; Petersen in this special issue). All patterns deserve attention so that their associated discourses and practices can be unpacked. The case studies explored in the special issue capture some of the many facets of Sunni–Shi'a relations, but without seeking to answer the 'non-question' of which types of relations are more or less commonplace (Haddad, 2020: 69). More often than not, inconsistent and contradictory dynamics are at play simultaneously, pointing to the need also to explore how they relate to and influence each other.

The dynamic nature of Sunni–Shi'a relations in Europe calls for an approach that takes into account the multidimensionality of the context in which these relations are situated, shaped and experienced. Five dimensions are suggested. The first concerns the internal make up of Muslim communities. Sunni Muslims represent the large majority of Muslims worldwide and the Shi'a a minority estimated at 10–13%, but these proportions vary considerably across different European countries. Estimates put the number of Shi'a of various sub-branches at a record of 20–40% of the Muslim population in Sweden, 10–15% in Britain

and Germany, 5% in Denmark, 2–3% in France, and less than 1% in Finland and Norway (Pew, 2009: 39–41). The internal dimension of Sunni–Shi'a relations is not limited to a distinction between denominational groups. There are other bases of religious differentiation, such as school of thought, ideological orientation (Geisser, 2019; Scharbrodt, 2020) and religious trajectories including conversion to or within Islam (Lechkar, 2012). Most importantly, to mitigate the risk of glossing over heterogeneity of attitudes and experiences, the 'super-diverse' (Vertovec, 2007) makeup of Muslim communities in Europe should be considered: country of origin, migration history and immigration status, educational and socio-economic background, generation, and gender. Although one should not reify sociodemographic categories, much research is needed on how Sunni–Shi'a relations are constructed and enmeshed in various forms of social differentiation (Jacobsen, 2010: ch. 2).

Space is another dimension to consider. In addition to exploring dynamics within and across different European national and local contexts, a more micro perspective entails attention to the many locations in which Sunni–Shi'a relations take place. The contributions in this special issue focus on more or less structured Muslim spaces – a national umbrella organisation, mosques, grassroots groups and online platforms. Spaces are not just locations for observation but also affect relations. This is a core argument of Petersen's ethnographic study in the feminist Mariam Mosque in Copenhagen, a space that 'warps' Sunni and Shi'a identity categories and makes them insignificant. This calls for research on various sites of religious activity but also on everyday settings where Sunni and Shi'a Muslims interact: at home, at school and university, in the workplace, on the street, in recreational facilities, and so forth. Relations in one place may also shape relations in other places.

A third dimension is the state and wider society contexts in which Sunni–Shi'a relations are embedded. The forces shaping them may stem from the state management of minority religions, and the governance of Islam specifically, including the (lack of) recognition of the internal diversity of Muslims (Sakamaho, 2018: 122). Related are the politics of representation vis-à-vis state and society, which also play out against the backdrop of public perceptions of and discourses on Islam and Muslims. Intrigued by the increased visibility of Shi'ism in Denmark, Lene Kühle considers the success of a major Shi'a mosque, compared with a Sunni counterpart, in becoming the public face of Islam in the country, a position previously associated with Sunni Islam. In addition to physical visibility, the contestation plays out in outward-facing spheres of activity – in the media and inter-religious fora. In their study of inclusive conceptions of British Islam promoted by Shi'a grassroots organisations in Britain,



Elvire Corboz and Emanuelle Degli Esposti find that cross-sectarian inclusivity is very much entangled with engagements with wider British society. For his part, Olav Elgvin contextualises Sunni–Shi‘a collaboration in the main Muslim umbrella organisation in Norway as dependent on the need for a show of strength and unity vis-à-vis state and society.

Less directly explored in this special issue, transnational dynamics constitute an additional dimension with potential to shape Sunni–Shi‘a relations. Concern – outwith but also amongst Muslim communities in Europe (Huttunen and Juntunen, 2020: 4133–4) – has been raised at the import of contemporary conflicts from the Middle East, be it by recent waves of refugees or by returning foreign fighters. As Uzair Ahmed (2022) cautions in a study including young Norwegian Muslims who went or intended to fight in Iraq and Syria, practices vis-à-vis denominational others vary across geographical and cultural contexts. State-sponsored and non-state outreach from abroad, (social) media and transnational solidarity imaginaries are some of the many avenues through which to explore further the transfer, negotiation and transformation of Sunni–Shi‘a discourses and practices into European contexts, and possibly back.

Finally, and cutting across all the above, is the time dimension. Existing scholarship dedicated to Sunni–Shi‘a relations in Europe, like most contributions in this special issue, captures current or recent dynamics, without going much further back than the past ten to fifteen years. While this period allows us to pinpoint patterns of continuity and change, such as the rise of public Shi‘ism explored by Lene Kühle or the fluctuating priority of cross-sectarian outreach in Shi‘a grassroots activism (Corboz and Degli Esposti), the dynamic nature of Sunni–Shi‘a relations also deserves a longer historical perspective. Key in this regard is Olav Elgvin’s longitudinal study of the ups and downs of Sunni–Shi‘a institutional collaboration in Norway from the 1980s to the 2010s. Furthermore, the time dimension encompasses individual life trajectories and diasporic histories, as well as memories of the past (Løland, 2020), significant not only for the historical record but also for the exploration of how they are negotiated in the present of Sunni–Shi‘a relations.

#### 4 Conclusion

Individually and collectively, the case studies examined in this special issue capture the multifaceted nature of Sunni–Shi‘a relations in Europe, as well as some of the internal and external dynamics at play in shaping them. The

special issue makes no claim to offer a complete map of Sunni–Shi'a relations in Europe. However, it should form a basis on which to establish European contexts as a new geographical area for the study of these relations. Our hope is that this endeavour will attract future scholarship to achieve an integrated research field that can address both the scholarship on sectarianism and the literature on Muslims in Europe.

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