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The religious fractures of Middle East

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Abstract:

The Middle East is a highly fragmented and polycentric space where states have consolidated their power and pragmatism and self-interest prevail, giving rise to complex power struggles and unusual balances of power.

Islam lacks doctrinal unity and a universally accepted hierarchy. It is a diverse and pluralistic religion that contributes substantially to the identity of its peoples and is essential for understanding the geopolitical configuration of the Middle East. Its two predominant branches are Sunni and Shia Islam, which do not have significant doctrinal differences but have historically hostile relations. On the Sunni side, one cannot speak of a monolithic bloc due to the existence of a plurality of actors vying for leadership, each with a different proposal in accordance with their national reality. The Shia side is dominated by Iran, where two dimensions converge —the religious and the ethnic— leading to greater polarisation in their confrontation.

But there are also other, smaller groups with whom conflicts have become more intense, such as the Yazidis.

Religion is indeed a contentious factor insofar as it divides societies into groups, between those who are and those who are not, so that major conflicts arise from minor differences.

Keywords: Sunnis, Shiites, Druze, Alawites, Yazidis, Alevis.

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"The magic lamp of Islam had been shattered with the death of the Prophet and had not ceased to scatter into millions of pieces since then, each party picking up a fragment to contemplate its own dreams and desires, claiming them in the absolute name of Islam."

*Khaled Berry*¹

The Middle East is the cradle of history. Until well into the 20th century, it had been an integral space, a cosmopolitan *continuum* through which it was easy and common to travel without problems. Being born in Syria and educated in Cairo was relatively common. Now this is no longer possible, as the many fault lines that converge in the region have been activated.

The fact is that in the Middle East there are three major fault lines that could be described in dichotomous terms, although this would still leave room for ambiguity. The first level would be religious and would be established between Muslims and non-Muslims (Christians, Jews, but also Druze, Alawites and Yazidis, among others); the second level would be ethnic and would be between Arabs and non-Arabs (Turkmens, Persians, Kurds, Baluchis, Armenians, etc.), subnational but also transnational groups; the third level would again be religious, a by-product of the first, and would correspond to the division between Sunnis and non-Sunnis (Shiites, in their different branches, Kharijites, and some would include Druze and Alawites).

Nor should we forget that Sunnis are divided into four legal schools (*madhabs: Hanafi, Shafi'i, Maliki, Hanbali*), although their distribution is mainly geographical. The classification is based on the legal tools used as a priority. As a result, they have their own legal treaties, that is, different ways of solving similar problems. The *Hanbali* school, predominant in the Arabian Peninsula, is stricter and takes a more literal reading of the sacred texts. The *Shafi'i school*, typical of the Middle East and the east coast of Africa, attaches great importance to the companions of the Prophet. The *Maliki school*, predominant in North Africa, is based on the practices of the inhabitants of Medina at the time of the Prophet as a source of jurisprudence. And the *Hanafi school*, the most open, typical of the Abbasids and the Ottoman Empire, is found throughout Central Asia, Lower Egypt and India.

¹ AL-BERRY, Khaled. *Confessions of a Madman of Allah*. La Esfera de los Libros, Madrid, 2002, p. 125.

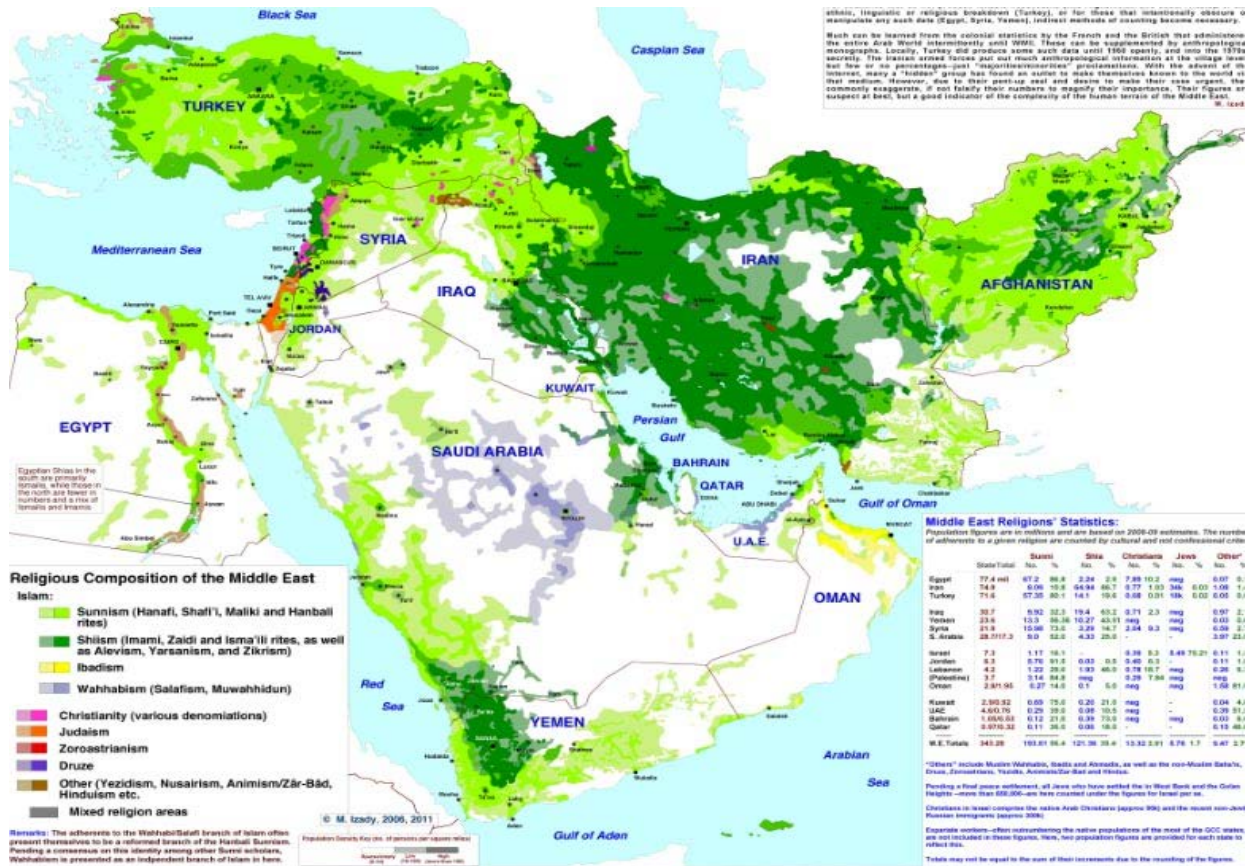


Image. Religious distribution in the Middle East.

Source: "Identities and divisions in the Middle East". Wordpress.com
<https://elimperiodedes.wordpress.com/2015/11/26/identidades-y-divisiones-en-el-orient-medio/>

Added to this are transnational movements such as pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism, which increase the fluidity of national identities. Other aspects, such as linguistic and cultural distribution, are by no means trivial, but their boundaries are more or less encompassed by the above. Turkey, Iran, the Arab world and India are cultural universes that collide with each other. Nor can we forget, as already pointed out, the presence of states, institutions defined territorially and built on Western axiological codes, without regard for the aforementioned lines of fracture. These structures generate their own dynamics and have equally significant interests that are capable of imposing themselves, as demonstrated, for example, by the Iran-Iraq war, the Syrian-Iranian alliance, and Arab nationalisms of various kinds.

Alongside states—within them or distributed among several—pre-state organisations such as tribes, clans, nations, ethnic groups, etc. coexist, imposing their logic and influencing the formulation of countries' policies, both internally and externally.

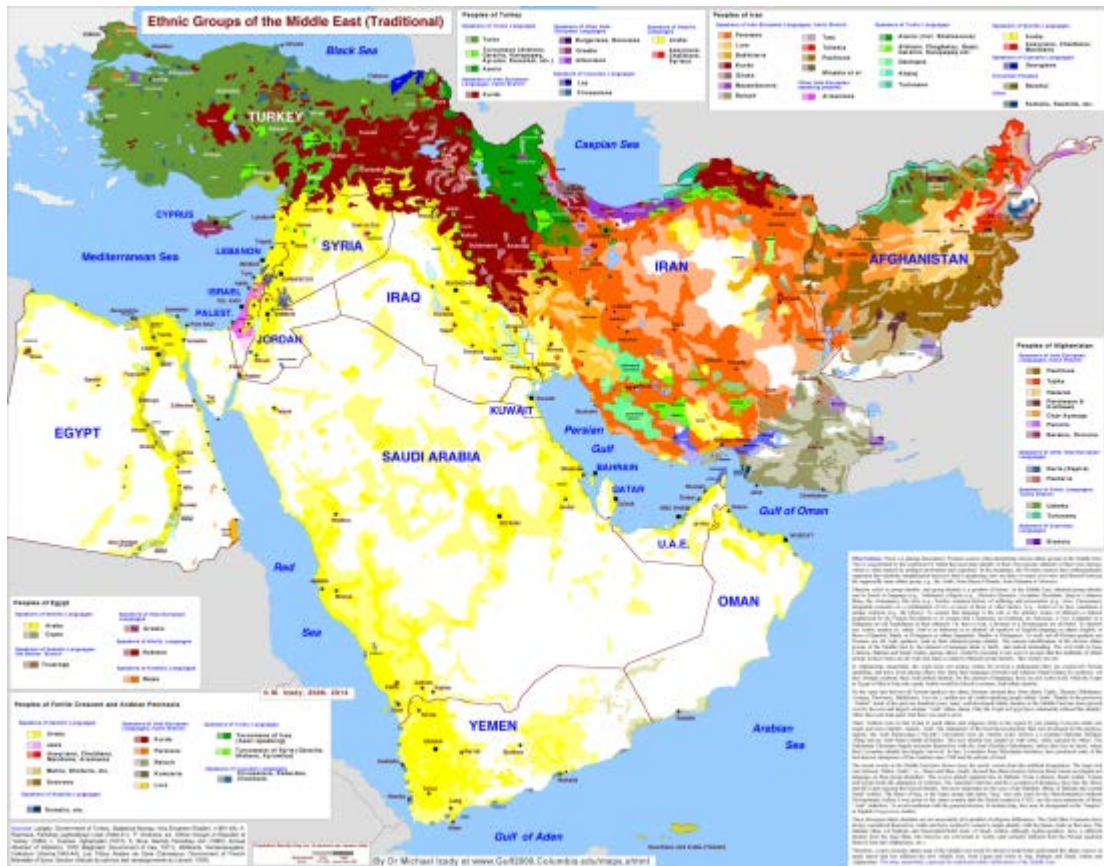


Image. Ethnic distribution in the Middle East.

Source: "Identities and divisions in the Middle East". Wordpress.com
<https://elimperiodedes.wordpress.com/2015/11/26/identidades-y-divisiones-en-el-orient-medio/>

The state, as it exists in the Muslim world, is not the result of the evolution of a form of Islamic organisation, but rather the consequence of a policy of reforms, on the one hand, and the persistence of structures, values and behaviours from the past, on the other. Furthermore, Muslim states are, in general, recent creations, lacking a reference point for identity in terms of political form of government.

In fact, we can consider that one of the main causes of the heterogeneous phenomenon known as the Arab Spring lies in the lack of adequacy and fit between an inefficient and ineffective model of the state (authoritarian regimes only have effectiveness as a source of legitimacy), built on Western parameters, and societies whose axiological codes and

distribution of power are very different, which subjects the system to multiple tensions and constant friction.

The economic crisis on the northern shore limited the financial flows that lubricated the union of both parts, and the system became rigid until it collapsed as a result of the governance deficit and the fragility of the state. This situation also had collateral effects on identity. Thus, there is a system that does not work and an alternative that is presented as a solution, but which has not been tested. The point is that Islam is neither the problem nor the solution, although it is probably part of it.

Moreover, the implementation of the state model has succeeded, at least partially, in transforming societies, if not fracturing them, between a more or less Westernised core and another part that clings to traditional values and does so in the context of poverty. Added to this are other factors, such as the division between the countryside and the city. The result gives rise to different roles and sets limits on both the processes of secularisation and Islamisation, as demonstrated, in both senses, by the cases of Tunisia, Turkey and Egypt.

For academic Bernard Lewis, the names adopted by the new states are an expression of their artificiality: Iraq was a medieval province with boundaries very different from those of today; Libya, Syria and Palestine are names from antiquity that had not been used for a thousand years, until the 20th century; Algeria and Tunisia did not even exist as words in Arabic; the same term was used to designate both the capital and the country. There is no word in Arabic to name Saudi Arabia, which is referred to as "the Saudi Arabian Kingdom", "the Arabian Peninsula" or simply "the Kingdom". The reason, in his view, is not that Arabic is a poor language, but that they do not conceive their identity in territorial and ethnic terms².

However, there are many academics who reject this view and consider states to be existing realities, facts that are not open to debate. Furthermore, Lewis' position coincides, paradoxically, with that of the radicals, for whom the supranationality of the *Umma*, the *Dar al-Islam* (land of Islam), is today seen as being partly subject to a process of artificially imposed territorial fragmentation, an unwanted result of the colonial experience and, therefore, from a Western perspective. However, the facts are stubborn:

² LEWIS, Bernard. "The Revolt of Islam," in Various Authors. *Dossier de La Vanguardia* 1/2002, p. 9.

the state has consolidated and imposed its logic, so that even global Islamist processes incorporate, in practice, a state bias. As Oliver Roy predicted in the early 1990s, nationalist movements have become integrated and trivialised, taking on Islamo-nationalist overtones, reabsorbing centripetal and centrifugal tensions while detracting from the geopolitical value of their commitment to the *Umma*³.

Consider the post-conflict situation in Iraq, a maelstrom of civil wars that broke out when the institutional framework that contained them disappeared. Religious against secular; Shiites against Shiites; Kurds and Shiites against Sunnis; Sunnis and Kurds against Shiites; Sunnis against jihadists; jihadists against invaders; occupiers against Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds; tribes against tribes...⁴.

Muslim societies are young (in most cases, 60% of the population is under thirty) and vibrant; they are not monolithic societies, as they tend to be made up of different races and languages, nor are they static. Their urbanisation has been very pronounced, leading to changes in their social structures and the proletarianisation of significant sectors of the population. In Iran, for example, this has resulted in the creation of the *Basij* paramilitary militias (the *sans-culottes* of the 21st century, but also the moral force of the regime); religion thus provides anonymous groups with a form of integration and identity. All this is happening while political structures remain stagnant and unable to respond to such changes.

In addition to the centrifugal elements in this scenario, there are also centripetal ones, such as the existence of a common cultural foundation parallel to religion, although not entirely coinciding with its areas of implementation: Turkish and Persian cultures (which compete with each other and extend to Central Asia; for example, Tajikistan, a country built around the Sunni creed, is a Farsi country) and the Arab culture, which has come to be confused with Islamic orthodoxy, transcend borders and ethnicities.

This extraterritoriality of the *Umma* explains, for example, the cross-border collaboration of clerics. Thus, the Egyptian sheikh Yusuf al-Qardawi, residing in Qatar, was *the*

³ FERNÁNDEZ-MOLINA, Irene. "Islamism and International Relations" in *Proceedings of the First Conference on Security Studies of the General Gutiérrez Mellado Security Studies Community*, Volume I. UNED, 2009, pp. 291-286, pp. 291-286.

⁴ BARM, Samuel. *Sunnis and Shiites—Between Rapprochement and Conflict*. pp. 87–93.

supreme *mufti* of the Palestinians of Hamas; and Sheikh Ibn Qatada, a Palestinian Jordanian residing in London, was *the mufti* of the Algerian group GIA⁵.

In the West, political unity is the nation state, which can be fragmented on different levels, one of which is religion. However, for many Muslims it is difficult to conceive of a nation subdivided into religious groups, rather than a religion divided between nations⁶. Islam is, from a purist approach, a nomocracy⁷, *Din, Dunya, Dawla*: religion, society and state, without an exclusive space for politics; which, in a reverse reading, gives politics all the space.

The religious divide and its key factors

The most significant aspect of the crisis of the grand totalising ideologies that marked the end of the 20th century has been the mutation of traditional secular ideologies and their reconstruction based on cultural, religious and linguistic matrices as forms of collective mobilisation and identification, in a context enhanced by formidable media multipliers⁸.

The culture of a society framed within the context of civilisation constitutes a diffuse space that embodies within itself a proposed system of values and norms. At the heart of this proposal are both language and religion, which are by no means unrelated, as Durkheim points out: "Almost all great social institutions have been born of religion"⁹.

In this sense, some Muslim intellectuals already argued that Islam would end up "turning in on itself, because the whole culturalist discourse is based on a constant confusion between culture and religion, making culture or religion the determining factor"¹⁰. Reactions such as Islamism or Salafism are expressions of this diversity. Globalisation, as we have already seen, has led Islam to discover itself.

The religious sphere is equally fragmented, as it harbours three faults with cross-cutting elements: in addition to those already mentioned between Muslims/non-Muslims and Sunnis/non-Sunnis, there is a third, concerning the interpretation—broad or intimate—of

⁵ SIVAN, Emmanuel. "The Clash within Islam," *Survival IJSS Quarterly*, Vol. 45, Number 1. Spring 2003, pp. 25-45.

⁶ LEWIS, Bernard. "The Revolt of Islam", Various Authors. *La Vanguardia Dossier*. 1/2002, pp. 9.

⁷ ELORZA, Antonio. *Umma*. Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 2002.

⁸ VILANOVA, Pere. In the prologue to DAVID, Charles-Philippe. *War and Peace*. Icaria, Barcelona, 2008, p. 19.

⁹ DURKHEIM, Émile. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 2003, p. 630.

¹⁰ KHADER, Bichara. "Localised Islamist terrorism, globalised Islamist terrorism. An attempt at a definition," in Various authors. *Confronting terrorism*. Government of Aragon, 2006, p. 186.

religion and the correct meaning of society. These would be situated in the terms of the biblical debate between man and the Sabbath. As Freund said, many conflicts "arise from disagreements about the idea of perfection"¹¹ .

The disagreement in the Islamic world—the dreaded *fitna*, the rupture of the community—arises at the death of the Prophet and has as its primary cause his succession, the moment from which the divergence begins. The issue even goes back to a statement by the Prophet Muhammad in Ghadir al-Khum. The Sunnis accept these words, but maintain that they implied nothing more than a declaration of affection for his cousin and son-in-law. The Shiites, on the other hand, consider that, with his words, the Prophet unequivocally declared Ali as his successor and celebrate the event. However, when the Prophet fell mortally ill, he left Abu Bakr in charge of prayers, and he was subsequently elected by the leaders of Mecca. Abu Bakr was succeeded by Umar; Umar by Uthman, who would compile the Qur'an; and Uthman by Ali.

From that moment on, the *Umma* was divided between the legitimists—those who believed that his successor should be a member of his House (*Ahl Al Bayt*), specifically Ali, his cousin and son-in-law, from his lineage, and not the designated successor—and the rest. The former took the name Shiites ('the party of Ali'), while the latter, the victorious group, identified themselves as Sunnis (from the word Sunna, 'the customary procedure', 'the beaten path'). The evolution of the caliphate with the successors of the first caliph, Umar and, above all, Uthman, as well as the subsequent assassination of Ali, would consolidate the split¹² .

However, there are "revisionist sectors" that attribute the definitive separation between Sunnis and Shiites to the death of the Caliphate in 945, the date of the split between Arab and Iranian Islam, which traces a Persian-speaking national path in Islam¹³ . Religion thus serves to strengthen national identity by amplifying existing lines of fracture.

A third group, the Kharijites – "those who left" – refers to the defection of a sector of Ali's supporters, who abandoned him when he accepted arbitration in Siffin between himself and his adversary, the Umayyad Muawiya, for having contravened, by yielding, the will of God who had made him leader. For this reason, they assassinated him. Today, there are

¹¹ FREUND, Julián. *Sociology of Conflict*. Ediciones Ejército, Madrid, 1995, p. 197.

¹² MARTÍN, Javier. *Sunnis and Shiites. The Two Arms of Allah*. Los libros de la Catarata, 2008.

¹³ ARUFLO, Alessandro. *The Islamic World. From Muhammad to Today*. Editorial Popular, 2002.

less than 1.5 million Kharijites, most of them in Oman. They are Ibadis, the only remaining branch of this group. They do not differ significantly from Sunni Islam, as they advocate strict observance of the precepts of the Qur'an and are very resistant to accepting innovations (*bid'ah*). Fundamentalist movements have incorporated many of their debates.

The Sunni world and the Wahhabi experience

Sunni practice encompasses 80% of Muslims. It does not recognise any specific religious authority or mediator; however, some theologians, due to their personal prestige, exert great influence. Its practice is traditionalist and manifests itself in the acceptance of the established order, as well as in the fulfilment of the precepts of the Koran and the rites established by custom, within the territorial framework of the different legal schools. As we have seen, these are not different religions, but rather groups of diverse jurisprudential responses. To this end, they use or prioritise different legal instruments that apply to the same reality: analogy (*qiyas*), consensus of the wise (*ijma*) and interpretative effort (*ijtihad*). The result, however, is significantly different.

T. E. Lawrence, better known as Lawrence of Arabia, described his Arab collaborators in the early 20th century in the following terms:

"They were a people of primary colours, or rather, of black and white, who always saw the world in sharp outlines. They were a dogmatic people who despised doubt, our modern crown of thorns. They did not understand our metaphysical difficulties, our introspective questions... for this people, everything was black and white... they lived voluntarily in superlatives... they never compromised... they were a people of spasms, of cataclysms, of ideas, the race of individual genius... they reached that intense condensation of themselves in God by closing their eyes to the world and all the complex possibilities latent in it... the solitary Arab found no happiness that could compare to voluntary restraint. He found pleasure in self-denial, in renunciation, in self-correction... he made his desert a spiritual refrigerator in which he kept intact, but without possible improvements, a vision of the unity of God"¹⁴.

Within this religiosity there is a practice: the Sufi path, with its groups or brotherhoods, led by a master and close to mysticism; or other popular practices, such as maraboutism, which venerates holy men. All of this is difficult to fit into an orthodoxy that prohibits mediation or any cult other than that of a single God, as it entails a certain heterodoxy.

¹⁴ LAWRENCE, T. E. *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. Editorial Óptima, Barcelona, 2000, p. 25.

Political and religious reforms are not unknown in Sunni Islam. We can cite, for example, the case of the Almoravids¹⁵. Wahhabism, viewed in this light, is another trend that ties in with the *Kharijites*: it is a reformist, traditionalist and regenerationist movement that emerged in 18th-century Arabia under the leadership of a Hanbali cleric—a more rigorous school of thought, favouring literalism in Koranic exegesis—Abd al Wahabb, who was greatly influenced by another 14th-century cleric, Ibn Taimiyya, sought to cleanse Islam of heretical practices and restore its original purity. To this end, he allied himself with the Ibn Saud family, which ultimately turned Wahhabism into a state religion; in fact, Wahhabism and the House of Saud served to found Saudi Arabia.

The Wahhabi reading of the Qur'an is very strict and proposes a return to the sources. Furthermore, according to the dogma of the uncreated Qur'an, they believe that it physically exists in heaven, which makes it perfect. It emphasises the idea of *Tawhid*, the convergence of everything around God, which leaves nothing outside the realm of religion. Likewise, they consider God's full knowledge of all acts to be key, which implies predestination: everything is subordinate to the glorification of Allah, the Prophet and his companions¹⁶.

Wahhabism denounces many practices and customs as un-Islamic: it does not support the simple imitation (*taqlid*) of the ancients; it even believes that medieval law is erroneous because it had lost its reference point or was even heretical. Wahhabi theology—like that of the *Kharijites*—recognised only two categories in the world: Muslims and non-Muslims. Those who did not belong to the former, that is, who did not accept all of its proposals and rules, were to be labelled infidels and subjugated. Following in the footsteps of Ibn Taymiyyah, it promotes a broad use of *takfir*, or excommunication: those who sin are sinners, but those who do not follow a single one of the rules of religion, which are not few, are apostates, the worst of all.

This discourse condemns Sufis and Shiites, whom he accuses of polytheism, as well as certain traditions and customs: smoking, listening to music, dancing, shaving one's beard, visiting graves, and even, for some, laughing; anything that constitutes a deviation from God. His iconoclastic view of religion is blamed for the destruction of the tombs of the

¹⁵ FRADKIN, Hillet. 'The Paradoxes of Shiism' in Various Authors. *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, Vol 8.

¹⁶ FAHER, Mourad. "The Wahhabi Exegesis of the Qur'an" in *Dossier La Vanguardia*, no. 10/2004, pp. 54-56.

Prophet in Medina and Hussein in Karbala, a blow to the Shiite backbone, as he believes that only God should be worshipped.

True to themselves, they reject the term "Wahhabi" as derogatory and claim the name "true Islam". However, it is impossible to achieve complete harmony between theory and practice, between orthopraxis and orthodoxy: striving for excellence requires constant purification. The truth is that Wahhabism, in accordance with the mandate of the *Dawa* and with the resources provided by oil, would send preachers all over the world, spreading its vision of Islam and presenting it as the only possible one in both North Africa and Central Asia. Wahhabi influence took hold in Afghanistan as early as the 19th century and, since the 1970s, in Sudan, northern Nigeria and Banda Aceh (Indonesia)¹⁷ ; but it has also caused turmoil in North Africa. Wahhabism and Deobandism are at the roots of many radical movements.

The instrumentalisation of Wahhabism (along with atavistic hatreds) in the context of the Cold War forced the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan and seriously disrupted the Soviet order in Central Asia. Furthermore, it showed its followers that armed struggle against a superpower could be successful, instilling hope in radicalised individuals who had been given training, combat experience and prestige among their fellow citizens (in Algeria, for example, and as has already been mentioned, these former combatants often changed their surnames to *Afghan ones* and created an aesthetic that alternated between the *kemis* and military clothing). These, in turn, became new and widespread centres of radicalisation.

Since the 1970s, there has been a decline in pan-Arabist policies in favour of the states that form part of the Arab nation and, in parallel, an increase in pan-Islamism. Moreover, it could be said that pan-Islamism, built on Wahhabi culture, has replaced pan-Arabism, integrating other ethnic groups and thereby legitimising its presence at a global level¹⁸ .

Shiism

Shiites account for between 12 and 20% of the estimated population of the *Umma*, the community of believers, between 120 and 250 million faithful, and are the branch of Islam

¹⁷ <http://www.mediterraneosur.es/fondo/wahabi.html>

¹⁸ FERNÁNDEZ-MOLINA, Irene. *Op. cit.*

that has experienced the greatest growth in recent years¹⁹. They are predominantly found throughout the Middle East and as far as India, and can be classified into three main categories: Arabic-speaking Shiites, Persian-speaking Shiites and Urdu-speaking Shiites²⁰.

In terms of geographical distribution, it is worth noting that it is the majority religion in Azerbaijan (75%), Bahrain (61.4%), Iran (93.5%) and Iraq (62.5%); it accounts for a considerable percentage in Lebanon (41%) and Yemen (47%); and is clearly in the minority in Kuwait (30%), Pakistan (20%)—this state was founded by the Indian Shia leader Ali Jinnah—, Syria (15.3%), Turkey (20%), the United Arab Emirates (16%) and Saudi Arabia (²¹).

Iran is accused of being the backbone of the so-called 'Shiite arc', which would encompass the different communities of this religion in the Middle East. This theory was put forward in 2004 by King Abdullah II of Jordan, referring to an alleged pan-Shiite movement led by Iran that would reach all countries with a Shiite majority (for example, in 1981 Shiite activists promoted a coup d'état in Bahrain and Shiite workers caused riots in Saudi Arabia).

However, talk of a Shiite arc is exaggerated, as each country has generated interests of its own. For example, in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over control of the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave, Iran and Russia have traditionally supported Christian Armenia, thus confronting Turkey. In this case, Iran has forgotten any sense of pan-Islamic or pan-Shiite unity. With a large Azeri minority within its own territory, the last thing it wanted was the strengthening of Azerbaijan, as has been the case.

In 1501, the advent of the Safavid dynasty in ancient Persia served to unify the country and put religion at the service of a dynasty, forcing the conversion of many groups and contributing to the creation of a religious structure—unprecedented in the Islamic world—that first submitted to the regime and served its purposes, reinforcing the apparatus of the nascent state, but later rose up against it, imposing its dynamics²². Shiism became an element of Persian identity. In contrast, Shiites of Arab origin were burdened as fifth

¹⁹ DEL PINO, Domingo. "Shiites versus Sunnis," *Revista Española de Defensa*, no. 246. November 2008, pp. 62-67.

²⁰ MARTÍN, Javier. *Suníes y chiíes. Los dos brazos de Alá (Sunnis and Shiites: The Two Arms of Allah)*. Los libros de la Catarata, 2008.

²¹ DEL PINO, Domingo. 'Shiites versus Sunnis', *op. cit.*

²² MARTÍN, Javier. *Suníes y chiíes. Los dos brazos de Alá. Op. cit.*

columnists, while culturally Persian but Sunni groups (such as the Tajiks) also saw their identity affected.

Shiites maintain that the leadership of the community belongs to a line of descendants of Ali, the last of whom is in hiding. These descendants have the dual status of religious and political leaders and are called imams. Until the last imam arrives, the community is guided by expert jurists, which is the reason behind the creation of an ecclesiastical hierarchy.

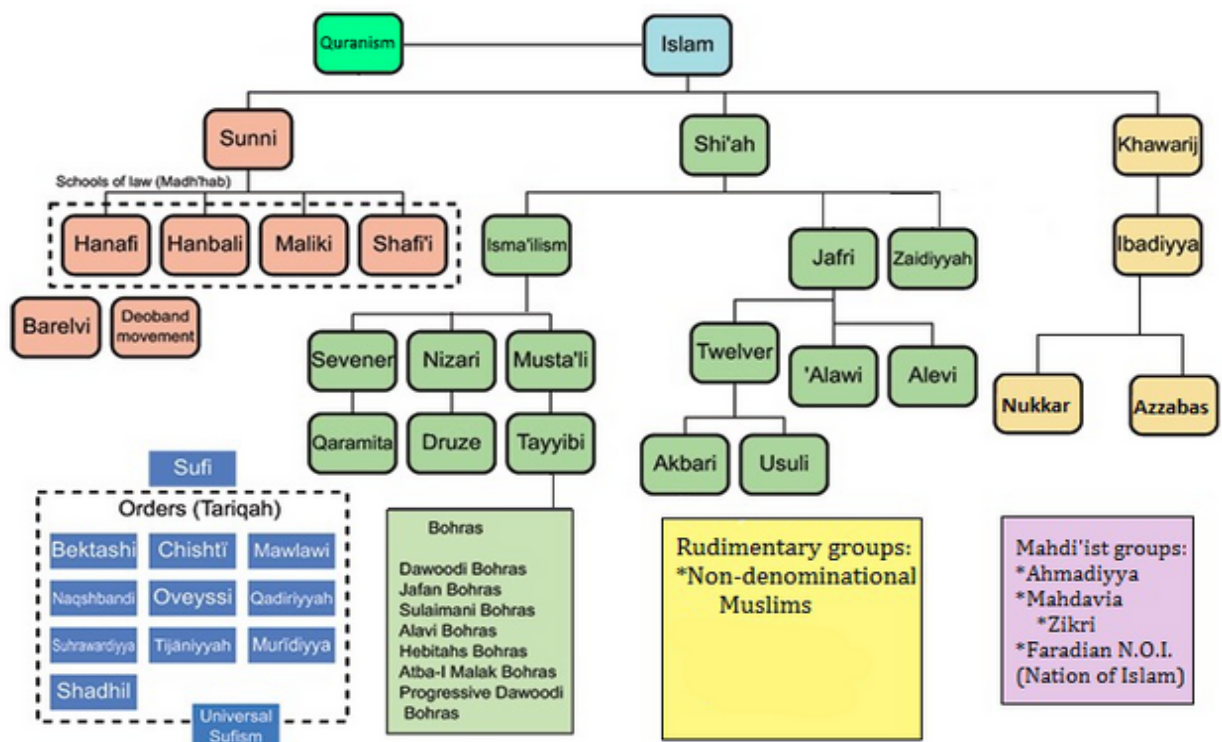


Image. Branches of Islam.

Source: Wikipedia.

Furthermore, Shiism is not monolithic, and two main types can be distinguished: Twelvers (the majority group) and Seveners (or Ismailis, which emerged when, upon the death of the sixth Imam Yafar al-Sadiq, he was succeeded by Musa al-Kazim instead of his eldest son Ismael, who was disinherited for reasons that have not been sufficiently explained; one of its branches is represented by Aga Khan). A third, very small group would be the Qinqimans or Zaydis (a group with a more populist theory close to the Kharijites). The number (12, 7 or 5) designates the last of the legitimate imams in the line, whose return after concealment will bring justice back to the world.

To these must be added certain cults located on the periphery of Islam. These arose from Shiism or earlier branches, or mixed Muslim ideas with those of other religions, although they are not always considered Muslim. The most prominent are the Druze and Alevi. From the point of view of the character of the imams, they would be divided into Zaydis (the imam is only a leader); intermediates (the majority group: the imam is hereditary and guided by God); and extremists or *ghulat* (the imam is a manifestation of God, so they are considered non-Muslims, as is the case with the Druze).

Shiites do not differ from Sunnis in dogma, although they do differ in some doctrinal elements (they have their own collection of hadiths) and, above all, in their practice. They believe in the omnipotence of Allah, the infallibility of Muhammad and the advent of the Last Judgement, although they qualify these concepts; however, the central role given to the return of the hidden imam, who will return at the end of time to restore justice, can overshadow other fundamental concepts²³.

In the principles of religion (Usul-ad-Din), they differ in Adl (the autonomy of the individual in the face of divine justice) and, above all, in Imama, that is, in the authority of the imams, leaders of the community and capable of interpreting the hidden meaning of the scriptures; these are thus recognised as incomplete without this mystical reference. This gives the religion an esoteric component as opposed to the Sunni exaltation of literary exegesis²⁴.

For Shi'ism, every great prophet is accompanied in his mission by an imam. Seth was the imam of Adam; Shem was that of Noah; Aaron or Joshua of Moses; Peter or the apostles of Jesus; Ali and his descendants of Muhammad. The prophets delivered the word in the form of a book and presented the letter of revelation, but it is a coded scripture that must be deciphered; the imam is the one who penetrates the esoteric dimension and transmits it to the initiates, giving rise to a prodigiously fertile religiosity. The Qur'an is thus the 'silent guide' and the imam is the 'speaking Qur'an'.²⁵

All of this has given rise to a different doctrine in areas of jurisprudence: divorce, pilgrimages, the worship of saints, concepts such as *taqiya* (concealing one's faith, essential for survival), *muta* (temporary marriage) or, in minor matters, such as

²³ MARTÍN, Javier. 'The Shiites', *Foreign Policy magazine*. April/May 2006, pp. 14-21.

²⁴ ARUFLO, Alessandro. *Op. cit.*

²⁵ AL GHARBI, Iqbal. *Shiism and the Maghreb*. Akkar/Ideas, Spring 2009, pp. 20-21.

introducing the phrase 'I bear witness that Ali is the friend of God' into the call to prayer (the *adhan*)... But also, and above all, it has produced a different conception of life²⁶ .

Special mention should be made of the Alawites (in reference to the role of Ali), Ansaris or Nusayris (in reference to their founder, the Shiite Muhammad Ibn-Nusayir, who, upon the death of the eleventh imam, proclaimed himself *Bab* [Gate of Truth], a key figure in Shia theology, a term that emphasises his differences with Islam). This religion is secretive (knowledge of their faith is gradual and, in its entirety, possessed by a select few, which facilitates myth and mistrust), esoteric and syncretic (with Sunni, Shiite and Christian elements and even festivals), and divides its community into initiates and lay people. In addition, they incorporate other sacred texts from the Quran.

Alawites are not proselytising and believe that human beings are stars that have fallen from the sky: they must be reincarnated seven times to regain their place in heaven, where Ali is the prince. In fact, some consider Ali to be an incarnation of the divinity that created the prophet Muhammad from his own light²⁷ .

It is a branch that some integrate into Twelver Shi'a Islam and others do not, accusing it of heresy, although they claim to be Muslims. There are between two and three million followers, distributed between Lebanon, Antioch (Turkey) and Syria²⁸ . The family of President Assad, who ruled Syria until 2024, belonged to this creed; in fact, the Baath [Renaissance] party was created by an Alawite and a Christian and remained in the hands of the Alawite minority, which was over-represented in the Syrian army at the time. Thus, "the initial Ba'athist pan-Arabism has been transformed into a Greater Syrian nationalism, secular sensibilities have shifted towards Alawite confessional hegemony, and moderate socialism into autocratically directed economic liberalism"²⁹ .

A similar problem of definition arises with the Druze, another minority of around one million believers, strategically located between Lebanon, Israel, the Palestinian territories, Syria and Jordan, who have suffered persecution for centuries and maintained a strategic alliance with Israel. It is also an initiatory religion, very secretive and little known, which believes in resurrection and reincarnation; it considers that the Koran does not establish definitive dogma and incorporates other texts into its creed. The Druze are strict

²⁶ MARTÍN, Javier. *Sunnis and Shiites. The Two Arms of Allah. Op. cit.*

²⁷ <http://www.abc.es/20120624/internacional/abci-alawitas-siria-Asad-201206221553.html>

²⁸ <http://www.mediterraneosur.es/>

²⁹ Ibid.

monotheists: they believe in one God, but in their secret books, Caliph Al Hakim is sanctified as his 'most perfect incarnation', whose return they await, as he remains in hiding³⁰ .

Like other minorities in the East, the Druze oscillate between retreating in the face of threats, separatism, and Arab nationalism. As with the Alawites, to facilitate their social advancement, they enlisted in the army and joined the Baath Party. Alawites and Druze, who have not always coexisted peacefully, constitute, although not with the same importance, what remains of the Syrian Assad regime and occupy a key position in Lebanon³¹ . In fact, the presence of these minorities has always played an important political role. After the fall of the Ottoman Empire, for example, the French relied on Alawites, Christians and Druze to counterbalance Sunni power. The same is true in Lebanon with political Maronism and minority alliances.³²

Twelver Shiism is not a unified whole, far from it; it is a collection of worlds with areas of uncertainty. In Shiism, there have always been different *marja-e taqlid* (sources of emulation, the highest hierarchical level), religious leaders to be imitated by believers, and never just one, thus ensuring their plurality and diversity. Furthermore, they belong to different nations and schools (colleges) that rival each other. Their teachings and mandates died with them³³ .

Consequently, each Shiite community has its own interests, which generates inter-Shiite conflicts. Even within the same branch and school, significant personal and doctrinal rivalries persist, which have led to the assassination of great leaders, such as the great Ayatollah Mohamed Baquir al-Hakim³⁴ . Moreover, not even Khomeini's authority remained unchallenged in Iran; in fact, some of his peers did not accept either his authority or his most important proposals. This situation is even more pronounced in Shiism in neighbouring countries, as in the case of Ayatollah Fadlallah, founder of the ideological group Hezbollah. However, there are also points of convergence, such as the holy cities and, especially, Karbala, where Imam Hussein is buried³⁵ .

³⁰ <http://www.mediterraneosur.es/>

³¹ ALCOVER, Tomás. "The Druze: an irreducible and self-absorbed minority."

<http://blogs.lavanguardia.com/beirut/los-drusos-minoria-irreducible-y-ensimismada>

³² MNEIMNEH, Hassan. "The Arab reception of Vilayat-e-Fasquih. The counter-model of Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, Vol. 8.

³³ MARTÍN, Javier. *Sunnis and Shiites. The two arms of Allah. Op. cit.*

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ MARTÍN, Javier. *The Shiites. Op. cit.*, pp. 14-21.

Shiism is a religion in which quietism and radicalism, theocracy and secularism coexist; all of this is possible without leaving the religion itself, by resorting to doctrine. It puts forward injustice, legitimacy and martyrdom as key concepts, while presenting itself as the religion of the dispossessed. Historically, Shiites have suffered thirteen centuries of social marginalisation (outside ancient Persia and, for a century, in the Indian state of Awadh); they have been a dominated, oppressed and disinherited minority, whose history was linked to the struggle to restore God's law. Dispossession and oppression made them the outcasts of Islam, but also shaped their character: a patient, distrustful, fierce personality, yet with an immense capacity for suffering. As Kapuscinski said: "The Shiite is, above all, a relentless opponent"³⁶.

The injustice of Ali's treatment reflects a community in permanent rebellion. Shiism is thus a counterculture³⁷. It imbues discourse with a messianic meaning, as well as narratives and rhetoric: a whole language of protest to which is added the sense of grievance and humiliation of a minority that has been persecuted for centuries³⁸. In this way, social exclusion and economic irrelevance have resulted in the exclusion of the excluders by the traditionally excluded, through the affirmation of an alternative set of values articulated around religion³⁹, which is presented as more perfect.

From this perspective, all Arab regimes are branded as illegitimate. Moreover, Arab Shiites have lived under regimes that did not expressly recognise their identity, and whose characteristics were transformed from Arabic-speaking Shiites to Arab Shiites, and from there to Arab Shiites. The Shiite trait thus became more relevant than any other identifying element, such as ethnicity, economic class, religion or culture⁴⁰.

The clash between Shiites and Sunnis

Freud wrote in *Civilisation and Its Discontents* that major conflicts do not arise from major differences, but from minor ones. Difference, by definition, breaks with homogeneity and creates asymmetry, which prevents individuals or groups of individuals from projecting

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ AL GHARBI, Iqbal. *Op. cit.*, pp. 20-21.

³⁸ YANN, Richard. *Shiite Islam*. Ediciones Bellaterra, Madrid, 1998.

³⁹ CASTELL, Manuel. 'The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture', *Volume III: End of the Millennium*. Alianza, Madrid, 2000, p. 425.

⁴⁰ MNEIMNEH, Hassan. "The Arab reception of Vilayat-e-Fasquih. The counter-Model of Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din," *Current trends in Islamist Ideology*, Vol. 8.

themselves onto others. At the same time, although these differences are not great enough to prevent encounter, they hinder recognition, empathy and otherness, which makes the relationship conflictual; paradoxically, the smaller the difference, the more intense the tension becomes. That is why civil wars are the most bitter: violence is used to highlight and absolutise the nuances that divide the parties.

Similarly, religious conflicts usually arise with the emergence of heterodox currents, i.e., heresies. The reason is that, implicitly, these imply a questioning of those who maintain orthodoxy and demand its extreme rejection. It is the branches of the same religion that pose the most bitter conflict⁴¹.

The great conflicts are not between civilisations, but within civilisations, between neighbours. In this sense, it should not be ignored that Christianity derives from Judaism, with which it was at odds; and, significantly, Dante⁴² placed Muhammad in his work in the hell of heretics, because of the influence of Nestorian Christianity on the Koran.

The confrontation between Sunnis and Shiites is a sectarian confrontation that is fuelled more by political reasons than by ethnic, cultural or religious differences, although it finds its legitimising and inspiring key in them. From this perspective, the counterpart ceases to be 'the other' and undergoes a process of metamorphosis that leads to its permanent demonisation. It is no longer the right of the other vis-à-vis my own that is questioned, but the right of the other to be and to have equality.

The confrontation also becomes political, for, as Carl Schmitt reminds us: "Every religious, moral, economic, ethnic or any other kind of antagonism or opposition becomes political opposition as soon as it gains sufficient strength to effectively group men into friends and enemies"⁴³. For example, theology can help us understand Daesh or Al Qaeda, but the analysis must transcend and develop at the political level.

Thus, Sunnis accuse Shiites of being heretics, believing that Ali has divine status, which is a serious crime in Islam, that is, of being associators (*shirk*, associating other gods with God) and polytheists (in the same way that they accuse Catholics of the dogma of the

⁴¹ STORR, Anthony. *Human Aggression*. Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 1970, p. 101.

⁴² Canto III.

⁴³ SCHMITT, Carl. *The Concept of the Political*. Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 1991, p. 67.

Trinity). This is why they also accuse them of being hypocrites (*munafiqun*) and of lacking faith in their hearts.

Furthermore, the doctrine of the infallibility of imams places them, in the opinion of Sunnis, on the same level as the prophet Muhammad, which, de facto, questions his status as the last and final prophet. For Wahhabis, Shiism presents the Qur'an as imperfect, since it cannot be interpreted by itself and must be interpreted correctly by the imams. Among the most popular beliefs of this group is the belief that it was lawful for Shiites to kill Sunnis (*nasibi*)⁴⁴.

Shiites' resentment towards Sunnis is less pronounced. They often compare Wahhabis to the Kharijites, people who exceed limits (*ghuluw*), uneducated nomads who, after converting to Islam, have returned to the ignorance of desert life and are agents of the West. They present themselves, in contrast, as the product of a more refined and superior civilisation (*shu'ubiyyah*).⁴⁵

Theologically speaking, they believe that the Qur'an does not include the entire revelation and that some verses have been omitted (more specifically those that gave power to Ali: Surat al-wilaya and Surat al-nurayn), as well as some hadiths that were deliberately forgotten. However, they do not reintroduce them because that would be tantamount to creating a new religion, arguing that by accepting the example of Ali, who tolerated it, they seek to preserve the community. Furthermore, for Shiites, references to Abu Bakr, Umar and Uthman — the first three successors of the Prophet, whose actions and sayings are a reference for Sunnis and, particularly, for Salafists — are abhorrent, since they usurped the power of the legitimate successor, which invalidates them as examples.

As an anecdote, it is worth noting that this hatred has led Wahhabi *hackers* to clash with *Shia hackers* in cyberspace and vice versa. On the contrary, pan-Islamic movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood see their anti-Shia militancy endorsed by the scope of their commitment. Sunnis can share mosques with Shiites; in fact, they do so in Madrid, although when the communities are large, each branch has its own. For those unfamiliar with the Islamic world, it is difficult to distinguish between them, especially if they are European converts.

⁴⁴ BARM, Samuel. *Op. cit.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

In reality, Shiism has historically been the target of persecution (hence its doctrine of *taqiya*, which allows believers to conceal their faith). Deobandi groups are behind the murder of the Hazaras in Afghanistan; in Saudi Arabia, Shiites cannot find a place for their identity. Their distribution throughout the oil-rich Persian Gulf area does not exactly help to bring about peace; and they are often seen — or presented — as Iran's fifth column in the region. In Malaysia, Mahtair's government carried out a campaign against Shiite heresy in the late 1990s.

The King of Saudi Arabia, Abdel Aziz, went so far as to say in 1910: "We hate the Turks only a little less than we hate the Persians, because of the infidel practices they have introduced into our faith." Curiously, the Wahhabi raids led a large percentage of Arabs in Mesopotamia to convert to Shiism. And it was the ancestors of the Wahhabis who today are calling for a new caliph who, with the help of the British (with whom they had a strategic alliance that would later be inherited by the United States), rose up against the Turks and brought about their downfall for the benefit of a Christian power. Obviously, they want a caliph, their caliph, that is, one in their own image and likeness.

Both blocs have generated Islamist movements that are steeped in their traditions. Sunni Islamism (mostly Wahhabi and Deobandi) is Hanbali (Qutb, Hassan Al Turabi, Abdallah Azzam...) and looks to the past, as opposed to Shiite Islamism (Ali Shariati, Khomeini...), which is more coherent due to the importance of its legal dimension and redirected through clerical scholasticism. However, this does not mean that there is no Basiji populism, although it is intellectually more solid⁴⁶.

The margins of the conflict between Sunnis and Shiites oscillate, pendulum-like and still without a solution, between *taqarub* (reconciliation) of an ecumenical nature and *takfir* (excommunication) due to its heretical character. And the pendulum's range has proven to be short and dependent on the interests of those who can move it.

As early as the 18th century, Nadir Shah⁴⁷ attempted to have Shiism recognised as another madhab, or school of Islamic jurisprudence, effectively as the fifth school of Islam. Other prominent figures in Islam also proposed the creation of a Ja'fari school during the 20th century, which was seen as a Shiite ploy⁴⁸. In 1959, Mahmoud Shaltut, rector of the

⁴⁶ FRADKIN, Hillet. 'The Paradoxes of Shiism' in Various Authors. *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*. Vol. 8.

⁴⁷ Shah of Persia, founder of the Afsharid dynasty.

⁴⁸ ELAD ALTMAND, Israel. "The Sunni-Shi'a Conversion Controversy," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, Vol. 5. Washington Hudson Institute, 2007.

prestigious Al-Azhar University in Cairo, recognised Shiism as a Ja'fari school without any special distinction from other Koranic schools in the Sunni world. He therefore ignored its status as heresy, which made conversion to Shiism a commitment to paganism⁴⁹.

Similar efforts were made by the Shiite world, beginning with Imam Khomeini himself promoting, for example, the figure of Abu Bakr. However, accepting Shiites as a fifth Koranic school is difficult because the dictates of any one of these are valid for the others.

The visibility of the Iranian regime, confronting Israel and the United States or developing its nuclear programme, has in the past given it popularity and recognition in the Arab world, which, together with organised missionary activities (teachers, cultural centres, etc., a form of 'soft power'), has resulted in a notable increase in the number of conversions to Shiism from the Sunni world (Algeria, Syria, Libya, Lebanon, etc.). This has generated mistrust and hostility among those who had once been receptive to the ideas of communion, as well as provoking an institutional response from Sunni countries.

Thus, Sheikh Qardawi — then president of the Association of Muslim Scholars and who had been receptive to the idea of a fifth school — defined Shiites in 2008 as "dangerous heretical Muslims, armed with millions of dollars and led by well-trained cadres who are trying to invade Sunni societies with missionaries," and accused them of trying to enter through the brotherhoods. He later demanded: "Do not invade my country. My country is Sunni, and you Shiites have no reason to spread your sect in my country, because if you do, I will have to defend my sect and say that your sect is worthless, and I will have to proclaim that you are spreading evil in the land of good"⁵⁰. With the Syrian conflict, his position would become even more extreme.

Iran's visibility gave hope to unintegrated Shia minorities who joined its proposals, but it also hindered the assimilation process and exacerbated anti-Shia rhetoric in the face of the rise in power of a non-Arab actor that threatened the nationalist and identity-based vision of other Arab actors. In fact, Iran has transferred Shiite vindictiveness to Islam; it therefore tries to present itself as the champion of a persecuted Islam and guardian of its essence. However, the bridges between Sunnis and Shiites can also serve, in turn, to strategically isolate Saudi Arabia.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ DEL PINO, Domingo. *Op. cit.*

Foreign policy and plans for division. The instrumentalisation of identity and its flaws. The dualism of culture and interests.

Difference, as the source and origin of asymmetry, is not only the cause of conflicts, but also a key operational concept, since conflicts are "a mixture of conscious and deliberate manipulation, complicity and unconscious negligence"⁵¹. Thus, religion has been used to legitimise conflicts whose foundations have little to do with the transcendent, to broaden the social base of governments in power, to structure opposition discourse, to justify war... thereby confirming Clausewitz's *dictum*: "Behind the fog of war, other conflicts always lurk"⁵².

The word fanatic comes from *fanum*, which in Latin means temple⁵³, a term that is used not only in the religious sphere but also in the political sphere⁵⁴. Recalling once again the political nature of religious conflicts in the words of Carl Schmitt: "Religious, moral and other conflicts become political conflicts and can lead to the decisive regrouping of forces based on the friend-enemy distinction. But if this happens, then the decisive conflict is no longer religious, moral or economic, but political"⁵⁵.

The fact is that identity traits, despite being "comparatively neutral", contain mythical elements: they are "emotionally charged". There is a transfer of sacredness from religion to the nation, and also to ideology⁵⁶, which seems to return to religion, making the concept of "the sacred" more relevant than that of God, sociologically speaking⁵⁷. In the words of the Prophet, which we have already referred to: "The iman (faith) is internal, Islam is external." Sometimes, making use of this duality, a deliberate confusion between religion and culture arises by extension.

Religion—for some, the forgotten factor in international relations⁵⁸—in its fusion with geopolitics acts as just another discursive element⁵⁹. The return of religion to international relations, which have often been measured from the perspective of political

⁵¹ VERSTRYNGE, Jorge. *A Society for War*. Centre for Sociological Research, Madrid, 1979, p. 56.

⁵² CLAUSEWITZ, Carl Von. *On War*, vol. II. Ministry of Defence, 1999, p. 553.

⁵³ For the practices of the priests of the goddess Cybele.

⁵⁴ SCHMITT, Carl. *Op. cit.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁵⁶ GLOVER, Jonathan. *Humanity and Inhumanity*. Ediciones Cátedra, Madrid, 2001, p. 203.

⁵⁷ ARON, Raymond. *Op. cit.*, p. 55.

⁵⁸ JOHNSTON D. and SAMPSON, C. *Religion: The Forgotten Factor in International Relations*. PPC, 2000.

⁵⁹ CAIRO CAROU, Heriberto. 'Christian Fundamentalism'. *Op. cit.*, p. 118.

realism, poses a challenge to creativity⁶⁰. This is what Kepel calls the revenge of God⁶¹. Religion thus becomes confused with a non-religious entity, with a state or a nation, and enters into its game, a political game.

The intersection of different fault lines creates a particularly complex scenario in the Middle East, where different levels can be activated in various ways and the actors have significantly different interests. External agents, together with highly fragmented internal ones, form a kind of *wija* in which everything seems to change in unpredictable ways, except for the reality of the citizenry, which, for the most part, remains in misery. It is the curse associated with the dragon's teeth of classical mythology: internal division and inter-Muslim rivalry.

Thus, the invasion of Iraq created a geopolitical vacuum, altering the balance of power and highlighting the rifts between Sunnis and Shiites, by placing this religious key issue at the forefront and setting in motion the tectonic plates that made up societies.

The relationship between power (national or international) and Shiism is conflictive. Its intellectuals have gone from preaching distancing themselves from power, due to its imperfect nature, until the advent of the hidden imam in his capacity as a just ruler, to seizing power and exercising it in his name.

The replacement in the 19th century of the more literalist Ajbārī school by the Usulī school, which was legalistic and more inclined towards political action through a freer interpretation of doctrine, profoundly changed this relationship. Its culmination would be Khomeini's proposal in his seminal work *Vilayat e-faqih* [The Guide of the Jurist], which changed Shiite thinking by moving, in less than two centuries, from the rejection of political participation because of its sinful nature to its uncontested exercise, *mutatis mutandis*, by the same rule and in the name of the past, also serving as a reference point for Sunni Salafist movements. This reinterpretation of its history made it an inspiring force, a source of legitimacy due to its religious origins and mobilisation in the face of injustice.

⁶⁰ IRANZO DOSDAD, Ángela. *Op. cit.*, p. 141.

⁶¹ KEPEL, Gilles. *God's Revenge*. Anaya & Mario Muchnik, Madrid, 1991.

The Yazidi case

The US intervention in Iraq in 2003 and its aftermath, and the so-called Arab Spring in 2011, in the context of which the Syrian civil war took place, disrupted the entire Middle East. Other factors contributed to this, such as the presence of Al Qaeda in the area, from which Daesh would break away in late 2013 or early 2014; the geopolitical struggle between Salafism and the Muslim Brotherhood; and two countries, Syria and Iraq, ruled authoritatively by the same party, the Baath Party, led in both cases by religious minorities and based on a secular ideology that made extensive use of violence.

In this context, the jihadists would not be the only ones to take advantage of the reconfiguration of the Middle East to become a key force in the region. The power vacuum gave the Kurdish people unprecedented prominence and, for a time, made them the apparent antagonists of the Islamic State⁶².

One of the conflicts in the Middle East that is relevant to the case at hand is that involving the Kurds. They have a population of between thirty and forty million inhabitants, of Indo-Iranian roots, mainly settled in a mountainous region known as Kurdistan. They are the fourth largest minority in the Middle East and share a common history, culture and languages (with two dialects, *Kumanji* in the north and *Surani* in the south). The Kurdish people (who have given Islam figures of the stature of Saladin) are divided between Turkey (45%), Iran (25%), Iraq (25%) and Syria (5%); they also have pockets in Europe (Germany) and the United States. They constitute 20-25% of the Iraqi population, 15-20% of the Turkish population and 10% of the Syrian population. They are mainly Sunni.

They were part of the Ottoman Empire. At the end of the First World War, the Treaty of Sèvres provided for their independence—with a controversial territorial distribution, given the areas ceded to the mandate of the European powers by Sykes-Picot—in the context of the dismemberment of the Empire. The Treaty of Lausanne (1923), which followed the Greco-Turkish conflict led by Atatürk and reflected the Turkish victory, marked the end of this independence process.

After the Second World War, the Kurdish question was reignited, and it did so in an escalating manner. First in Iraq and then in Turkey. It should be noted that in 1946, the

⁶² PONCE, Antonio. "The Kurds: the new major player in the Middle East," *El Orden Mundial*. 1 October 2014. <https://elordenmundial.com/los-kurdos-el-nuevo-gran-actor-de-oriente-proximo/>

Republic of Mahabad was founded in Iran, which lasted barely a year. In 1978, Abdullah Öcalan created the Kurdistan Workers' Party, becoming fully involved in the conflict and joining the other factions and insurgencies existing in different countries. Turkey suffered cross-border attacks and various episodes of guerrilla warfare. In Iraq, the Kurds supported the Americans, which brought them into conflict with Saddam Hussein's forces. The latter, in the context of Operation Al-Anfar, used chemical weapons and destroyed up to 4,500 villages. Turkey also carried out military operations beyond its borders throughout the Syrian civil war.

It should be noted that in 2025, after nearly 40 years of conflict and 40,000 deaths, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) decided to disband, following the call of its leader Abdullah Öcalan, imprisoned since 1999, which opens the door to its eventual entry into Turkish politics, which would thus become Ottomanised. Recently, the PKK announced its withdrawal from Turkish territory.

The Yazidis

The Yazidis are the part of the Kurdish people who follow the Yazidi religion. We are therefore dealing with a minority group within what is already a regional minority. This means that they face twice the problems of a minority, in addition to those arising from a long-standing lack of political representation. They are a strictly ethno-religious and endogamous group—conversion does not exist and marriage outside the community is prohibited—which is why they are considered pure Kurds. In fact, many Yazidis still retain Indo-European physical characteristics. They believe that they are descended exclusively from Adam and not so much from Eve. They believe in the transmigration of souls as part of a process of purification; the greatest punishment, therefore, is expulsion from the community, as this prevents their spiritual progress.

There is no minimally updated census, although it is estimated that there may be between half a million and a million Yazidis. Their geographical distribution has undergone significant variation throughout history and particularly in recent times with the wars in Iraq and Syria. The conflicts have scattered the population, a significant proportion of which has moved to Central and Eastern Europe (200,000 in Germany) and North America (Canada and the US, more than 200,000). In addition to Syria (14,000) and Iraq

(between 70,000 and up to 300,000 according to some sources), there are small communities in Armenia (35,000), Georgia (20,000), Iran, Russia and Turkey. However, these figures are subject to considerable change.

The doctrinal basis of Yazidism is indebted to the work of Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir al-Umawī, a 12th-century Sufi master descended from Caliph Marwan I, who settled in the region as a hermit and is buried in the city of Lalish, a holy place to which Yazidis must make a pilgrimage at least once in their lifetime; and those who live in the region once a year. Yazidi vocabulary is influenced by Sufi mysticism.

For the Yazidis—monotheists who have two holy books: the Book of Revelation and the Black Book—God (Yazdan, a strict monotheism) created the world and left it in the care of seven holy beings or angels, among whom Melek Taus, the Angel of the Peacock, stands out and plays a unique role, very visible in iconography. He is considered an avatar of the aforementioned Sheikh Adi, and is even credited with removing the stone that sealed the tomb of Jesus Christ. This is the Fallen Angel, Satan in the Muslim and Christian traditions; although in the Yazidi tradition he was forgiven and assigned a role as mediator between God and men.

The Yazidis, organised hierarchically and in castes, sought to live in their own villages, although they were subjected to various processes of Arabisation and Islamisation. Geographically isolated in the mountainous region of Sinjar and the Lalish valley and accustomed to discrimination, they became encapsulated. In fact, the region is a strategic crossroads between Turkey, Syria and Iraq.

The Yazidis have suffered numerous religious persecutions, which they estimate at no less than 72, while Amnesty International puts the figure at 47. The fact is that, throughout history, the centres of power have fuelled negative stereotypes of apostates, adulterers and incestuous people to justify the use of violence against them, the expropriation of their lands and even rape⁶³. In this way, they promoted distancing and separation between communities.

These persecutions began during the Ottoman Empire, around the 17th century, with the aim of forcing their conversion, alleging, in addition, their refusal to submit to central

⁶³ ROSELLÓ, Daniel. "The Yazidis, a history of persecution," *El Orden Mundial*. 16 December 2018.
<https://elordenmundial.com/los-yazidies-historia-persecucion/>

authority. They intensified at the end of the 19th century, when the crisis of the Empire was becoming apparent, during the First World War and, particularly, after the Treaty of Sèvres, when 200,000 Yazidis were displaced in the Middle East.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Saddam Hussein, as has been noted, carried out a vast process of Arabisation, during which the Yazidis were forced to leave their villages and settle in cities. There they were even forced to register as Arabs in order to alter the demographic balance in northern Iraq to the benefit of the regime. This, in a sense, pitted them against the rest of the Kurds, who in turn pressured them to consolidate their rule in the province of Nineveh, promoting processes of Kurdification of the Yazidi population, but without committing to their security. Many Yazidis then refused this Arabisation and joined the Kurdish movement, a reality that was repeated in reverse⁶⁴.



Image: Situation in Iraq in 2014.

Source: "Who are Yazidis and why is ISIS hunting them", *The Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/07/who-yazidi-isis-iraq-religion-ethnicity-mountains>

The Yazidis did not benefit in any way from the American intervention in Iraq in terms of greater rights. On the contrary, they found themselves caught up in the struggle between the Kurds and a severely weakened Iraqi state that was unable to provide security. Added

⁶⁴ OROSA, Pablo L. and FERNÁNDEZ, Miguel. "Yazidis, trapped in the prison of the Islamic State," *La Marea*. 7/9/2014. <https://www.lamarea.com/2014/09/07/yazidies-atrapados-en-la-carcel-del-estado-islamico/>

to this were punitive actions as a result of their participation in insurgency activities in the context of the Kurdish independence movement. In 2007, between 400 and 500 Yazidis were massacred in several attacks, which were presented as acts of retaliation for the alleged stoning of a Yazidi woman who, supposedly, had converted to Islam or planned to elope with a Muslim (according to another version) and had been punished by her co-religionists.

In June 2014, Daesh took the former caliphate capital of Mosul (Iraq) and on the 29th of that month reinstated the caliphate, demonstrating the inability of both the Syrian and Iraqi armies to meet the jihadist challenge. It then continued its advance northwards, reaching the outskirts of Sinjar on 3 August.

The *Peshmerga* forces, some 12,000 men, who were defending the area, unusually withdrew without prior warning and without even giving the population the option of evacuating the area by their own means. In this way, they left the Yazidis defenceless against the inexorable advance of the jihadist forces. In many cases, the Yazidis' Arab neighbours collaborated with the occupying forces and even handed them over.

The PKK, however, was able to react and open a relief corridor to facilitate and support the escape of the civilian population. Western countries provided air support to these populations. As a result, 50,000 Yazidis were surrounded in Sinjar and left at the mercy of the jihadists. It is estimated that around 5,000 were killed, between 5,000 and 7,000 were kidnapped and between 200,000 and 500,000, depending on the source, had to flee. The UN described this situation as genocide.

We see that in this case there are several overlapping conflicts: the one between the jihadists and the Yazidi Kurds; that between the Kurds and the countries that host them, especially Turkey; and, finally, the indifference that the Yazidis elicit from the Kurds themselves, which explains—due to their weak commitment—why they were abandoned by members of their own ethnic group, although Muslim, who should have protected them.

Religious freedom in Islam. The Sinjar disaster

It is clear that religion has played a role in these events, but a theological explanation is insufficient, even if it offers some answers, for how can we explain the survival of Yazidism

into the 21st century? *Jabhat al-Nusra* and Daesh, for example, held opposing positions on the issue of slavery.

The traditional approach of the Islamic world in its relationship with other faiths was one of tolerance: "There is no compulsion in religion, the right course is now distinct from the wrong" (2:256). Tolerance is certainly not equality, far from it, but, formulated in the 7th century, it was a step forward from the practice of the time. Thus, the Qur'anic mandate considered that Jews, Christians and Sabians, the so-called "people of the book" (*Ahl-al-khitab*), protected minorities (*dhimmis*) who could freely practise their religion, were only subject to the payment of a tax (*jizyah*).

However, on the one hand, we see Koranic references in this regard: 'O People of the Book! You will have nothing until you follow and put into practice the Torah and the Gospel and what has been revealed to you from your Lord', and, overcoming all exclusivity, it goes so far as to affirm 'Our God and your God is One' (5:68). Contrary statements are also made: "Fight them until there is no more opposition and religion is only for Allah" (2:193). Furthermore, this fundamentalist line of thinking maintains that religious freedom was abrogated in the verse: "Strive hard against the unbelievers and the hypocrites, and be harsh with them" (9:73), as it was subsequent to the first judgement and therefore constitutes a definitive reconsideration. In this vein, the Prophet himself forced the conversion of some Arab tribes.

In accordance with the geographical limits of Islam, the characterisation of 'people of the book', initially limited to the aforementioned faiths, was extended by analogy to other creeds, although this was not a common position, because Islam lacks doctrinal unity and hierarchy. However, the position regarding polytheists is much more radical, as they are "associators" (*mushrik*, they associate other gods with God), which is a crime in the Islamic world, and therefore their conversion is compulsory. Thus, when the Prophet saw a line of slaves, he said: 'Your Lord has been amazed to see how a people was led, in chains, to paradise' (Bukhari).

But it is against apostates that the conflict reaches its most virulent nature, since Muslims, in their obligation to do good and avoid evil, must fight against them even more forcefully than against infidels (*kafir*). It should be remembered that, according to the radical view, apostates are not only those who explicitly renounce their faith, but also those who, being

Muslims, do not live in accordance with each and every one of the numerous precepts of Islamic law.

In the case of the Yazidis, the issue has dimensions that go beyond the theological and enter the realm of popular beliefs. To begin with, the name Yazidism is falsely attributed to Caliph Yazid, one of the most hated figures in Islam. Grandson of Abu Sufyan—Muhammad's great rival—and son of Muawiya—who deposed Caliph Ali—it was he who, in the battle of Karbala, had Ali's son Hussein killed.

A religion whose name is attributed to such an origin, however false, is already condemned in itself. Such condemnation is formulated in the premises, however much it may be justified doctrinally. This is all the more so when its cosmogony incorporates, in a leading role, none other than the Fallen Angel himself, the Satan of Christians and Muslims, even though, as we have seen, his role is very different. If, in addition, the terminology of Islam is used and Islamic festivals and customs are commemorated, condemnation by populists is guaranteed. Added to this is the fact that the secretive and endogamous nature of Yazidism fuels all kinds of rumours, which explain — although they do not justify — the multiple persecutions suffered by the Yazidis. As Teilhard de Chardin said: "At the root of every conflict lies a problem of ignorance."

Thus, for example, anthropology has found multiple cases of accusations of anthropophagy among cultures. Athenagoras of Athens, in 177, wrote a *Plea in favour of Christians* addressed to the emperors Marcus Aurelius and Commodus in which he denies the accusations of cannibalism, atheism and incest levelled against Christians⁶⁵. The Spanish were accused of the same thing during the conquest of America, as were the Europeans during the colonisation of Africa in the 19th century. Theodore de Bry's engravings served to promote the Black Legend, which was not far removed from the aforementioned accusations, deliberately weakening the Spanish position.

Similarly, the jihadists developed a propaganda campaign calling for the annihilation of this group, which would lead to the events that occurred after the capture of Sinjar, as well as the attacks that preceded them. Daesh acted on the basis of a very strong religious ideology that was well established in the region; this is why it has managed to expand and establish its presence geographically, because it is, to a certain extent, a product of

⁶⁵ <http://www.holytrinitymission.org/books/spanish/>

the local culture itself, with which it has a close affinity. We return, once again, to Durkheim's statement: "Gods are peoples thought of symbolically."

The proclamation of the Islamic State implies the restoration of Sharia law in its entirety. In this context, Salafism represents the doctrinal rearmament of the jihadists, giving substance and foundation to their actions. Their perception of religion is that of a kind of nomocracy in which numerous aspects that are considered social customs in the West are also regulated. For radicals, Islam only exists if Sharia law is applied in its entirety; otherwise, what exists is *jahiliyya* [the era of ignorance prior to Muhammad]. Rejecting Islam is an act of *ridda* [apostasy], since rejecting any rule is rejecting everything completely.

This is reflected in issue 4 of *Dabiq* magazine, entitled 'The Failed Crusade', in which, to justify the massacre doctrinally, an article entitled 'The Rebirth of Slavery Before the Hour' argued:

"Before the capture of Sinjar... it was studied whether the Yazidis should be treated as a *mushrik* [polytheistic] group or one that originated as Muslims and then became apostates... Due to the Arabic terminology used by this group to describe themselves, some contemporary Muslim scholars have classified them as an apostate sect and not an originally *mushrik* religion, but... it was determined that this group is the one that existed since pre-Islamic *jahiliyyah* [ignorance], but was 'Islamised' by the Muslim population around them, by their language and culture, even though they never accepted Islam. The apparent origin of the religion lies in the magism of Ancient Persia... reinterpreted with elements of Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Christianity... expressed in the heretical vocabulary of Sufism. Thus, they were treated as *mushrikin*. Unlike Jews and Christians, there was no provision for the payment of *jizyah*. Furthermore, their women could be enslaved, unlike apostate women, who cannot be enslaved and can only be given an ultimatum to repent or face the sword.⁶⁶ .

The fact is that Yazidism and Islam have coexisted for ten centuries, with the former being subject to Islam, that is, under its direct and indisputable authority. And now, suddenly, in the 21st century, the criteria that have marked their coexistence are being drastically changed. The approach set out in *Dabiq* magazine served as the basis for the occupation by jihadist forces. Thus, after capturing them, Islamic State divided them into categories: men, elderly women, mothers with children under the age of 6, virgin girls (up to the age of 9), and boys⁶⁷ .

The men were ordered to convert to Islam—which would have resulted in their condemnation in their own religion at the end of the transmigration phase—and when

⁶⁶ https://law.vanderbilt.edu/academics/academic-programs/international-legal-studies/Yazidi_Genocide_Opinion_KRG_4.15.pdf

⁶⁷ SHAMMO, Nareen. "Yazidi women, the slaves of the 21st century," *Amnesty International*. 23 January 2017. <https://www.es.amnesty.org/en-que-estamos/blog/historia/articulo/mujeres-yazidies-las-esclavas-del-siglo-xxi/>

they refused, they were executed. There is evidence to suggest that even if they did convert, they suffered the same fate. Virgin women and girls were distributed as spoils and auctioned off. Boys were forced to convert and were trained as soldiers; many were used in suicide missions.

As for the women, most were sold as slaves. However, the Islamic State initially denied this, only to eventually acknowledge and justify such extremes in an October 2014 issue of *Dabiq* magazine. The aim is to scandalise the West, to provoke them by questioning their core values. In fact, in its ninth issue, the magazine put Michelle Obama, then First Lady, up for sale for a third of a dinar.

Slavery [*Saby*] is a recurring theme in Islam; in fact, it is an institution mentioned some thirty times in the Qur'an. The question of its correct assessment lies, as in other matters, in the translations. The restoration of Sharia law, in the black-and-white logic of the radicals, brought with it the restoration of slavery, formulated, moreover, in extreme terms. Thus, the aforementioned article in issue 4 of *Dabiq* states that "unlike Jews and Christians, there is no place for the payment of religious tribute by Yazidis; their women will be distributed among the fighters of the Islamic State as established by Sharia law"⁶⁸

What is more, it considers this to be positive because it exposes female slaves to Islam and frees men—with unprecedented cynicism—from the temptations of the flesh: "Muslim families who have hired maids to work in their homes face the *fitnah* [temptation] of forbidden *khalwah* [seclusion] and the resulting *zina* [prostitution] that occurs between the man and the maid, whereas if she were his concubine, this relationship would be legal."⁶⁹

A woman, Umm Summayyah Al-Muharijah, in 2015 and in issue 9 of *Dabiq*, in the article entitled "Slaves or Prostitutes?", emphasises these arguments, although, in a way, she humanises them somewhat without abandoning the dithyrambic terrain in which they are set. In that article, she criticised, first of all, those within their own ranks who had been quick to deny this fact, "as if they had committed an error or a vile act," justifying it theologically. According to his interpretation, the ultimate goal of this captivity was not slavery, and even less so sexual slavery, despite its occurrence, but rather that Islamic law "urges kindness and good treatment towards slaves, even those who are not

⁶⁸ SHELANU. "Sexual slavery in the Islamic State," *El Periodista Digital*, 21 August 2015.

<https://www.periodistadigital.com/totalitarismo/20150821/esclavitud-sexual-en-el-estado-islamico-689403916554/>

⁶⁹ Ibid.

believers and whom God humiliates by making them the property of Muslim people. For He made their liberation from the lands of the infidels a form of salvation and guidance towards the right path." That salvation would take place through concubinage or marriage to believers, to whom they would provide Muslim children by birth, acceptance of Islam and its pure practice⁷⁰ .

Far removed from these approaches, which are in themselves extreme and intellectually untenable, there were women, including girls, who were sold several times and exploited as sex toys to the point of sadism. In some cases, women were pressured even with their minor children, and there are documented cases of them being murdered as punishment. The drama is of such magnitude that a written work at the strategic level cannot recognise it with the rigour and detail it deserves⁷¹ .

Amnesty International reports that "when Islamic State began selling Yazidi people in Mosul in mid-August 2014, prices ranged from US\$5 to US\$100. Then *online* sales began via WhatsApp. The operation consisted of sending a photo or description of the girl, her price and the type of daily tasks she was capable of performing. They also indicated whether she spoke Arabic fluently and whether she had memorised parts of the Koran. Prices began to rise, ranging from US\$5,000 to US\$15,000, sometimes even more."

The trauma persisted in 2020, with more than 300,000 refugees continuing to live in very precarious conditions in camps. Many of the kidnappings had not been resolved; in fact, some sources speak of up to 3,500 cases, and legal action is still pending. However, 80,000 Yazidis may have returned to Sinjar, but neither the security nor economic conditions are favourable. The problem is also that the strict endogamy required by Yazidism virtually forces those who have already suffered abuse to abandon their children if they want to return⁷² . However, Yazidi leader Baba Cheikh has condemned those who blame them.

⁷⁰ TORRES DÍAZ, Olga. *Daesh propaganda is also a matter for women. From Umm Sumayyah al-Muhajirah in Dabiq to the al-Khansaa brigade manifesto on the Internet*. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, 2015.

http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2015/DIEEE0121-2015_Propaganda_Daesh_Mujeres_OlgaTorres.pdf

⁷¹ For further information, we recommend the *Amnesty International* report. <https://www.es.amnesty.org/en-que-estamos/blog/historia/articulo/mujeres-yazidies-las-esclavas-del-siglo-xxi/>. We also recommend the UN group's report https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/A_HRC_32_CRP.2_en.pdf

⁷² "The Yazidi genocide continues, five years after the massacre," *Agencia EFE*. 3 August 2019.

<https://www.efe.com/efe/america/mundo/el-genocidio-yazidi-continua-cinco-anos-despues-de-la-masacre/20000012-4036550#>

Reflections on the case

On 4 October 2018, the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Nadia Murad, a Yazidi human rights activist who was kidnapped and enslaved. This award undoubtedly represents a distinction for an entire people through her person, as well as recognition of the injustice and mistreatment that this people has suffered for centuries due to its status as a double minority.

Scientific progress does not imply moral progress. After the Second World War, a neologism had to be introduced to define a new type of crime: genocide⁷³, a hybrid of two words: 'genos', meaning origin or species, and 'caedere', meaning to kill⁷⁴. With these words, the act of annihilation is introduced into rationality. It is a question of implementing a methodology to industrially destroy an entire culture.

Thus, from the perspective of the Rome Statute, Daesh's actions are concurrent with five systematic crimes of genocide, as they are aimed at "destroying, in whole or in part" the Yazidis as a protected group. Namely: 1) murder, mainly of Yazidi men through selective execution; 2) inflicting serious bodily or mental harm, mainly on Yazidi women through the use of sexual violence and slavery; 3) deliberately imposing living conditions calculated to bring about physical destruction, mainly by imposing siege on trapped Yazidi civilians; 4) imposing measures to prevent births, mainly through the practice of forced abortions and the separation of Yazidi men and women; and 5) the forcible transfer of children, mainly through abduction⁷⁵.

In the case at hand, religion, or worse still, the proximity between two religions that had coexisted for hundreds of years, for better or worse, has served to distance and differentiate them, even among members of the same ethnic group. The indifference of their neighbours or the initial abandonment of the forces that were supposed to defend them is not without intellectual significance and all point in the same direction.

The fact is that distance not only diminishes sympathy, but also reduces the sense of responsibility. Propaganda also allows the perpetrator to distance themselves

⁷³ Quoting Pierre Drost: "The crime of genocide in its most serious form is the deliberate destruction of human beings taken individually because of their membership as such in any human community." TERNON, Yves. *El Estado criminal (The Criminal State)*. Editorial Península, Barcelona, 1995, p. 45.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 37.

⁷⁵ LAW VANDERBILT. https://law.vanderbilt.edu/academics/academic-programs/international-legal-studies/Yazidi_Genocide_Opinion_KRG_4.15.pdf

intellectually from the victim. This makes it possible to depersonalise them and avoids any form of moral repulsion, facilitating their actions. Furthermore, once the operation is underway, a moral inertia is generated that takes on a life of its own and makes it difficult to begin a different political phase.

In this case, the pseudo-speciesification that occurs when the Yazidis are labelled as "worshippers of Satan" or followers of Caliph Yazid allows for inhumane treatment and even extermination⁷⁶. The approximation produced by the fact that they incorporate Islamic practices into their creed, as Freud said, reduces the distance between the parties, but by making otherness impossible and calling for the defence of one's own creed, it paradoxically brings about an increase in violence. As Edward Said points out, it is enough to create a stereotype, to give it marked features, without any individuality, and to contrast it with the chosen model for a feeling of threat to be perceived⁷⁷.

This once again creates distance⁷⁸ between the parties, reducing sympathy and responsibility and weakening any kind of emotional revulsion, which contributes to inhumanity. A human response, on the other hand, brings people closer together and encourages recognition and empathy, which is not desirable⁷⁹. The aim is to inhibit any human response. That is why the doctrinal basis of the events in *Dabiq* magazine and the comments between combatants via WhatsApp served to normalise, and even trivialise, behaviour that deserves to be rejected, to the extent that it is even rejected by the jihadist community itself.

Daesh has proven to be, in the words of lawyer Amal Clooney in a report for the United Nations, a "bureaucracy of evil on an industrial scale," insofar as it has fostered the development of a kind of moral Taylorism by setting in motion an assembly line of annihilation against an entire people, justifying it doctrinally.

Conclusions

Diversity is natural in a religion without doctrinal unity, spread throughout the world and associated with countless cultures. As a result, there have been significant tensions in

⁷⁶ TERNON, Yves. *Op. cit.*, p. 74.

⁷⁷ SAID, Edward W. *Orientalism*. Editorial Libertarias, Madrid, 1990, p. 338.

⁷⁸ GLOVER, Jonathan. *Humanity and Inhumanity*. Ediciones Cátedra, Madrid, 2001, p. 144.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

the Islamic world between national sovereignty and the identities it harbours. Added to this is the fact that globalisation has brought it into contact with its environment and also with itself, making it aware of its diversity and initiating its rationalisation. There is also a demand for unity presented in religious terms, but which each local culture restrains. We are facing a kind of Islamo-nationalism.

The religious sphere is an important arena for confrontation, but it is not the only one. It is false to say that religion determines international relations, but it is also false to say that it does not affect them. The religious sphere can influence, but it does not mediate. Populations are one of the pillars on which these are built, and religion is the basis of their identity. Islam is thus an important agent of internal transformation and international change. It can act as an integrating force and a producer of internal consensus, but also as an agent that limits the room for manoeuvre of leaders⁸⁰.

Furthermore, it has the capacity to influence the bases and perceptions of decision-makers. Religion can act as a motivator, legitimiser or simply as a justifier of a specific foreign policy⁸¹. This influence is not absolute, but rather another element of political culture. Moreover, practically anything can be justified using Islam, including the most realistic and pragmatic policies.

The Middle East is a highly fragmented and polycentric space in which states have established themselves and pragmatism and interests prevail, giving rise to complex power games and extravagant balances.

On the Sunni side, it is impossible to speak of a monolithic bloc due to the existence of a plurality of actors vying for leadership, each with a different proposal in line with their national reality. The Shia side is dominated by Iran, whose geopolitical situation, geographical centrality and geopolitical pivot character make it an essential actor in the region. In Iran, two levels converge, the religious and the ethnic, which lead to greater polarisation in their confrontation. However, the Revolution has become institutionalised and lost some of its momentum and, moreover, despite the Messianism of some of its leaders, it is unable to overcome its intrinsic contradictions.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

Neither Iranian Islam (meaning the Shiite version of Islam exported by that country) nor Wahhabism can represent worlds that are much more plural and rich than the image they seek to convey while flaunting their representation. What is at stake is regional leadership in terms of rhetoric and visibility.

Furthermore, societies have adapted to states and have been transformed. They are not homogeneous and harbour marked differences. If secularism has had its limits, so too have the processes of Islamisation, all of which has generated a Hegelian-biased dialectic that links revolution with counter-revolution.

There are no policies today that transcend the state. Neither Islamic nor Arab countries have a level of policy coordination equivalent to that of the members of the Atlantic Alliance or the European Union. While there may be areas in which they can act with a certain degree of unity in the face of a shared perception, there are also many others in which they clash. To propose any kind of organisation – formal or informal – that, supported by the people as a sociological entity, transcends state frameworks is utopian, however full of good or bad intentions it may be.

Moreover, there is an overvaluation of religious factors that overlooks the necessary analysis and consideration of purely nationalist or ideological aspects, in a world where religion acts as the backbone of counterculture, but fails to formulate concrete solutions, and even less so in the international arena.

A different situation arises when—as in the case of Iraq or Syria—both communities coexist under the same state apparatus, a weak state incapable of exercising a legitimate monopoly on force, and the system has been destabilised. As Sartre warned: 'The other is never the development of my freedom, but an obstacle. Hell is other people, and there is no solution to this.' Although Islam can contribute to peace, according to the Quranic verse "Allah does not love those who exceed the limits" (2:215).

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