Religious Sectarianism in International Conflicts

A Study of the Axis of Resistance

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Introduction

Sectarianism[2] refers to an individual's affiliation with a "religious subculture" within the broader context of a specific religion, leading to a cultural, political and social "identity" that differentiates them from others within the same larger religious group. This phenomenon is widespread across most religions, with even single religious sects often fracturing into sub-identities, which may sometimes conflict more intensely with each other than with those outside their sect. Some researchers attribute the causes of internal conflicts within religions, particularly between sects, to two main factors: First, differences in cognitive approaches to interpreting religious texts, shaped by intellectual levels and cultural heritage predating collective religious affiliation. Second, the role of elites within each sect, who may exploit these differences to expand their influence based on internal political or social dynamics within the religious community or external factors, especially in heterogeneous societies.[3]

Quantitative data indicates that there are over 10 thousand religious sub-identities globally. However, the majority of these sub-identities do not represent a significant proportion of the world's population. The largest population groups within these sub-identities are concentrated in the major world religions, which together account for about 77% of the global population: Christianity 31%, Islam 24%, Hinduism 15%, and Buddhism 7%. The remaining population is distributed across a variety of smaller religions, including Judaism, and traditional or folk religions such as Taoism, Sikhism, Shintoism, and Zoroastrianism, among others. Additionally, 16% of the global population does not identify with any specific religion, encompassing atheists, agnostics, and those who believe in a higher power without affiliating with a particular faith, such as some Gnostics. This illustrates that religious sectarianism is not confined to any specific region, religion or territory. The pyramidal-segmentary theory explains how overlapping subordinate loyalties contribute to conflicts of priorities, whether sectarian, national, linguistic, religious, or otherwise.[4] Moreover, there are currently 43 countries that officially designate a state religion or religious denomination.[5] Of these, 27 declare
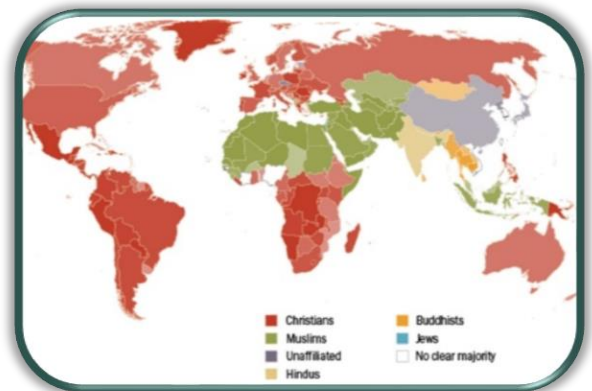
Islam as the state religion, 13 designate Christianity and 2 specify Buddhism. In addition, 9 Christian-majority European states designate a specific Christian denomination as the state's official faith.[6]

Although inter-religious wars account for only 6.98% of all recorded conflicts—123 out of a total of 1,763 wars in human history[7]—wars between sects of the same religion (intra-religious wars) are a prominent feature of religious conflicts. For instance, the conflicts between Christian denominations, especially after the Great Schism between Orthodox and Catholics, followed by divisions between Catholics and Protestants over the role of the Church, took place across Europe from 1524 to 1648, with brief and fragile periods of peace. An example is the Eight Wars of Religion in France between Catholics and Protestants, which lasted from 1562 to 1598, as well as the Thirty Years' War from 1618 to 1648. In the modern era, conflicts continue between Christian denominations, sometimes taking on a sectarian political dimension, as seen in Ireland, Scotland and elsewhere, and occasionally escalating into broader conflicts.[8] Some studies indicate that conflicts and violence among Christian denominations are currently concentrated in three main regions: Latin America, particularly among Catholics, Protestants and Pentecostals; sub-Saharan Africa; and East Asia.[9] India has also experienced sectarian conflict within Hinduism, particularly among Shaivites, Vaishnavites, Jains, and Buddhists. Similarly, Japan faced conflicts among various Buddhist sects during its medieval history, despite the cultural emphasis on "Ahimsa" (peace and love).[10] This phenomenon is also evident in Islamic history and other contexts.

Contemporary quantitative studies indicate that monitoring the causes of international conflicts through the dichotomy of religious versus non-religious factors leads to the following conclusions:[11]

1. Non-religious conflicts between 1975 and 2015 showed a steady increase from 35 conflicts in 1975 to around 65 in 1990. However, after 1990, these conflicts began to decrease in a non-linear fashion, reaching approximately 58 by 2015.

2. In contrast, religiously driven international conflicts exhibited a linear rise during the same period, increasing from 3 conflicts in 1975 to 31 in 2015.

3. The geographical distribution of religiously themed conflicts, rounded to the nearest decimal, is as follows:

- 1% in the Americas

- 3% in Europe

- 18% in the Middle East

- 38% in Asia

- 41% in Africa

4. Conflicts within the same religion still outnumber those between different religions by more than double.

The factors driving sectarianism generally vary across social, political and economic dimensions. In contrast, the explanation of inter-confessional conflict from a religious perspective often centers on foundational issues in religious doctrine (Primordial), the political exploitation of sectarian disputes (Instrumental), or disparities in levels of modernization between societies.[12]

What are the implications of this:

1. International conflicts between religious sects are not confined to a specific religion or region; rather, sectarian conflict is a phenomenon encountered by nearly all religions. It is not solely an Islamic or Middle Eastern issue, as often portrayed by Western media.

2. The quantitative indicators of "inter-religious" clashes of civilizations challenge Samuel Huntington's theory. Conflicts occurring "within" civilizations, particularly those with religious dimensions, far outnumber those "between" different religious civilizations. The ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war serves as a contemporary example of this trend, highlighted by the split of the Orthodox Church into Russian and Ukrainian factions, each aligning with one of the conflicting sides.[13] Additionally, many conflicts in Latin America arise among predominantly Catholic countries, etc.

3. The classification of the world into regions based on political, technological, and economic development levels shows that developed regions experience the fewest "inter-religious" or intra-religious conflicts.

4. The Middle East has the lowest incidence of "inter-religious" conflicts, such as sectarianism, accounting for approximately 47% of Asia's total and about 44% in comparison to Africa, as indicated by the data above.

First: Sectarianism in Arab-Iranian Relations: The Interplay of Political and Religious Employment

The Iranian Revolution represented a pivotal moment in political dynamics, particularly in the Eastern Arab World. This shift was further influenced by significant events occurring in the same year, 1979, including the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Juhayman Al-'Utaibi's attack on the Grand Mosque in Mecca, the leadership change in Iraq with Saddam Hussein assuming the presidency, and Egypt's signing of a peace treaty with Israel. These concurrent strategic developments led to several notable outcomes, including:

1. The rise of jihadism against various entities, most notably Soviet communism, alongside the establishment of training camps and financial donation funds to support the Afghan *Mujahideen*. This was followed by the assassination of the Egyptian president, the emergence of jihadist movements in Palestine, Lebanon and other countries, and an expanded opposition to Western influence in Arab societies. This shift was reflected in the electoral successes of Islamic parties in legislative elections, particularly those that maintained a minimum level of transparency in many Arab countries, in addition to Turkey.

2. Western powers and Israel recognized the dangers posed by this phenomenon. They attempted to implement policies designed to exploit it to their advantage while undermining efforts to channel the growing movement towards resisting Western and Israeli influence in the region. They infiltrated some of its factions to redirect its momentum. This strategy was further supported by promoting normalization between Israel and the Arab world, aimed at preventing the movement from advancing in a counterproductive direction.

3. The Western powers and Israel have adopted a diplomatic strategy aimed at undermining the emerging strength of the Axis of Resistance by:

a. Heightening concerns among Arab political regimes that these forces may attempt to seize power. This has led Arab regimes to coordinate, at various levels, with Western powers to limit the growth of this phenomenon. Such coordination has manifested in media campaigns against this rising force, intelligence infiltration into these organizations, and efforts to steer these groups in questionable directions. Notably, this includes the establishment of civil society initiatives aimed at fostering a culture that challenges the liberating or developmental roles of these organizations.

b. Attempting to prevent the unity of these organizations by exposing doctrinal differences among them. The Sunni-Shia divide has been particularly exploited to facilitate disintegration. During the Iran-Iraq War, Iraq played a significant role in perpetuating this dichotomy. Subsequently, Israel and various Arab countries began to promote these sectarian policies for clear political reasons. This strategy is evident in initiatives such as the New Middle East, the Greater Middle East and Creative Chaos, as well as in the works of thinkers like Bernard Lewis, Oded Yinon, Bernard-Henri Lévy and others.[14]

A study conducted by the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy for the US State Department analyzed the content of Saudi curricula across 100 textbooks from 2017 to 2020, with ongoing assessments until 2022. The findings highlight a predominant emphasis on Wahhabism, often portraying other Islamic sects as inferior or viewed with skepticism. Furthermore, a comparison of the curriculum "reforms" from a sectarian perspective reveals a clear correlation between regional political changes and the nature of these "reforms."[15]

c. Tightening security measures and cracking down on the financial sources that support these movements, as well as mobilizing cultural counter-attacks. The political regimes in the Arab Gulf states have played a central role in this effort, driven by the fear that these organizations may seize control of power in the Arab region, potentially extending their influence to the Gulf.

d. Exploiting the Shiite-Sunni divide to besiege Iran, in addition to implementing a comprehensive approach that includes political, media, and economic isolation of Iran, surrounding it with military bases, and promoting internal opposition. These powers coordinate closely with Israel, recognizing that Iran serves as the foundational "base" of the Axis of Resistance that must be dismantled. It is notable that media coverage tends to emphasize the sectarian affiliations of the axis's parties, linking

them to groups like Hizbullah, Ansar Allah, and the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), while often overlooking the Sunnism of the Palestinian factions and other Sunni organizations supported by the axis.[16]

Despite the fact that the 1952–1970 period, often referred to in Arab political literature as the era of the nationalist tide—particularly the Nasserist tide—witnessed a markedly different attitude compared to the post-Iranian revolution era, religious movements during this time received substantial financial and media support from countries that are now hostile to them. This highlights the pragmatic approach of Arab political regimes towards religious movements. Specifically, the stance of these regimes centered on how to utilize these movements against their opponents, thereby adopting an "instrumental" approach in their relationships with them. Consequently, the role of these religious organizations remains "ambiguous" for many researchers, particularly regarding their relationship with Iran.

Second: The Influence of Sectarianism on Iranian Foreign Policy Dynamics

Following the triumph of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the Muslim Brothers (MB) movement, the most prominent Sunni Islamic movement in the Arab world, expressed its support for this revolution. Leaders from both movements engaged in contacts, and coordination between the international organization of the MB movement and Iran began through the Islamic Unity Forum in 2007. The writings of Sayyid Qutb significantly influenced Iranian leaders, to the extent that the current Iranian leader, Ali Khamenei, translated one of Qutb's books into Persian and openly praised its content and methodology.[17] This rapprochement raised concerns among Arab political regimes, Israel and the United States, prompting these forces to work towards dismantling this cooperation, especially

after the Islamic movement's victory in the Egyptian parliamentary elections. This was further underscored by Egyptian President Muhammad Morsi's visit to Tehran in 2012, marking the first such visit in over three decades.

These Iranian orientations align with the provisions of Iran's Constitution, as reflected in several constitutional articles. Article 11 of the Constitution asserts that "the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has the duty of formulating its general policies with a view to cultivating the friendship and unity of all Muslim peoples, and it must constantly strive to bring about the political, economic, and cultural unity of the Islamic world." As for Article 12, it states:

> The official religion of Iran is Islam and the Twelver Ja'farî school [in usul al-Dîn and fiqh], and this principle will remain eternally immutable. Other Islamic schools, including the Hanafî, Shafi'î, Malikî, Hanbalî, and Zaydî, are to be accorded full respect, and their followers are free to act in accordance with their own jurisprudence in performing their religious rites. These schools enjoy official status in matters pertaining to religious education, affairs of personal status (marriage, divorce, inheritance, and wills) and related litigation in courts of law. In regions of the country where Muslims following any one of these schools of fiqh constitute the majority, local regulations, within the bounds of the jurisdiction of local councils, are to be in accordance with the respective school of fiqh, without infringing upon the rights of the followers of other schools.[18]

However, the Iranian Constitution includes provisions that undermine the contemporary understanding of citizenship and weaken the principle of equality, which is one of the highest values in political systems. It mandates that the President of the Republic—and especially the Supreme Leader—must follow the Jaafari Shiite school of thought. This effectively excludes approximately 8-10% of the Sunni population, around 8 to 9 million people, from holding these positions. Additionally, there are restrictions on Sunni representation in certain high-level bodies, including limited Sunni representation in governorates and districts with Sunni majorities, as well as in the establishment of institutions dealing with Sunni sectarian matters.[19] Some political organizations, particularly among Sunni Kurds, such as the Iranian Call and Reform Organization, which is affiliated with the MB movement, are politically active in Iran and even field candidates in parliamentary elections. However, this does not eliminate instances of violence between groups from the two major sects.[20]

In the context of Islamic sectarianism, the Sunni branch of the global Islamic community encompasses several schools of thought, such as Hanafi, Shafi'i, Maliki and Hanbali. However, political polarization has not prominently emerged within these sects

or their political behavior, largely remaining within the realm of jurisprudential and intellectual disagreement. This suggests that the current political alignment of Arab countries toward Iran has leveraged these jurisprudential differences for political purposes, primarily driven by Arab regimes' concerns over the transformative developments in Iran. Rather than fostering cultural enrichment through diverse intellectual efforts, these regimes have focused on politically containing the influence of the Iranian revolution, often in collaboration with the US.[21]

It is noteworthy that during the Iran-Iraq war, Iraqi political discourse, unequivocally supported by the Gulf states, prominently focused on the Persian-Arab national divide on one hand, and on the other hand, it emphasized historical phases that deepened this divide to rally the Arab world behind Iraq against Iran, a narrative encouraged by Western powers. However, following the occupation of Kuwait and the Gulf states' complete shift in stance toward Iraq, this nationalist rhetoric began to fracture. A stark example of this was Saddam Hussein's decision to send 137 warplanes to Iran to safeguard them from US attacks launched from Gulf state bases.[22] This shift highlights that the positions of the Gulf states, in particular, are rooted in the political manipulation of sectarianism to serve regime interests rather than broader Arab or Islamic causes.

Third: The Azerbaijani Model in the Context of Iranian Foreign Policy

I must begin with a phrase I regard as scientific, attributed to the philosopher Karl Popper and based on Hegel's dialectics: "History is full of conspiracies, but history itself is not a conspiracy." While conspiracies may occur, they cannot fully explain the overarching movements of history or its mega-trends. History is indeed rife with conspiracies; however, the trajectory of historical development is intrinsically linked to technical, cognitive and value-driven advancements, as well as the interconnections of organic ties and technical and economic relationships. It also involves various mechanical ties, including religion, language and ethnicity. When examining Iran-Azerbaijan relations from a historical perspective, we observe that while mechanical ties such as Islam and Shiism are present and robust, they do not fundamentally shape the nature of the relationship between the two nations. Both countries boast the highest percentage of Shiite Muslims globally, and there exists significant ethnic overlap, particularly in northern Iran, where Azeris comprise a substantial majority, accounting for

approximately 24% of Iran's total population and ranking as the largest ethnic minority after Persians. Upon evaluating the significance of these mechanical interdependencies, we find that the influence of Shiism and Islam on the bilateral relationship is relatively weak, with the ethnic factor related to Azerbaijan—home to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei—following closely behind. Additionally, the historical connection between the two parties was severed in 1813 following the Russo-Persian Wars and the signing of the Gulistan Treaty.[23]

The Shiite connection has clearly failed to create any harmony within the social and political structures of both countries. While Iran's political system is religious in nature, with a societal religious adherence rate of 70 to 75%,[24] Azerbaijan's political system is the most secular among all Muslim countries. Azerbaijan's constitution explicitly mandates the separation of religion from the state in Article 18, and Article 7 defines the state as secular. In Azerbaijani society, the rate of religious commitment does not exceed 50%, a legacy in part attributed to decades of Soviet influence.[25] Therefore, if the sectarian aspect is central to Iran's foreign policy, how can we explain that its worst relationship in West Asia is with a neighboring Shiite-majority country?

When evaluating other indicators, we find that Azerbaijan's Gini index, which measures the fairness of wealth distribution, stands at 25%, compared to 41% in Iran. This suggests that Azerbaijan performs significantly better in terms of wealth equality. Regarding democracy, Azerbaijan scores 2.8, while Iran scores 1.96 (on a scale of ten). Both countries exhibit negative political stability, with Azerbaijan at –0.93 and Iran at –1.59.[26] These differences in their internal political structures help explain their distinct political behaviors, where shared sectarianism has played no significant political role.

In the field of international relations, using the political distance index,[27] Azerbaijan's relationship with Israel stands out as one of its strongest, particularly in terms of growing military, political and economic cooperation since 1992. This partnership began six months after Azerbaijan established diplomatic relations with Israel following its independence from the Soviet Union. In stark contrast, Israel's relationship with Iran ranks among the latter's worst within the international community.[28] A clear example of this disparity is Israel's arms sales to Azerbaijan and its support against Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, as well as Israel's reliance on Azerbaijani oil, which accounts for approximately 40% of its supply.[29]

On the other hand, the countries closest to Iran in all sub-indices of political distance are Confucian China, with the lowest religiosity index in the world, and Orthodox Russia. In terms of trade, Iran's main partners are China, UAE, Iraq, Turkey and India, while its trade relationship with Azerbaijan accounts for only 2.8% of its total trade. This indicates that the sectarian dimension plays a marginal role in shaping relations between Iran and Azerbaijan.

Thus, attempts to explain Iran's foreign policy behavior solely on a sectarian basis are inconsistent with the nature of Iran-Azerbaijan relations or Iran's broader international relations. Therefore, the concept of a "Shiite Crescent" is insufficient to explain Iran's political behavior, especially when compared to the stronger influence of geostrategic considerations.

Fourth: Iran's Foreign Policy Towards Arab and Non-Arab Shiites

Monitoring the media trends in countries with Shiite populations reveals that accusations of Iran politicizing sectarian dimensions in its relations are almost exclusively found in Arab countries. While there are non-Arab countries with significant Shiite populations, they do not raise this issue of sectarian politicization. Although sectarian tensions exist between Sunnis and Shiites in these non-Arab countries, the politicization of sectarianism is not a prominent concern. For instance, the combined Shiite population in India and Pakistan totals approximately 62 million, surpassing the number of Arab Shiites.[30] Despite this, Iran's relations with both Pakistan and India do not appear to be sectarian in nature, even in the context of the Kashmir conflict, which is primarily an issue between these two Asian nations. Notably, Iran is the third-largest recipient of Indian exports, despite Kashmiri Sunnis and some Shiite factions in the region not aligning with Iran's stance.[31] Furthermore, Iran has even attempted to mediate between India and Pakistan, particularly regarding the Sunni-majority region of Kashmir.[32]

Conversely, some significant Arab Shiite groups, such as the Sadrist movement in Iraq, are not fully aligned with Iran's foreign policy, particularly regarding Iraq. This indicates that sub-state Shiite forces are not necessarily aligned with Iran.

Iran's foreign policy is shaped by the interplay of three competing currents: Islamic unity, Persian nationalism and sectarianism.[33] Therefore, it is essential to move beyond a singular focus on sectarianism when analyzing this policy.

The establishment of societies, clubs or financial aid funds abroad was not exclusive to Iran. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries also operated similar institutions across several African and Asian countries. However, unlike Iran, they were not accused of attempting to "politicize" sectarianism, while Iran's activities in this regard are often framed as having a political agenda.[34]

Some researchers distinguish between two dimensions in Iran's foreign policy. The sectarian aspect does not play a significant role in Iran's relationships with sovereign "states." However, it appears more prominent in its dealings with "sub-state" actors, as seen in its relations with groups in Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq and Palestine. The politicization of the sectarian dimension by Iran does not parallel that of its regional adversaries. In fact, a substantial portion of researchers who have studied Iranian foreign policy since 1979 argue that Iran's decision-making process aligns more closely with a realist perspective than with a sectarian one.[35] In this context, it is worth considering the position of Alawites towards Iran in countries like Syria and Morocco, where divergences exist, particularly regarding relations with Israel and the Western Sahara issue.[36]

Fifth: Operation al-Aqsa Flood: Navigating Between Religious Sectarianism and Strategic Vision of the Conflict

The late Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), Yasir 'Arafat, with ties to the Sunni MB movement, led the first official foreign delegation to visit Tehran following the victory of the Iranian revolution on 17/2/1979. The severance of Iranian-Israeli relations, along with the closure of the Israeli embassy in Tehran and its conversion into the Palestinian embassy on 18/2/1979—just a week after the revolution's triumph and one day after 'Arafat's visit—signaled a significant shift in Israeli-Iranian relations. This development was further driven by Iran's opposition to any Arab normalization with Israel, prompting some Arab countries to resort to sectarian rhetoric as a cover.

Iran's stance was closely tied to the earlier relations between Palestinian organizations and revolutionary forces prior to the victory of the Iranian Revolution. Additionally, the relationship between Nasserist Egypt and Iranian opposition groups during the Shah's era, particularly in the context of Mohammad Mosaddegh's revolution and other

movements, was significant. Sectarianism did not shape the substance of these relations; instead, political alignment transcended sectarian affiliations.[37]

Following the Iranian Revolution, the influence of religious movements within the Palestinian resistance grew, prompting Iran to extend its support, especially after the outbreak of the First *Intifadah*. In 1990, Iran invited a Hamas delegation to participate in a conference in Tehran aimed at supporting the Palestine issue, marking the start of evolving relations. However, these ties experienced some tension during the Arab Spring, particularly due to the Syrian crisis. Iran's relationship with the Palestine Islamic Jihad (PIJ) also strengthened, largely as a result of the Arab world's diminishing support for the Palestinian resistance, according to the PIJ leader.[38]

The above calls for the Arab and Iranian sides to separate jurisprudential differences from political commonalities and to establish a moral framework for managing these differences in a way that reinforces their political alignment.

On the other hand, it is worth noting that Iran adopted a specific strategy outlined in the Vision 2025 document, which was prepared by numerous Iranian experts and institutions in 2003. The vision aims for Iran to attain a leading regional position in West Asia through scientific and economic development, in line with Article 3, paragraph 5 of the constitution, which mandates the complete elimination of imperialism and the prevention of foreign influence. Additionally, Article 11 declares all Muslims form a single nation. Consequently, Iran's foreign policy has both technological and economic dimensions on one side and ideological, inclusive, and non-sectarian elements on the other. These components gradually shaped and stabilized Iran's foreign policy orientation after the initial revolutionary fervor subsided.[39]

As for Iran's contentious relationship with Israel, it is rooted in fundamental contradictions, which have fostered a rapprochement between the religious wing of Palestinian organizations and Iran, transcending sectarian divisions:[40]

1. The historical legacy of the negative image of "Jews" in the Muslim psyche, a perception shared by both Sunnis and Shiites.

2. The perception of Israel as a force obstructing Iran's aspirations for regional status, which aligns with Palestinian movements' view of Israel as a colonial power in the region.

3. The US-Israeli relationship, perceived by Iran as a threat to its regional ambitions, while the Palestinian movements view US support for Israel as a significant obstacle to Palestinian liberation.

4. Iranian concerns about the alignment of Arab normalization states with the US and Israel, coupled with these regimes' hostility toward the Arab popular will for "genuine" political representation of Islamic movements, have created a convergence among those affected by Israeli-Arab rapprochement.

In line with the above, Tehran has no interest in provoking the sectarian dimension. A study utilizing content analysis of a sample of 12 speeches by Iranian leader Ali Khamenei over one year, along with editorials from two Iranian newspapers—*Tehran Times* in English and *Al-Vefagh* in Arabic over a three-year period—yielded the following results:[41]

1. Khamenei's speeches emphasized the concept of Islamic unity 76.3% of the time, in contrast to 19.8% for the sectarian dimension and 3.7% for bi-nationalism, referring to Arabs and Persians.

2. In *Tehran Times* editorials, the theme of Palestine appeared 61.9% of the time, while the Sunni/ Shia concept was mentioned 32% of the time and the Arab/ Persian theme 4.5%. In *Al-Vefagh* newspaper, the frequency of the Palestinian theme was 77.9%, compared to 4.5% for the sectarian dimension and 7.1% for the Arab/ Persian national dimension.

If we consider the number of demonstrations held globally in support of Palestine following Operation al-Aqsa Flood, we observe the following results:[42]

1. Iran ranks fifth globally in the number of demonstrations held in support of the Operation al-Aqsa Flood, with a total of 1,032 demonstrations as of the end of August. In the Muslim world, it ranks fourth, following Yemen, Morocco and Turkey.

2. Iran's voting aligned perfectly with the demands of the resistance regarding all draft resolutions, amendments or requests for amendments in the United Nations General Assembly from 27/10/2023, to 12/12/2023. During this period, Iran opposed three

draft resolutions or amendments, supported one resolution, and abstained from voting on another draft resolution.

3. Leaders of resistance movements, academic studies and various media reports confirm that Iran is the primary ally and a key material and moral supporter of Palestinian resistance, particularly its Sunni religious wing. Additionally, many Arab religious political movements and elites in various Arab countries maintain close ties with Iran.[43]

Conclusion

Israel's management of its international relations warrants reflection. It maintains close ties with many denominations within the Christian world and is a key arms supplier to India, a Hindu nation, the predominantly Catholic Philippines, and Azerbaijan, a Shiite country. Israeli military sales to the Arab Abraham Accords countries increased by 17% from 2021 to 2023.[44] Prior to Operation al-Aqsa Flood, Israel was the top trading partner in the Middle East for Sunni Turkey and enjoys advanced relations with Japan, which is Shintoist/ Buddhist. This suggests that the primary factor in managing international relations is not the "sectarian" dimension, but rather a pragmatic approach based on "'national interest." Israel politically employs sectarian considerations to maximize its national interests and limit the influence of its opponents, particularly Iran.

The official Arab stance toward Iran largely involves the strategic use of "sectarianism" to repel forces of change to political regimes, particularly hereditary ones. These regimes prioritize their own security over that of society and the state. Consequently, this necessitates the establishment of Arab-Iranian relations, particularly within the Axis of Resistance, based on a gradual rational shift towards a non-zero-sum perspective that prioritizes common interests over conflicting ones in managing these relations, as long as this approach does not undermine the strategic goal of liberation from settler colonialism.

Endnotes

[1] An expert in futures studies, a former professor in the Department of Political Science at Yarmouk University in Jordan and a holder of Ph.D. in Political Science from Cairo University. He is also a former member of the Board of Trustees of Al-Zaytoonah University of Jordan, Irbid National University, the National Center for Human Rights, the Board of Grievances and the Supreme Council of Media. He has authored 37 books, most of which are focused on future studies in both theoretical and practical terms, and published 120 research papers in peer-reviewed academic journals.

[2] Many socio-political studies associate the concept of "Sect" with nationalist or other dimensions, whereas the Oxford Dictionary emphasizes hierarchical divisions within a single religion, indicating that the individual belongs to a sub-identity within that specific religious context. See T.V. Sathyamurthy, *Nationalism in Contemporary World* (London: Frances Pinter, 1983), pp. 74–77; and sectarianism, site of Oxford English Dictionary (OED), https://www.oed.com/search/advanced/Meanings?textTermText0=sectarianism&textTermOpt0=Definition

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[5] Pam Wasserman, World Population by Religion: A Global Tapestry of Faith, site of Population Education, 12/1/2024, https://populationeducation.org/world-population-by-religion-a-global-tapestry-of-faith

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[8] Political science literature distinguishes between a dispute, which is managed through non-violent means, and a conflict, which is managed through violent means.

[9] Jason Bruner and David C. Kirkpatrick, "Intra-Christian Violence and the Problematisation of the World Christian Paradigm," *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, vol. 74, no. 2, August 2022, pp. 375–397.

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And for a psychosocial analysis of the variation in the nature of violence between different religions and within the same religion, see Linda M. Woolf and Michael R. Hulsizer, "Intra- and Inter-Religious Hate and Violence: A Psychosocial Model," *Journal of Hate Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/255659806_Intra-_and_Inter-Religious_Hate_and_Violence_A_Psychosocial_Model

[11] Isak Svensson et. al., "Disputes over the Divine: Introducing the Religion and Armed Conflict (RELAC) Data, 1975 to 2015, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 62, no. 5, May 2018, pp. 1137–1139.

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