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Why Is There So Little Shia–Sunni Dialogue? Understanding the Deficit of Intra-Muslim Dialogue and Interreligious Peacemaking

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Abstract: Despite a growth in fatalities resulting from organized violence with Shia–Sunni dimensions over the last two decades, in this study, we show, using existing data-bases on interreligious dialogue and peacemaking, that only less than two percent of the interreligious peacemaking organizations in the world are specialized in dialogue between Shias and Sunnis. Why is there so little institutionalized Shia–Sunni dialogue occurring when the need for such dialogue is evident? This study identifies and discusses this lack of institutional initiatives designed to prevent violence, manage conflicts and facilitate processes of intra-Muslim de-sectarianization. We discuss what we see as the three seemingly most obvious explanations—(1) the dismissal of the relevance of a Shia–Sunni cleavage, (2) the inappropriateness of the interreligious dialogue concept in the Muslim context, and (3) the substitution of institutional interreligious dialogue by other channels. Although we suggest that the third is the most potent explanation to pursue, we do not aim to provide a comprehensive explanation for the Shia–Sunni religious dialogue deficit. Instead, our aspiration is mainly to present and substantiate a puzzle that has not been identified or discussed in previous research. This can set an agenda for a reinvigorated research endeavor into the contemporary challenges for interreligious peacemaking.

Keywords: interreligious dialogue; interreligious peacemaking; Civil War; organized violence; Sunni; Shia; sectarianism; Middle East; regional power struggle

1. Introduction

Violence and conflicts across the Shia–Sunni divide have increased during the last decades. In fact, a disproportionate share of battle-related deaths falls upon armed conflicts that occur along the Shia–Sunni fault line (Finnbogason et al. 2019). Previous research has demonstrated how the increase of violent identity politics, by political elites and authoritarian leaders in the Middle East, but also in other parts of the wider Muslim world, has reactivated intra-Muslim tensions that had laid dormant (Abdo 2017; Byman 2014; Hinnebusch 2016; Larsson 2016). A well-established scholarly consensus recognizes that tensions between Shia and Sunni communities are not cases of primordial "ancient hatred" but rather that recently, these historical group identities have been instrumentalized by various political actors to maximize political gains and influence (Ahmed 2011; Behuria 2004; Hasheemi and Postel 2017; Nasr 2007; Wehrey 2017). The Shia and Sunni communities can be seen as what Benedict

Anderson labeled "imagined communities," a concept that was originally developed to describe the socio-cultural construction of nationalism (Anderson 2006). In the Middle East, the regional rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has been crucial in fomenting sectarian tensions, as their governments have utilized identity politics as measures to improve dominance and influence in a multi-sectarian region (Salloukh 2017). Moreover, the so-called Islamic State (IS) has carried out a brutal campaign against Shia Muslims across several countries outside the Middle East. Although the Shia–Sunni rift is only one divide in a region plagued by many multi-layered social conflicts (Phillips and Valbjørn 2018), it has risen to become the main identity cleavage in the Middle East: "Today, although there are myriad sects and forms of religious identity in the Middle East, the overarching intra-Islamic Shi'a-Sunni divide is the 'master cleavage' [. . .]" (Sisk 2017, p. 266).

However, relatively little scholarly attention has been paid to contemporary institutional attempts to bridge this divide. We do not wish to add to the vast amount of research on the causes of conflict, but rather focus on their management. Our study builds upon what we identify as the puzzle of the Shia–Sunni interreligious dialogue deficit in contemporary politics. While the UN and other major international organizations have made dialogue, mediation, and peacebuilding efforts in some of the most violent conflicts with a Shia–Sunni dimension, organizations specialized in interreligious dialogue and peacemaking have yet to play a role here. As we will show in this article, although there are some historical examples of dialogue between Sunni and Shia Muslims from the 20th century, these initiatives are no longer active. Thus, we do not know how, and to what extent, interreligious dialogue and peacemaking occur across the Shia–Sunni divide.

A note on the terminology and scope of this study is needed before we proceed. There is no consensus as to what exactly terms such as "interreligious peacemaking," "interreligious dialogue," or "interfaith cooperation" capture. For instance, Cheetham et al. (2013, p. 1) criticize that many authors use the terms "interreligious dialogue" and "interreligious relations" interchangeably, ignoring the fact that they capture different things. The authors view dialogue as one form of relational engagement within the field of interreligious relations. Cornille and Corigliano (2012, p. 1) define interreligious dialogue as a category that implies "the engagement between different religious traditions oriented toward mutual understanding and growth." Accordingly, Cornille (2013, p. xii) distinguishes interreligious dialogue from other forms of interreligious interaction, such as neutral religion studies, or traditional apologetics, as a form of "constructive engagement between religious traditions."

Here, we examine interreligious peacemaking attempts to bridge the Shia–Sunni divide, incorporating but not limiting our attention to interreligious dialogue. Instead, we look more specifically at the institutional perspective: interreligious peacemaking initiatives tailored to conflicts between Shias and Sunnis. Nonetheless, more research is needed to shed light upon existing local strategies to foster dialogue between Shias and Sunnis in violent conflicts.

By exploring intra-Muslim sectarian tensions, peacemaking across the Shia–Sunni divide, and challenges for religious identity politics, our study aims to set an agenda for a reinvigorated research endeavor into the contemporary challenges for interreligious peacemaking and dialogue. As sectarian tensions between Shias and Sunnis can be locally anchored but also transcend existing national boundaries, there is a regional perspective to Shia–Sunni tensions. Besides this dimension, future research should also consider the question of time, i.e., when do conflicts occur and under what conditions are Shia–Sunni divisions utilized, and when do they cease to have a rationale for spurring continued conflicts.

We seek to contribute to the development of a research agenda for how to address the puzzle of the Shia–Sunni peacemaking deficit. After situating the latter against a backdrop of increasing levels of violence that have included a sectarian dimension, this article proceeds by discussing what we consider to be the three most potent potential hypotheses for how this puzzle may be understood. First, we discuss the possibility that Shia–Sunni dialogue does not exist because Shia–Sunni tensions are epiphenomenal and there is, in essence, no Shia–Sunni divide to bridge in the first place. Second, we discuss whether the lack of Shia–Sunni dialogue is simply a reflection of interreligious dialogue,

as such, being a Western, Christian innovation that carries little weight in the Middle East and the wider Muslim world. Third, we discuss the possibility that the apparent lack of Shia–Sunni dialogue can be explained by arguing that dialogue and peacemaking occur through other institutional channels or informally through local actors, for example tribal leaders, village elders, or other local authorities. Of these three explanations, our analysis suggests that the third and last is most promising and warrants further attention. By examining these three hypotheses, we take the historical trajectory of Shia–Sunni "ecumenical" developments into account, as well as the track record of the intergovernmental approaches to conflicts across this divide and how the divide has been shaped by the inter-state rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia and their proxy wars in the Middle East. While this study aims to set a research agenda, by identifying and discussing what we argue to be an under-studied and little noted puzzle of a lack of institutional attempts to engage in interreligious dialogue in Shia–Sunni conflicts, we do not aspire to provide the full answer to solve this puzzle. Our discussion around the potential explanations should be seen as explorative, and the hypotheses are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The exploration of these potential explanations may hopefully enlighten further discussion and pave the way for a closer examination as to why there is so little institutional religious dialogue along the Shia–Sunni dimension, when the need for such dialogue is, as we suggest, evident.

2. Presenting the Puzzle: The Deficit of Shia–Sunni Dialogue

2.1. The Increasing Levels of Violence with Shia–Sunni Dimensions

Before discussing three hypotheses about what could help explain the apparent lack of Shia–Sunni dialogue, it is important to illustrate why we consider such dialogue to be necessary in the first place. Haddad (2014, 2017) has criticized what he describes as an indifferent and inflationary use of the term "sectarianism" in the regional context of the Middle East. In particular, he highlights the common failure to distinguish between the social, political, and religious dimensions that can create tensions between Shia and Sunni communities. Against this background, our study departs from the recognition that violence across the Shia–Sunni divided has increased substantially over time. Finnbogason et al. (2019) provide a conceptual framework of different sectarian dimensions of armed conflicts. Their empirical analysis, which builds upon the Religion and Armed Conflict (RELAC) dataset (Svensson and Nilsson 2018) on the religious dimensions of state-based conflict, as well as the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) on one-sided violence (Eck and Hultman 2007) and non-state conflicts (Sundberg et al. 2012), demonstrates how levels of violence with different Shia–Sunni dimensions have increased over the last two decades. The authors distinguish between three dimensions of Shia–Sunni conflict: an identity-dimension, an alliance dimension, and an ideological (explicitly sectarian) dimension. Since 2014, an increasing number of fatalities has occurred in conflicts that share at least two such Shia–Sunni dimensions, and a notable share of these fatalities occurred in conflicts that shared all three Shia–Sunni dimensions (Finnbogason et al. 2019, p. 45). In other words, armed conflicts with multiple Shia–Sunni conflict dimensions have become increasingly violent in recent years.

In general, although armed conflicts with Shia–Sunni dimensions are relatively rare, if compared to the overall number of armed conflicts, their share of fatalities in organized violence has increased dramatically over the past decade: since 2011, the share of fatalities in organized violence with at least one Shia–Sunni identity dimension, of the total number of all fatalities in organized violence worldwide, lay at least above 40 percent (Finnbogason et al. 2019, p. 42). To a substantial extent, this high share can be explained by the Syrian Civil War, which includes multiple Shia–Sunni dimensions, as well as the growth of the so-called Islamic State and its violent campaign against Shia Muslims in several countries around the globe. Still, organized violence with Shia–Sunni dimensions also occurred elsewhere, for instance between tribal groups in Pakistan, and in the context of the ongoing civil war in Yemen (Finnbogason et al. 2019). Thus, although it should be noted that much of the organized violence with Shia–Sunni dimensions can be traced back to other contentious issues that may be partly

overlapping with sectarian questions, the empirical trajectory of armed conflicts in the Middle East and parts of the wider Muslim world substantiates the claim that the Shia–Sunni divide constitutes a prominent cleavage in contemporary conflicts and that it has become increasingly militarized during the last decade.

Peacebuilding and dialogue are always a challenge in identity-based conflicts that have become militarized (Cox et al. 2017), but they might be even more so if they involve Shia–Sunni dimensions due to a number of complicating factors. The religious dimension to the conflicts transcends state borders, which creates a set of complex interactions between local political dynamics and transnational power relations. The local dynamics typically include the strategic instrumentalization of sectarian identities by authoritarian governments as well as the introduction of majority-based semi-democratic systems. The latter has, in these contexts, often led to ethnic and sectarian-based electoral mobilization, which further intensified ongoing cycles of violence (Sisk 2017, p. 260). In addition, high-level peacebuilding efforts are often undermined by regional powers that compete over strategic influence in the region, most importantly Iran and Saudi Arabia. However, despite the multifold challenges and the complexity of peacebuilding in conflicts with Shia–Sunni dimensions, the literature on identity-based conflicts has suggested several ways in which peacebuilding can work to effectively manage sectarian conflict and enhance social cohesion. Examples of successful peacebuilding efforts in sectarian conflicts include the cases of Northern Ireland, Bosnia, or Sri Lanka (Sisk 2017). As recognized by previous research, the building of peace and social cohesion "requires progress in extending the presence of an inclusive, resilient, and responsive state—especially at the local level" (Sisk 2017, p. 274; see also Cox et al. 2014). In other words, although these conflicts provide particular challenges, their complexity should not by itself explain the lack of peacebuilding initiatives and interreligious dialogue, which we empirically outline in the following section.

2.2. The Low Levels of Institutional Peacemaking Dialogue along the Shia–Sunni Fault Line

If we explore existing databases on interreligious dialogue and peacemaking, we find that the prevalence of organized violence across the Shia–Sunni divide is not reflected in a similar prevalence of institutional attempts for dialogue and peacemaking. The most comprehensive list of international organizations engaged in interreligious dialogue and peacemaking is provided by the King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID) and is called the KAICIID Peace Map. It identifies 463 internationally operating organizations that are specialized in interreligious dialogue and peacemaking (KAICIID 2018). For this study, we have coded the religious communities targeted by the interreligious dialogue initiatives of these organizations, based on the information in the original dataset.[1] Table 1 provides an overview of our coding, displaying the most common interreligious relations addressed by peacemaking organizations listed in the KAICIID Peace Map. As can be seen in Table 1, only eight of these organizations (or 1.7 percent) have Shia–Sunni dialogue as an explicit mandate and/or have had concrete programs aimed at creating dialogue across the Shia–Sunni divide. By far the largest number of organizations addresses relations between Christian and Muslim communities, although still one hundred organizations address Christian–Jewish and Jewish–Muslim relations, respectively. In fact, it is worthwhile to mention that there are many organizations that specialize in relations between all the three Abrahamic religions. This is the case for 70 organizations.

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[1]　Our coding is based on the following variables provided in the original dataset, for every of the 463 organizations: "IRDActivities" (Column Q), "Activities" (S), "Aim" (AB), "IRDdefinition" (AC), "Events" (AD), and "Publications: (AE). We examined whether an organization worked to address a certain form of interreligious relations, for example, Christian–Muslim, Intra–Muslim, Intra-Christian, etc. The Peace Map with our additional coding can be accessed under the link that is listed under Supplementary Materials. The variables that we have coded ourselves can be found in columns AJ to BB.

Table 1. Type of interreligious dialogue promoted by organizations in King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID) Peace Map [1].

Type of Interreligious Dialogue Promoted by Organizations	Number of Organizations	Percentage (of All Organizations)
Christian–Muslim	173	37.4%
Christian–Jewish	100	21.6%
Jewish–Muslim	100	21.6%
Intra-Christian	47	10.2%
Intra-Muslim	11	2.4%
Shia–Sunni	8	1.7%

[1] Organizations covered by the KAICIID Peace Map also focus on interreligious dialogue with other religions, including Animist, Buddhist, Druze, Hindu, or Sikh communities. Still, none of these religions are explicitly targeted by more than nine organizations. Finally, 206 (of a total of 463 organizations contained in the dataset) promote interreligious dialogue on a more general scale, without focusing on the relations between specific religious communities.

With regards to the eight organizations that have addressed Shia–Sunni relations, the degree to which these organizations focus on Shia–Sunni relations varies considerably. For instance, whereas the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, based in Jordan, defines its main goal as advancing dialogue between the seven Islamic schools of jurisprudence, the UNESCO Association for Interreligious Dialogue, and the International Council for Inter-Religious Cooperation adopt a much broader focus, although they have previously organized events and seminars addressing Shia–Sunni relations. The US-based Salam Institute for Peace and Justice primarily promotes dialogue between Muslim and non-Muslim communities, but has, for instance, also organized meetings with religious authorities in Iran to discuss Shia–Sunni relations. Another organization that partially addresses Shia–Sunni relations is the Malaysia-based International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies. The Association for Conflict Transformation (ACT) of the Cordoba Foundation of Geneva (CFG) is particularly active in different parts of the Muslim world and has thus also worked in contexts where it sought to foster dialogue in violent conflicts with a Shia–Sunni dimension. The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), despite promoting dialogue between the different Islamic sects, suffers from several problems, which are discussed to a greater extent in relation to our third hypothesis (Section 3.3). Finally, since the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War, the MENA Council of Religions for Peace (RFP), an international organization created in 1970, has sought to advance dialogue between religious authorities, including Sunni and Shia representatives. It is noteworthy that, apart from the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), none of the eight organizations that are listed in the KAICIID dataset has offices in a country that has both sizeable Shia and Sunni populations.

While we recognize limitations with regards to the comprehensiveness of the KAICIID Peace Map, as it may fail to include *all* such organizations, we see no reason to expect that this would introduce a systematic bias against the information gathered about Shia–Sunni dialogue. We therefore consider the fact that only 1.7 percent of the listed organizations focus specifically on Shia–Sunni relations to be indicative of a general interreligious peacemaking deficit when it comes to addressing Shia–Sunni tensions and violence. We have also consulted two other sources on interreligious peacemaking and dialogue, and both reveal a similar empirical picture. One such source is provided by the Directory of InterFaith and InterReligious Organizations (Guerrand-Hermès Foundation for Peace 2018). It lists a total of 42 additional organizations not covered by the KAICIID list, none of which seems to explicitly address the Shia–Sunni divide. Moreover, in their 2005 report, Bouta et al. (2005) report on a large number of Christian and Muslim faith-based peacebuilding organizations. While providing strong evidence that besides Christian organizations, there is also a substantial number of Muslim peacebuilding organizations (particularly in Africa), only a small share of these organizations specifically focuses on interreligious peacemaking and dialogue, and none seem to specifically address Shia–Sunni relations.

Since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, there has been an increasing prevalence of organized violence and armed conflicts along the Shia–Sunni fault line, which has further escalated over the past

decade (Finnbogason et al. 2019). However, this does not seem to have prompted the creation of new organizations and institutional attempts focusing on Shia–Sunni relations. In fact, only two of the eight organizations mentioned here were founded after 2003—in 2008 and 2009, respectively.

Taken together, the two empirical trajectories that we have identified above present us with a puzzle. In 2017, 44 percent all the world's fatalities in organized violence resulted from conflicts with Shia–Sunni dimensions (Finnbogason et al. 2019). Still, very few institutional mechanisms and organizations have been set up to explicitly address this fault line. This deficit of peacemaking and dialogue has neither been noted nor discussed in previous research, regardless of whether that research focusses on Shia–Sunni sectarianism (or sectarianization) (e.g., Byman 2014; Haddad 2017; Hasheemi and Postel 2017) or rather on interreligious dialogue and religious peacemaking (e.g., Cheetham et al. 2013; Haynes 2007; Smock 2002). In this study, we seek to explore why so few interreligious peacemaking initiatives seem to be targeted at conflicts between Shias and Sunnis, when the need for such dialogue is evident.

3. Potential Explanations

3.1. Hypothesis One: There Is a Lack of Shia–Sunni Interreligious Peacemaking Because There Is No Need for It

A potential explanation of the Shia–Sunni dialogue deficit is that the Shia–Sunni divide is simply epiphenomenal. Behind rhetoric and positioning, there is, from this perspective, no fundamental animosity between the two Muslim communities. Therefore, the lack of dialogue across the Shia–Sunni divide simply reflects that such a dialogue has never been needed. From this perspective, focusing on the Shia–Sunni dimension risks enforcing group stereotypes and misleading any efforts for building security and peace. Dialogue or peacemaking initiatives between Shias and Sunnis are therefore fundamentally unnecessary, and that is why we see so little of it.

While we acknowledge that this hypothesis may carry some explanatory weight, it needs to be qualified. Over long time periods and in many different regions of the wider Middle Eastern world, Shias and Sunnis have lived peacefully with each other, intermarriages have not been uncommon, and the social cohesion and collaboration between the communities have been strong and robust. Periods of hostilities have been followed by periods of peaceful coexistence, when the Shia–Sunni divide has been superposed by other, more pressing urgencies. Also, as pointed out at the start of this article, there is close to a scholarly consensus that ethnic and religious identities in general, including the Shia–Sunni identity divide, cannot by themselves explain conflict and lack of peacemaking, thus providing little support for the "ancient hatred" theory (a point made, for instance, by (Salloukh 2017; Sayigh 2017). Instead, conflicts with Shia–Sunni dimensions are, in most cases, the result of identity politics, where authoritarian leaders cynically exploit sectarian differences for their own political aims (Lynch 2013).

Still, even if Shia–Sunni polarization may not be the root cause of conflicts in the Middle East and other parts of the wider Muslim world, it has certainly been a consequence. The levels of violence between actors that mobilized at least partly along Shia and Sunni identity cleavages in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Afghanistan, and Pakistan have contributed to increased sectarian tensions between Shia and Sunni communities. Surveys following the Arab Spring (conducted between November 2011 and May 2012) found that a substantial proportion of people in the Middle East themselves were aware of problems related to sectarian tensions. For example, in Lebanon, two-thirds of Muslims perceived sectarian tensions as a big or moderately big problem. This share lay at approximately 50 percent among Iraqi Muslims, more than 40 percent in Afghanistan, and close to 25 percent in Iran (Pew Forum 2013).

Surveys have also found a substantial part of Sunnis to not recognize Shias as fellow Muslims. The most comprehensive study of this was published by the Pew Forum in 2012 ("The World's Muslims: Unity and Diversity"). It involved 38,000 face-to-face interviews in 39 countries with Muslim populations, finding strong evidence for sectarian tensions, although with significant geographical variations. Muslims in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region appeared to be most aware of the distinction between Sunni and Shia. In most surveyed countries (five out of seven) in this region, at least 40 percent of Sunnis reported to not accept Shias as fellow Muslims, and in many cases,

an even greater percentage reported that some Shia practices, such as visiting sacred shrines, were unacceptable as parts of an Islamic tradition. In Egypt and Morocco, the dominant view was of Shias not being Muslims, while opinion was closely divided on the issue in Tunisia, Jordan, and Palestine. Whereas Shias were not viewed as Muslims to a substantial extent in several Sunni majority countries, Sunnis were rarely considered as *not* being Muslims in any of the surveyed countries. Only in Iraq and Lebanon—both countries with sizeable Shia populations—did large majorities of Sunnis accept Shias as fellow Muslims, as well as their distinctive practices. These findings can be interpreted as indications that if Sunnis and Shias live together, mutual recognition as Muslims is more likely. On the other hand, outside of the MENA region, the distinction between Shias and Sunnis seemed much less relevant for Muslims. In many Central Asian countries, most Muslims did not even self-identify as Sunni, but rather reported to be "just a Muslim." Similar patterns were observed for Southern and Eastern Europe, as well as Indonesia (Pew Forum 2012).

Due to constraints on data availability, it is not possible to provide a comprehensive answer as to whether sectarian tensions have increased over time. However, it is possible to get a snapshot at this question.[2] In its Wave IV survey (2016–2017), the Arab Barometer asked respondents about their feelings toward certain groups, including Shias and Sunnis (question 834). This survey was conducted in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, and Tunisia. Thus, unfortunately, no data are available from the two countries with the highest levels of violence with Shia–Sunni dimensions, Syria and Iraq. Still, some important findings can be drawn. The responses indicate that Sunni Muslims in Northern African countries, as well as in Palestine, tend to hold negative feelings toward Shia Muslims. In the four surveyed Northern African countries, the number of self-identifying Sunni respondents per country ranges from 908 in Tunisia to 1146 in Egypt, 1189 in Morocco, and 3300 in Algeria.[3] At least 62 percent of the (Sunni) Muslim respondents in each country reported to be at least "somewhat angry" towards Shia Muslims. Moreover, the percentages of people reporting to feel "very angry" is also substantial. In all these five countries, the number of respondents feeling "very angry" toward Shia Muslims was larger than the number of those reporting to feel "somewhat angry." In Egypt, this share was the highest, with 58 percent of the respondents feeling "very angry" toward Shia Muslims. In Lebanon, the country with the highest share of Shia Muslims in the population, there seems to be much less antagonism, both from Sunnis toward Shias and vice versa, which could lend support to arguments based on intergroup contact theory (Arab Barometer 2018). The Pew Forum and Arab Barometer surveys are the most reliable data sources available that provide information on attitudes between Shia and Sunni Muslims on a cross-country level. In this study, we do not primarily seek to explain these attitudes but instead wish to make use of them to illustrate that decades of sectarian violence and instrumentalization by authoritarian politicians seem to also have contributed to skeptical, if not hostile, attitudes among members of these sects, at least in some countries.

Thus, even if the Shia–Sunni divide may not be a root cause of contemporary organized violence and armed conflicts in the Middle East and other parts of the wider Muslim world, the sectarian dimension has been activated throughout different countries and regions. In fact, it has grown to become the master cleavage in today's Middle Eastern politics, and it also plays an important role in other parts of the wider Muslim world, including countries such as Afghanistan (Seerat 2017), India (Sharma 2016), Nigeria (Sunday 2019), or Pakistan (Rathore 2017). We conclude from this that there is a real need for institutional responses in form of interreligious dialogue and peacemaking across the Shia–Sunni divide.

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[2]   Polls with comparable questions have not been asked systematically over time. For example, in versions prior to Wave IV, the Arab Barometer did not ask specifically about respondents' attitudes toward Shia or Sunni Muslims. The Wave IV survey is the first study where this was addressed.

[3]   In the case of Egypt, the survey only contains the answer options of "Muslim" or "Christian."

3.2. Hypothesis Two: There Is a Lack of Shia–Sunni Interreligious Peacemaking Because Interreligious Dialogue Is a "Western" Phenomenon

Previous research has described the history of the concept of interreligious dialogue and the interfaith movement (Braybrooke 1998; Forward 2001; Halafoff 2013; Marshall 2013; Swidler 2013). Its origins are predominantly Christian and rooted in Western societies: the changing focus in Christianity from proselytization toward a greater emphasis on interreligious dialogue that occurred in the second half of the 20th century is highlighted by different authors as a key driver for the growth of interreligious dialogue (Cheetham et al. 2013; Moyaert 2013). A potential explanation for the lack of Shia–Sunni dialogue is therefore that interreligious dialogue is alien to the Muslim traditions, cultures, and contexts.

The first glance at the empirical record yields a mixed picture. On the one hand, the KAICIID dataset provides information on the religious affiliation of 202 international organizations engaged in interreligious dialogue and peacemaking.[4] Whereas 133 organizations are linked to a branch of Christianity, only 29 organizations are reported as having a Muslim affiliation, 28 to Judaism, 12 to Buddhism, and six to Hinduism. Eight organizations are listed as secular. These numbers support the notion of interreligious dialogue being a phenomenon predominantly rooted in non-Muslim societies. In line with this finding, Bouta et al. (2005) argue that it is difficult to identify Muslim peacebuilding organizations, which they assume to be explained by a lack of institutionalization: peacebuilding is mostly done by individual actors, such as imams or sheikhs, and often in a rather informal manner. Still, the authors note that "one should not conclude from this that there are hardly any Muslim-based peace-building activities" (Bouta et al. 2005, p. x). Their study further identifies and discusses 14 Muslim faith-based peacebuilding organizations, most of which are not covered by the KAICIID Peace Map, which further underlines that these organizations do exist, although they might be less common than their Christian counterparts. Thus, institutional interreligious dialogue and peacemaking are not alien to the Muslim context.

Moreover, there is an important historical trajectory of "ecumenical" efforts within Islam. Even though it is easy to portray the relationship between Sunni and Shia Muslims as a history of conflicts and tensions, it is also necessary to pay attention to individual and organizational efforts to promote understanding and rapprochement. Indeed, some theologians have worked hard to promote understanding, cohesion and brotherhood among all Muslims, despite the many differences when it comes to dogmata or rituals. Instead of addressing or paying close attention to historical discords (e.g., who should be the proper leader of Muslims after the death of the Prophet Muhammad) and disputes over how to understand and apply Islam, these theologians have stressed that all Muslims should be bound together by the fact that they are Muslims.

As pointed out by Ende (2018a, 2018b) and Brunner (2004, 2011), it was primarily the development of the pan-Islamism ideology (e.g., in organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood) and the rise of Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918–1970) to power in Egypt in 1952 that provided a window of opportunity for theologians that wanted to promote a theological program that stressed that all Muslims should be seen as equal. This was, however, not an initiative that aimed to neglect existing differences, but to put focus on unity rather than conflicts and splits. Moreover, already prior to this, during the 18th century in India, ecumenical attempts had been made by the Muslim ruler Nadir Shah. Since then, several individual Muslim thinkers have tried to promote similar ideas in other places. Yet, these initiatives primarily depended on isolated individuals or the mercy of local rulers that saw rapprochement as a pragmatic tool that could be used for political purposes. When the Al-Azhar University in Cairo started the society *Jamaat al-takrib bayn al-madhahib al-Islamiyya* ("Association for the rapprochement of the Islamic Schools of law") in 1947, the situation changed. From this point in time, there was a society

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4　　No information is available on the religious affiliation of the remaining 261 organizations. This is mostly because these are international organizations not rooted in any of the world's major religions.

that included both Sunni and Shia Muslims with a common ambition to work toward reconciliation between the different branches of Islam. Among its supporters and followers, we find the rector of the Al-Azhar, Mahmud Shaltut (d. 1963), who issued a fatwa in 1959 that declared the Twelver Shias to be valid and that the legal school of this tradition (i.e., the so-called *Jafarite* school) should be recognized.

Even though the initiatives above were important—not least among the political and religious establishment—they never became fully accepted or popular among the common population. The ideas of the so-called *dar al-taqrib* were therefore supported only where they could be exploited by the political establishment for promoting anticolonial sentiments and fostering unity among the Muslims in the Middle East. Moreover, the ambition to unite all Muslims was already threatened from the start by the rise of the new nation states of the Middle East (i.e., after the end of colonialism), the cold war and the rise of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia that saw Shia Islam as a danger to "pure" Islam (Polka 2013, p. 422). With the Iranian revolution in 1979 and the declaration of the theocratic state of Iran—based on Twelver Shiism—the institutional attempt to promote unity and reconciliation between Sunni and Shia Muslims experienced a serious setback. The revolution sparked a general fear among Sunni Muslims and many Arab leaders feared that Shia Islam and the revolution could be exported to other countries of the Middle East. Since the 1960s and the weakening of the *dar al-taqrib* in Cairo, there have been some Iranian attempts to establish equivalent organizations, which remained unsuccessful outside a very small Shia Muslim minority.

Those who argue that rapprochement is the way forward have often stressed that it is the enemies of Islam that gain from the division and split that exists among Sunni and Shia Muslims. In the 1940s, the external enemy was colonial power, whereas today, the enemy is often seen in the state of Israel. For instance, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a prominent Egyptian Islamic theologian (b. 1926), has argued that the Sunni animosity against Hezbollah should be put aside as long as Israel provides a common enemy. In 2003, by employing a similar line of reasoning, he tried to stop the blood bath between Sunni and Shia Muslims in Iraq, which had been unleashed by the US-invasion of the country: in this case, it was the external enemies—i.e., the invading troops of the United States, Al-Qaeda, etc.—that exploited the internal conflicts for their own interests. From this point of view, it is easy to employ the same argument when it comes to the conflicts that followed the uprisings in Syria. The Syrian Civil War, too, is a conflict with external enemies, in which key actors exploit divisions and old tensions within the population of the country. Theologians who call for rapprochement, unity, and a focus on theological and political questions are aware of the split and unwanted discord that is caused by those who work to enforce sectarian divisions. Today, however, there are few theologians or organizations that employ Islamic ecumenism to reach rapprochement between Sunni and Shia Muslims as a higher goal. Still, as the historical overview above has demonstrated, it is not alien to Muslim theological development or core faith institutions. The deficit of institutional intra-Muslim dialogue along the Shia–Sunni cleavage can therefore not be explained by depicting interreligious dialogue as a purely "Western" phenomenon.

3.3. Hypothesis Three: There Is a Lack of Shia–Sunni Interreligious Peacemaking Because Peacemaking Occurs through Other Channels

We started this analysis by showing that only less than two percent (1.7 percent) of the world's interreligious peacemaking organizations have had an explicit Shia–Sunni focus, according to the KAICIID Peace Map. One explanation for this may be that such dialogue occurs through inter-governmental international organizations, such as the United Nations (UN), or internal, informal, processes within states affected by Shia–Sunni conflict.[5] This hypothesis is also plausible if we consult earlier research on Sunni and Shia Muslim relations (e.g., (Brunner 2004). According to this research, there is a lack of organizations that would have the capacity or trust to engage in a serious dialogue in

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[5]   The KAICIID Peace Map also includes smaller, specialized UN agencies, for example the UNESCO Chair in Interreligious and Intercultural Relations or the UNESCO Chair in Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue for South-East Europe.

conflicts between Sunni and Shia Muslim actors or communities. Attempts are often made by individual Muslim theologians or by one side in a conflict, but there is a lack of well-organized ecumenical organizations that hold the trust and capacity to engage in peacebuilding, dialogue, or negotiations.

Indeed, there has been an extensive engagement of the UN, not least through mediation and involvement in Shia–Sunni conflicts in Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, or Afghanistan. However, the high degree of UN engagement also reflects a lack of regional capacities to manage these violent conflicts. Thus, there have been few internal institutional responses from the countries and societies themselves. Instead, "because of the low level of institutionalization across the sectarian divide in the region (i.e., across the Saudi–Iranian divide) the UN is by default called on to monitor and mediate peace agreements" (Sisk 2017, p. 272).

It is further important to recognize the failure of the major regional organizations, the OIC, GCC, and Arab League, to bridge the Shia–Sunni divide. With 57 member states, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)—until 2011 known as "Organization of Islamic Conference"—is the world's second largest international organization, after the UN, formally representing more than 1.5 billion Muslims around the world. In 2006, OIC Secretary General Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu reached out to Sunni and Shia leaders in Iraq and invited both sides to a reconciliation meeting that resulted in the signing of the Mecca Declaration on 20 October 2006. The OIC's involvement was received largely positive by the international community and contributed to alleviate Shia–Sunni tensions in many parts of the country. The OIC has also been involved in the process leading to the Djibouti Agreement in the Somali conflict in 2008 and supported dialogue processes between the government of Thailand and the Muslim minority and between the government of the Philippines and the MNLF rebels. More recently, however, criticism against the organization has been on the rise, specifically due to its internal divide. First, the double and triple membership of many member states in organizations that perform similar work, such as the African Union or the Arab League, bears the risk of duplicating mediation efforts by different actors and institutions. Second, the OIC Secretary General's authority to initiate mediation in conflicts depends on the political will from member states (Sharqieh 2012, pp. 230–31). Related to this is a third challenge that concerns rivaling strategic interests among OIC member states, especially regarding Saudi Arabia and Iran. The relationship between the two states evolved from a regional rivalry into increased hostility after the fall of the Pahlavi dynasty in Iran in 1979 and the subsequent war between Iran and Iraq, which saw significant support for Saddam Hussein's Iraqi government from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states (Keynoush 2016). Eventually, the First Gulf War (1990–1991) marked the beginning of an increased US engagement in the region, which, due to the US alliance with Saudi Arabia, contributed to renewed resistance and countering strategies by Iran (Mason 2014, p. 24). Already nearly two decades ago, Haynes (2001, p. 154) identified these states as "the chief rivals for superiority in the OIC (. . .)" who "used some of their oil wealth to try aggressively to expand international influence," a situation that has hardly improved since. More recently, it was in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings in 2011 that the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia escalated and became increasingly influential for the political dynamics in the region (Mabon 2015). Thus, if their interests diverge on a specific conflict, Iran and Saudi Arabia tend to prioritize their own strategic interests over those of the OIC. Moreover, they also influence the behavior of allied states, thereby complicating any mediation effort even further. Given the conflicting interests of some of its key member states, the OIC's capacity to play a mediating role in Shia–Sunni conflicts is further hindered by its organizational set-up that requires consensus among member states for major decisions to be taken (Sharqieh 2012, pp. 230–31).

Another major organization that could potentially act as a peacemaker in violent conflicts across the Shia–Sunni fault line is the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Established in 1981, the alliance has six member states: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. It promotes cooperation on economic, security, cultural, and social affairs. Similar to the OIC, since the beginning of the Arab Spring in 2011, the GCC has experienced a process of internal fragmentation that has been largely attributed to differing security interests of its members (Al Jazeera 2017; Lenderking et al. 2017).

By summer 2017, a split between GCC members Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (plus non-GCC member Egypt) on the one side, and Qatar on the other side, became evident. Qatar was accused of colluding with Iran and Iran-backed militias, as well as funding terrorist organizations in the region. This crisis reflected a deep fragmentation within the GCC and also in the wider Middle East. Kuwait and Oman refused to align with the anti-Qatar bloc, with the Emir of Kuwait offering mediation among the parties. The ethnically diverse composition of Kuwait (30 percent Shia citizens) made the government particularly weary of the risks of sectarian conflict in the region (Bianco and Stansfield 2018, pp. 614–17). Kuwait's mediation efforts, however, remained unsuccessful, to a large extent due to the refusal of the Saudi-led bloc to participate in the talks (Bakeer 2017). The distinctive socioeconomic and sociopolitical traits of the GCC members, despite sharing strong historical and cultural bonds, are currently diverging rather than converging. As long as this development of internal fractionalization of the GCC persists, it appears unlikely that the organization will be able to act as a unitary actor in a mediating function (Bianco and Stansfield 2018, p. 634).

A third major regional international organization is the Arab League, which for a long time was known for its principle of noninterference in international conflict. Between 1945 and 2008, it had only mediated in five of 22 civil wars in the Middle East. However, with the beginning of the Arab Spring, the organization seemed to be taking a more active stance, as it supported a no-fly zone over Libya and suspended the country's membership, as well as that of Syria later during that same year. Yet, like the GCC, the Arab League has suffered from the increased regional polarization that has unfolded since the Arab Spring. Supporters of the uprisings, such as Tunisia, have had contrasting interests to defenders of the status quo, such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Another source of conflict has been the Muslim Brotherhood, sponsored by Qatar but labelled as a terrorist organization by Saudi Arabia and Egypt. The member states' relations with the Iranian regime are complicating things further, since the Arab League is comprised of both Iranian allies, such as Lebanon and Iraq, and adversaries, most importantly Saudi Arabia. The organization also lacks a charter that would enable it to take binding and enforceable resolutions in relation to its member states, but the political will of its member states to take the necessary reforms is currently missing (Bröning 2014; Worrall 2017).

The UN-dominated peacemaking has led to a situation where interreligious dialogue has not been at the center of attention. Indeed, a common critique against traditional diplomatic approaches is precisely that such engagement tends to avoid a deeper engagement with religiously anchored dimensions of conflicts. It has been suggested that Western governments often lack openness and sophistication in their interactions with religious institutions in countries experiencing religious conflict (Smock 2006, p. 1). A similar criticism is voiced by Marshall, who criticizes that religion has remained largely absent from the core disciplines of international relations, in both academic and practitioner-focused debates, as well as in large parts of civil society. In this context, Marshall identifies "a broad religious 'illiteracy' within policy communities," including a lack of professional frameworks to address religious questions (Marshall 2013, p. 2).

However, there have been traditional, less institutionally developed approaches to interreligious peacemaking that have been utilized to address the Shia–Sunni violence in the region. For example, it has been shown that tribal law and traditional conflict resolution mechanisms have been widely utilized in Iraq following the sectarian violence and have helped to bring about reconciliation between communities (Carroll 2011). It is plausible that the deficit in institutional interreligious Shia–Sunni peacemaking reflects the occurrence of such peacemaking practices through less formal channels, including traditional and tribal mechanisms, in line with what was argued by Bouta et al. (2005). The extent to which this is the case remains to be explored, but it could potentially be an explanation for why we see so little institutional Shia–Sunni religious dialogue. Recent research shows that top-down appeals can be conducive for cross-sectarian cooperation across the Shia–Sunni identity cleavage (Chang and Peisakhin 2019).

4. Avenues for Future Research

This study has tried to identify and establish the puzzling empirical phenomenon of the Shia–Sunni interreligious dialogue deficit. This may encourage future research to devote greater attention to the lack of institutional Shia–Sunni dialogue initiatives, which is surprising against the backdrop of the escalation of organized violence that has occurred along the intra-Muslim sectarian divide. Organized violence between Shia and Sunni Muslims represents one of our most pressing security challenges: over the last few years, almost half of all fatalities in organized violence in the world occurred along the Shia–Sunni rift. In this context, special attention should be paid to state-based armed conflicts, that is, conflicts that involve at least one government of a state as a conflict party. Between 1989 and 2017, approximately 90 percent of all fatalities in conflicts with Shia–Sunni dimensions occurred in conflicts that involved state-level actors (Finnbogason et al. 2019, p. 43). Research needs to understand why there are so few institutional attempts to bridge this divide.

Of the three explanations we have discussed in this study, the third one appears most promising for future research to pursue. In particular, what is needed are studies that help clarify how institutional attempts, primarily by the UN as well as informal attempts at the lower societal levels, can bridge the Shia–Sunni divide. In this context, we wish to highlight that the second and third hypothesis in this study are not mutually exclusive: we have illustrated local, less institutionalized instances of Shia–Sunni dialogue that have occurred, for example the initiative by al-Qaradawi in Iraq after the escalation of sectarian violence in 2003. Such cases of Shia–Sunni dialogue do in fact indicate, with respect to our second hypothesis, that interreligious dialogue is not necessarily a Western phenomenon, and with regards to our third hypothesis, that it may occur through other channels. Still, more research is needed to systematically assess to what extent such local initiatives are taking place in non-Western countries affected by Shia–Sunni violence. Future research should also examine the conditions under which interreligious dialogue is successful in creating processes of de-sectarianization and how religious actors, leaders, communities, and organizational resources can be incentivized to create effective channels for dialogue and for the reduction of tensions.

The variations in group relationships need to be explained, not by extrapolating medieval-based historical animosities, but through modern political processes that involve the political elites. There are good reasons to believe that theological differences have been used for promoting discord between groups and individuals in both past and present (e.g., (Bengio and Litvak 2011; Maréchal and Zemni 2013). In some cases, the rhetoric use of a religious vocabulary has been employed for harassing and whipping up aggression against the religious "other." The latest wars in Syria and Iraq, but also the Iranian revolution in 1979 and the following Iran–Iraq wars, are illustrative cases. Political elites with authoritarian agendas and aspirations, in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria, have had self-interests to construct and maintain antagonistic sectarian identities and have acted in ways to fane sectarian violence. Moreover, Western governments fueled these dynamics by providing strategical support for sectarian regimes, on the one hand, and by military interventions that dramatically increased sectarian violence, such as the 2003 United States-led invasion in Iraq, on the other hand. Countries with significant Shia or Sunni minorities in which sectarian identities have been politicized suffer from unfulfilled state-building processes and a lack of social cohesion. Together with the Iran–Saudi Arabia rivalry, this has contributed decisively to sectarian violence as well as to a lack of dialogue.

We have shown in this study that while the rise in organized violence with Shia–Sunni dimensions can be explained by certain specific developments—in particular, the critical junctures of the United States-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the Arab Spring in 2011—the lack of dialogue is driven by other processes. The 2003 invasion of Iraq and subsequent turmoil in the country provided fertile soil for the growth of IS and its conflict with the government of Nouri al-Maliki. IS was able to draw on the resentment in Sunni communities toward the increasingly sectarian policies of al-Maliki's government, which favored Iraq's Shia majority population. The Arab Spring in 2011, on the other hand, provided

the backdrop for the civil war in Syria that would come to have repercussions for the entire region, not the least by providing IS with an opportunity to spring back to life and reignite sectarian violence.

Clearly, in some of the contexts experiencing violence with Shia–Sunni dimensions, the space for interreligious dialogue and peacemaking is extremely small, especially where conflicts involve Al-Qaeda- or IS-linked groups. In some conflicts, the targeting of the community of the religious "other" is part of the rationale for the conflict. For example, radical Sunni groups target Shias due to (at least partly) theological reasons. For successful interreligious peacemaking to take place, the involved actors must acknowledge that there is room for growth in their understanding of the truth, as well as to acknowledge that their religion is somewhat interconnected with the religious "other." Moreover, "hospitality" is required, which means that actors recognize actual truth, at least to some extent, in another religion, and that they view it as possible to include this into their own religion (Cornille 2013, p. 28).

We leave it to future research to examine the conditions under which interreligious peacemaking and dialogue can be effective. Previous research shows that faith-based mediation and religious peacemaking are most frequently utilized when the conflict issues are not defined in religious terms and when the religious identity can serve as a bridge between the antagonist parties (Johnstone and Svensson 2013). Moreover, previous research points toward the importance of religious communities: they represent key actors in religious conflicts, whose networks should be used by peacemakers to foster dialogue (Smock 2006). They can also play an important role due to their moral authority, which allows them to gain the trust of people who may live under corrupt and repressive regimes, as well as their direct access to the population, due to their long-term involvement in grassroots work in conflict settings (Halafoff 2013, p. 268). On the other hand, if international peacemakers decide to collaborate with certain religious organizations or actors, in the absence of functioning state institutions, there is a risk of reinforcing existing feelings among the population of clientelism and ethnic or faith-based service delivery. In other words, by focusing too narrowly on religious identity in peacebuilding, those identities may be inadvertently further inscribed, thereby exacerbating tensions (Cox et al. 2014, p. 2). Interreligious peacemaking may be more likely to be successful, where it is linked to secular and political processes and authorities (Smock 2006, p. 36).

The deficit of Shia–Sunni interreligious dialogue can be partly understood as a function of an undersupply of vibrant and free civil society organizations, and potentially a reflection of a wider democracy deficit in the Middle East and other parts of the wider Muslim world. The latter has been the subject of a long, still ongoing academic debate about Middle Eastern or Muslim exceptionalism, after several authors characterized political developments in these countries as exceptional, unusual, or unique (Bellin 2004; Borooah and Paldam 2007; Stepan and Robertson 2003). Some authors linked these developments to Islam itself (Huntington 1996; Lakoff 2004; Rowley and Smith 2009). Especially after the Arab Spring, but also earlier (Sørli et al. 2005), this notion of Muslim exceptionalism has evoked increasing criticism by authors who have instead highlighted the importance of political and colonial history (Hariri 2015), ethnolinguistic factors (Mabry 2015), or gender (el-Husseini 2016) to understand what is often perceived as a democratic deficit in the Middle East and the Muslim World. Others have pointed out how actors in Muslim democracies in fact often use Islamic concepts to contribute to democratization (Kubicek 2015). The existence of a civil society that transcends religious or ethnic cleavages is an important explanation for the capacity of societies to maintain civil peace, particularly in light of external provocations and turmoil (Varshney 2002). Organizations that can clarify misunderstandings and kill rumors help to work against negative stereotypes and prejudices, threat perceptions, and hostile attitudes. Resilience and social cohesion are lacking in the Middle East due to a colonial past and unfinished state-formation processes, weak state institutions, or lack of independence of, and space for, the civil society. To sufficiently address this issue lies beyond the scope of this article. Still, it would be worthwhile to examine whether the Shia–Sunni communities in the diaspora, some of which are living in societies with stronger institutional frameworks allowing for more civil agency, may in fact be more engaged in such dialogue. In a more general sense, future

research can help to shed light upon factors that explain the occurrence (or absence of) interreligious dialogue in conflicts with Shia–Sunni dimensions.

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