



**Issue:** Ensuring the peace between middle-east religions

**Forum:** Peacebuilding Committee

**Position:** President

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## Introduction

Religion has been dominating the Middle East politics for years, therefore most of the conflicts in the Middle East revolve around religion. There are many religious minorities in the Middle East; Jews, Syriacs, Assyrians, Armenians, Yazidis but there are also the big communities of Sunnis and Shias. The religions are interpreted differently and have played an important role in Middle Eastern politics. This can be seen with Iran trying to gain financial, political and military influence through religion. By doing so, they create sectarian militias and expand their authority in the Arab regions. These aims have significantly increased violence around the Middle East. Political elites utilize religion to gain control over wealth and political influence.

One of the most notable conflicts is the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict and the Sunni-Shia division. Special Coordinator Nickolay Mladenov stated that there was a perfect opportunity for foreign intervention and manipulation in the Middle East, especially with the situation of Palestine. He stated that “The complexities of the region’s conflicts means that political solutions based on justice, dignity and social cohesion are required to achieve peace and sustain peace”.

Both conflicts concern the three Abrahamic Religions. They all share cultural and spiritual elements and there has always been a conflict between these religions in the Middle East. For the Sunni-Shia division, the two sides share the characteristics of violence and intolerance. The Arab-Israeli conflict lies between the Jews and Palestinians and is regarding land and living conditions between the two religious groups.



## Definition of Key Terms

### Abrahamic religions

The Abrahamic religions are the group of religious communities that claim that their ancestries originate from Judaism. The religions are monotheistic and the religions with the largest amount of adherent are Islam, Christianity, and Judaism.

### Sunni

Sunni Islam is the biggest denomination of Islam which is about 90% of Muslims worldwide. According to the Sunnis, prophet Muhammad did not designate a successor and making his father-in-law Abu Bakr the first caliph.

### Shia

Shia is a part of a branch of Islam which entails the Ali ibn Abi Talib to be Muhammad's successor. The distinction between Sunni and Shia Muslims emerged from the succession to Muhammad.

### Hamas

Hamas is a Palestinian Sunni-Islamist fundamentalist organization. Some groups call Hamas a terrorist organization. They refuse to recognize Israel as a state and they have been the de facto governing authority of Gaza since 2007.

### Intifada

There were two intifadas, one in the late 1980s and the other in the early 2000s, which were rebellions against Israel. They had a big effect on Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

### Sectarianism

Sectarianism is a form of discrimination caused by very strong support for a religious or political group. This may create conflict with other groups.

### Wahhabism



Wahhabism is an Islamic doctrine and movement by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. It is a very conservative and fundamentalist doctrine.

## General Overview

### Israeli-Palestinian conflict

As the world's only Jewish state, Israel lies east of the Mediterranean Sea. The Arab population who are located on the lands of Israel, want to establish their own state and the territory they are situated is referred to as Palestine. The conflict is regarding land and the control over it. The ongoing conflict began in the early 20th century. Jews escaping Europe desired to establish their own state in an Arab and Muslim dominated area which were the lands of the Ottoman Empire and the British Empire. Nonetheless, there was a conflict with the Arabs as they believed that the lands were theirs. As the United Nations early tried to split the land, this failed and the Arabs and Israelis fought multiple wars. After the 1948 war, the land was divided into three parts: the State of Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip. The borders that are drawn at the moment are left from the 1967 war, where Israel gained control over the West Bank and Gaza Strip. These were Palestinian dominated territories.

After the wars on territory ended, an uprising amongst Palestinians began. The first intifada was in 1987 undermining thousands of Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza. In 1993 the Oslo Accords arbitrated the conflict by establishing a framework for the Palestinians to govern themselves. In 2000, the second intifada contained many more deaths than the first one. And in 2015, the Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas stated that Palestine would no longer follow the Oslo Accords.

The United States of America tried to restore the peace process in 2013 in the West Bank, but the peace talks were interrupted by Fatah, the Palestinian Authority's ruling party when they created a unity government with Hamas in 2014.

The West Bank is currently controlled by Palestinian Authority, however, it is still under Israeli occupation. The Israeli troops enforce the security of Israelis by restricting Palestinian activities and promoting settlement into the West-Bank to enlarge Israeli communities in the West Bank. Gaza, on the other

hand, is controlled by Hamas. Israel left Gaza in 2005 when Hamas won. However, they are still under Israeli blockade which allows the Israelis to control borders.



*Land division from 1947 to the present day*

In the summer of 2014, problems regarding Palestinian territories provoked conflict between the Israeli military and Hamas. Hamas fired around 3000 rockets at Israel and as a response Israel attacked Gaza. This conflict ended in August of 2014 with a cease-fire by Egypt. 73 Israelis and 2,251 Palestinians were killed during the conflict.

There are some concerns regarding a third intifada due to the renewed tensions in the region. And the United States remains interested in protecting their ally Israel through establishing a deal between the two parties. During the whole conflict, millions of Palestinians have been displaced and have been forced to live under difficult circumstances whilst thousands have been killed.

### Sunni-Shia conflict

Another conflict that has been ongoing in the Middle East and has divided Muslim countries is the struggle between Sunni and Shia forces. This conflict has led to the aggravation of the Syrian civil war, provoked violence in Iraq, and caused tension in Gulf countries. The developing sectarianism has spurred transnational jihadi networks. The two countries that are the leading



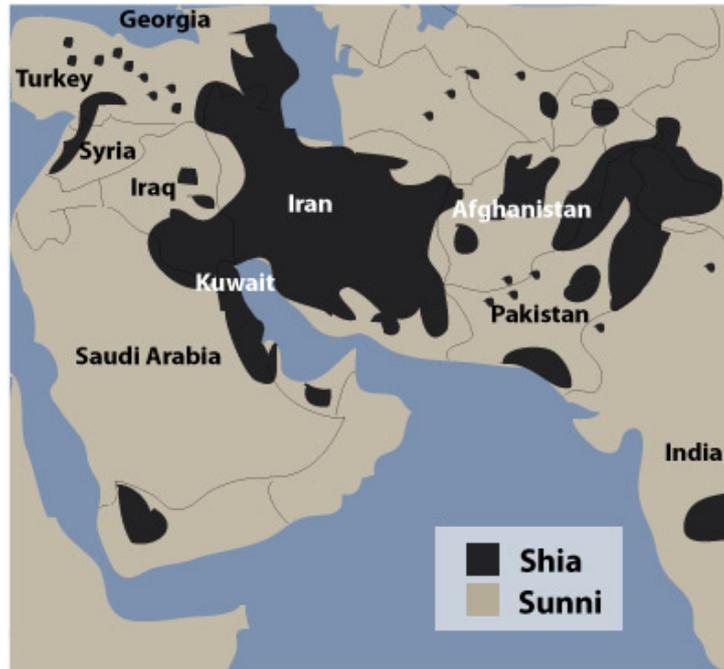
subjects of this conflict are Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shia Iran. The conflict determines the structure of the political balance in the Middle East between Sunnis and Shias, most importantly, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain, and Yemen. It is almost certain that Islam's divide will create more violence and grow the threat to international peace and security.

Sunni and Shia Muslims have lived together for centuries and they share faith in the Quran and the Prophet Muhammad's sayings and sometimes perform alike prayers. Nonetheless, they have different rituals and have a different meaning of Islamic law.

The Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979 allowed Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to execute his ideas for an Islamic state that is ruled by the “guardianship of the jurist” (velayat-e faqih). This concept has been opposed by Sunnis who have a different view on political leadership and religious scholarship. With Khomeini's regime, Iran began their Islamic rule. Khomeini tried to stimulate further Islamic awakening through proclaiming Muslim unity. He supported groups from Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, Bahrain, and Pakistan. Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas were Sunni Islamist groups that admired Khomeini's success yet they refused his leadership.

Saudi Arabia has a Shia minority of 10 percent of the population and has millions of followers of Wahhabism which is antagonistic to Shia Islam. After the Islamic Revolution in Iran, Saudi Arabia accelerated the propagation of Wahhabism. In the 1980-1988 war between Iraq and Iran, Saudi Arabia backed Iraq and financed militants in Pakistan and Afghanistan in order to fight against the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union was suppressing Shia movements provoked by Iran.

Most Arab countries empathized with the Shia uprising in Iran whilst not much attention was given to the uprising in Bahrain. Although Iran supported the uprisings in Bahrain, this also provoked the Assad regime in Syria to suppress the civilian uprising in Syria.



*The Sunni and Shia allies*

## Major Parties Involved

### United States of America

The Donald J. Trump administration has been trying to deal with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict especially since Israel is one of their priority allies. Trump decided to move the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem hereby getting positive remarks from Israeli leadership but the actions have been condemned by Palestinian, other Middle Eastern and European leaders. These decisions have caused Israel to be confronted by not only Palestinians and Arabs in the region but also other Muslims. The United States has been allied with Sunni elites with great political authority, however, they have mostly tended to counter the Sunni population in both the pre and post 9/11 era.

### Egypt

In 1979, Egypt signed a peace treaty with Israel, in the White House, ending the conflict that has lasted for more than 3 decades. The treaty established commercial and diplomatic ties between the two neighboring countries.

### Syria

Syria has major religious conflicts within itself. As the civil war continues various religious groups have used this war as an opportunity to seize land resulting in religious conflicts. Regarding the Israeli conflict, Syria also wants



the Golan Heights, a military competent area which was seized by Israel during the 1967 war with Syria.

### Lebanon

The anti-Israel Shia Islamist group Hezbollah is located in Lebanon and is funded by Iran. Hezbollah is a great force in the politics of Lebanon.

### Jordan

Another neighbor of Israel, Jordan, has a peace treaty with Israel. It is a refuge place with the largest number of Palestinian refugees. Palestinians have full citizenship rights in Jordan, nonetheless, the camps are not well conditioned and are overcrowded.

### Iran

Iran is a state where 90% of the population is Shia. Therefore, Iran plays a great role in the Sunni-Shia conflict. On the other hand, the government supports the most extreme anti-Israeli Arab groups. In Israel's eyes, Iran is a direct threat as they give financial support to Hezbollah, Hamas, and Syria ("Axis of Resistance")

### Turkey

Turkey has been on good terms with Israel, however, the government has been becoming more pro-Palestinian recently. The president Recep Tayyip Erdogan has supported the Palestinian side for ideological, domestic, and geopolitical purposes. The relationship between Israel and Turkey has been fragile since the conflict on Gaza flotilla.

### Saudi Arabia

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is the impulse behind an Arab League peace plan and they give hundreds of millions of dollars to the Palestinian Authority. Saudi Arabia still does not recognize Israel as a state but, the mutual conflict



towards Iran has caused for a diplomatic relationship between Saudi Arabia and Israel.

## Timeline of Key Events

<b>Date</b>	<b>Description of events</b>
1920-1922	Both Shiite and Sunni, revolt against British control of Iraq
15 May 1948 – 10 March 1949	The first Arab-Israeli war (Israeli War of Independence)
5–10 June 1967	The Six-Day War
26 March 1979	The Egypt–Israel Peace Treaty
22 September 1980 – 20 August 1988	The Iran–Iraq War
5 July 1980	Shias protest in Islamabad against the imposition of some Sunni laws on all Muslims. Sunni groups such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and Sipah-e-Sahaba, funded by Wahhabi clerics in Saudi Arabia, kill Shias throughout three decades
1982	Israel invades Lebanon, seizes Beirut, and Hezbollah is formed in Lebanon.
1983	Suicide truck bombers, believed to be Hezbollah, kill 241 American servicemen in Beirut.
8 December 1987 – 13 September 1993	The First Intifada



28 February 1991	Shiites of southern Iraq rebel against Saddam, and thousands of Shiites are killed.
1993	The Oslo I Accord, signed in Washington, D.C. by the Government of Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)
7 January 1978 – 11 February 1979	The Iranian Revolution
8 August 1998	Taliban militants kills at least two thousand Shias in Mazar-e-Sharif and Bamiyan in 1997 and 1998.
28 September 2000 – 8 February 2005	The Second Intifada
2001	Al-Qaida, led by Sunni Muslim fundamentalists, organize attacks in the United States, killing 3,000 people. The United States invades Afghanistan and ousts the Sunni Taliban government.
8 April 2013	The Islamic State of Iraq extends into Syria, creating the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).
20 June 2014	ISIS militants and other armed Sunni groups seize Mosul. They expand toward Baghdad and the borders with Syria and Jordan.
3 January 2016	Saudi Arabia cuts diplomatic relations with Iran. Saudi Arabia executed Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, a Shia cleric who had led anti-government protests in the country. Iranian protesters storm the Saudi embassy in Tehran



	and a consulate in Mashhad.
16 January 2016	The UN nuclear watchdog verifies that Iran has carried out the first steps for restricting its nuclear program as agreed to in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action the previous summer.

### Previous attempts to resolve the issue

- 1950 December 14: Resolution 394 (V): Calls for Arab-Israeli peace negotiations, and a solution for Palestinian refugees.
- 1970 November 4: Resolution 2628: Urges the speedy implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 242 and recognizes that "respect for the rights of the Palestinians is an indisputable element in the establishment of a just and lasting peace in the Middle East"
- 1978 February 14: E/CN.4/RES/2(XXXIV): The right of the Palestinian people to self-determination - CHR resolution
- 2004 April 13: HR/CN/1082 Press release: commission adopts resolutions on combating defamation of religions; right to development
- 2009 January 8: S/RES/1860: This resolution called for an immediate, durable and fully respected ceasefire leading to the full withdrawal of Israeli forces from Gaza
- 2013 October 28: SC/11161 Press release: Security Council Advocates Greater Ties with Organization of Islamic Cooperation to Resolve Conflict in the Middle East, Other Strife-Torn Regions



## Possible Solutions

Regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, there are two mainstream solutions; the “two-state solution” or the “one-state solution”. The “two-state solution” allows independence for both Israel and Palestine. Both Israelis and Palestinians are able to run their own country. Since both parties want their own way of ruling; the Israelis want a Jewish state, and the Palestinians a Palestinian, the division of the states would allow for satisfaction of both parties.

The “one-state solution” would combine the lands of Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza strip into one country. This has two sides to it. As the Palestinians would want a single democratic state, the Arab Muslims population will exceed the Jews, resulting in the collapse of Israel as a Jewish state. The other side is supported by Israelis which involves the annexation of the West Bank and denying voting rights of Palestinians or the annexation of the West Bank and denying voting rights or the displacement of Palestinians. Almost everyone rejects this possibility as it violates human rights.

To solve the conflict of the Middle East, it must be stressed out that looking through a Western lens is highly problematic.

As seen in Oman, a mediator in a conflict must be non-threatening, unbiased and trusted by both parties. Understanding the division between the Sunnis and Shias is vital in order to distill political solutions that will promote sustainable peace.



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