
Islam as a Tool in The Politics of Middle East

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ABSTRACT

This paper traces the significant role of Islam in the political dynamics of the Middle East from its advent to the present day. Originating in Medina, Islam rapidly expanded beyond the Arabian Peninsula, influencing and reshaping the religious and political landscape of neighboring regions, including Syria, Palestine, Yemen, Iraq, and the Persian Empire. The study outlines the historical evolution of Islam's political influence, highlighting the early conquests and the establishment of Islamic governance across diverse territories. Central focus is placed on the enduring sectarian divide between Sunni Shiite Muslims which began in the era of Hazrat Ali and Ameer Muavia. This schism led to the crises in middle east and shaped the region's political landscape. The sectarian divide fueled ongoing rivalries, proxy wars, and struggles for regional dominance. The paper argues that Islam has been consistently practiced as a political tool, during Middle East crises, to support their political agendas. Overall, the research highlights Islam's continuous and active role in the politics of Middle East, underscoring its influence on both historical and contemporary geopolitical development.

Keywords: Politics, Islam, Middle east, Palestine, Iraq, Yemen, Iran, Arabia, Shiite, Sunni, conflict, crises, sectarian divide

Introduction

This paper centers the active role of Islam in the politics of Middle East since its birth. The birthplace of Islam is Medina, situated in the current day Saudi Arabia. Before the advent of Islam, there was no specific religion of Arabia. Paganism was the order of the day, but few Christians also lived in the current day Najran province of Saudi Arabia. Similarly, in the neighboring states, mostly Christianity was practiced. The ruler of Yemen -

Najashi- was Christian. Similarly in Syria, most of the people practiced Christianity. In the Persian Empire, the religion practiced was Zoroastrian. After the birth of Islam, the religion expanded from Medina to the whole Hejaz and then it started conquering the neighboring states of that time. Syria, Palestine, Yemen, Iraq, and finally the great Persian Empire were subdued. From that day onwards, Islam has been playing an active role in those states. The great sectarian divide among the Muslims which started between Ali and Muavia, devastated the region in the coming times. Muslims split into two major sects, the Sunni and the Shiite groups. This division is the main driver behind politics in the Middle East even today. The contest for regional hegemony and all proxy wars in Middle East are the direct outcome of this divide in the religion of Islam. Every party use Islam as a political tool and interpret the Holy Book according to their versions. In a nutshell, Islam has been playing an active role in the politics of Middle East since its birth in Arabia.

1. The politics in Middle East before the advent of Islam

Before the advent of Islam Persia, Egypt, Syria and Yemen were the most important countries in the politics of Middle East while Saudi Arabia has not much important role. The passive role of Saudi Arabia in the politics of Middle East before the advent of Islam was because there was no structure of the government neither king was there. Feudal lords and tribe system was there (Lewis, 1995). While regionally, the most important region in the Middle East was Hejaz. Which was composed of three major areas: Makkah, Madina and Taif? Due to the most important holy place of Muslims – Kabbah- it was considered as the hub of economic and political activities but the people of Hijaz have no relations with other civilization (i.e.: Mesopotamia and Persia) (Esposito, 1999). Unlike Yemen (which lies on the border of Saudi Arabia) and Iran were also the part of Middle East and they have relations with the outside world. Syria which was the part of Roman Empire also has connections with external world and civilizations. Persia herself was the great empire and have big political role in the world affairs of that time. Egypt was the most important country at that time because it was the oldest civilization in the world. Hence, Persia, Syria, Egypt, and Yemen were the politically active countries of the Middle East and Saudi Arabia was confine to feudal and tribal system.

2. The great Persian empire

The great Persian Empire lies about Arabia; it was very vast empire before Islam. In this empire there was Sassanid dynasty, and they were ruling Persian Empire for hundreds of years. It was the most important and powerful empire of its time. This empire has great political importance as well as military powers. Religion of the great Persian Empire was

Zoroastrian. The people of this empire were the rivals of Roman Empire (Boyce, 2001). They have strong relations with Arabia as Arabia has no king, so they have superiority over them. The people of this empire were very strong and have great role in the trade of that time. Furthermore, the prominent features of great Persian Empire like political role, military role, religious role and long-lasting ruling of Sassanid dynasty kept Islam active in the Middle East. Concluding the argument, it can be said that due to the subduing of the great Persian Empire Islam remains politically active in the Middle East.

3. The Birth of Islam and a new political life

The birth of Islam gives birth to new political life in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia which was least active before Islam became the center of new political system with the birth of Islam. Before the advent of Islam there was no governmental or centralized structure in the Arabia (Anderson, 1991). At that time tribes were there, people collectively, select an elder from the tribe who will handle all the issue but that was the most democratic society in the world because everyone was treated equally, and they called their king as Malik. But when Islam came, it formed a central authority. First Islamic empire was made in Madina –a centralize kind of government- Prophet (S.A.W) became the caliph (Naazer, 2018, pp 29-41). This Islamic empire has its own cabinet of Suhaba R. A. They form a political structure and invoice. They started diplomatic missions and economic activities. They founded institution for the warfare, and social welfare system.by the birth of Islam New alliances was being made by the Prophet (S.A.W) with different tribes of Saudi Arabia. Different political treaties get started. All the above are the prominent features of Islamic political system which highlight the political role of Islam in the Middle East. In a nutshell, the birth of Islam gives rise to a new political life in the Middle East.

4. Arabia conquered herself

Arabia conquered herself: as its name indicates that the people of Arabia stand out and conquered Arabia. As we know that before the advent of Islam there was no proper government or centralized system in Saudi Arabia to handle all the ongoing activities. But since Islam came with new political system, in the leadership of Prophet (S.A.W) till the death of Prophet (S.A.W) they i.e.632 they captured most of the Saudi Arabia – from madina to tabok-. Tabok was the last endeavor of Muhammad (S.A.W). He also wrote letters to different empires of the states. Many of them have accepted Islam i.e. Najashi. Then from 632 to 634 is the duration of Hazrat Abu Bakar (R.A). He spread Islam and fights for this cause in Yemen. From 634 to 644 is the long duration of Hazrat Umar (R.A) in which twenty-five lack square mile land is captured, Syria and Iran conquered, Persia got

expeditions (Syed, et al, 2001). Even in the reign of Hazrat Umar (R.A) people came to the coast of Makran. The reign of Hazrat Usman (R.A) started from 644 and end in 656 (Yar, 1990). Here in this regime of Hazrat Usman (R.A) total Saudi Arabia was conquered by the Islamic leaders, introducing a new political order in the Middle East. So, the people of Arabia themselves conquered Arabia and give rise to a new political system in the Middle East.

5. Muslims invasion of Persia

For the rise of Islam, Muslims conquered all Arabia and established Islamic political system throughout the Arab. But it was not enough, and they started conquering non-Arab lands as well. Persia was invaded in the reign of Hazrat Umar Farooq (r.a) subdue by saad bin abi waqas (r.a) (İsmail, 2016). The ruler of Persia was Rustam; saad bin abi waqas captured Persia from him. Invasion of Persia is important for multiple reasons in the history of Islam because it was the first non-Arab land which was conquered by Muslims. Similarly, it was an oldest civilization. It was the strongest empire of the time and by subduing it, Muslims proved their military might and worth. In the same way, it opened a gate way to the Central Asia and other regions in the future. In this way Islam was spreading in the non-Arab states as well and hence it covered almost all Middle East.

6. The great Sectarian Divide among Muslims in the Middle East

The people of Arabia who conquered non-Arab states did not give them the value as they deserve. They called non-Arabs as Ajams and aliens. The sectarian division in the Middle East started from the regime of Hazrat Ali and Ameer Muavia (Ostovar, 2016). The followers of Hazrat Ali r.a made the Shiite group and the followers of Ameer Muavia called themselves as Sunnis. In Islam we have two major sects Shiite and Sunni. Middle East is divided into these two major sects. Saudi Arab, Syria, Egypt, Oman has the majority of Sunnis population, and they are allied of Saudi Arabia. Iran has Syria in its borders and has Shiite government (Bashar al Asad is Shiite regime) Lebanon and Yemen have Shiite Sunni mix population. Due to different sects in a single state the politics of Middle East is on the basis of sectarian division and not in the interest of single state. For example, the Shiite group of Syria should support their state, but they are serving the interest of Iran on the basis of their Shiite sect. same the Houthi rebels of Yemen, are fighting as proxy for Iran (Salisbury, 2015). That is why there is great sectarian divide in the Middle East and that sectarian divide is the main driver of the political system of Middle East. Hence it is concluded that the

sectarian divide among Muslims has great effects on the political system of Islam in the Middle East.

7. The active role of Islam in the Middle East

Islam plays an important role in the politics of the Middle East. If we look at the politics of west in the history, they did not indulge religion in politics. On the other hand, middle, east countries' politics are completely based on Islam (Byman, 2014, pp 79-100). For example, if we took the example of Saudi Arabia, the sitting monarchy there gives examples from Islam. Similarly, the democratic states of the Middle East also give examples from Islam. Furthermore, they solve their internal conflicts based on Islam. Like, as the sectarian divide among Muslims. Every group in the Middle East has a different point of view about Islam and they interpret Islam according to their interests and formulate their political system in the light of Islam. Hence, we can conclude that due to the wide spread of Islam in the Middle East, religion has a great role in its political system, and it remains active throughout history.

a. The conflict between Saudi Arab and Iran

There are certain reasons behind the conflict between Saudi and Iran. Firstly they both wanted regional hegemony that I should be the sole sovereign in the region and no superior body should exist (Grumet, 2015) . Both Iran and Saudi Arabia have same point of view. Secondly, they both wanted to be the leaders of Muslims. Iran claims that I should have the leading role for Muslims while Saudi Arabia also has the same sentiment. The third conflict between them is the sectarian divide. And the fourth conflict between them is the international alliances. Saudi Arabia is allied with the United States of America while Iran is tilted toward Russia and China. So, both the state have the same religion and Islam but have different roads to follow which give rise to different conflicts between them, and they both solve it by taking support of Islam. That's the reason behind the active political role of Islam in the Middle East. Whenever the states of the Middle East have any issue or conflict, they figure out the consideration of Islam. Hence, the consciousness of Muslims in their religion of Islam kept Islam politically active in the Middle East.

b. The proxy war in Syria

The dispute between Iran and Saudi Arabia is being fought from the third place that is Syria. They fight from 3rd Neutral Avenue. Syria has most of its population Sunni, but the government is of a minority Shia and due to this, Sunni rebels against the government of Bashar al Asad in 2011 (Bhalla, 2011). That rebellion was backed by Saudi Arabia because the Saudi Arabia sect is Sunni, and the rebellion group of Syria was also Sunni. Because of

the factor of sectarian divide Iran came in front to save the government of Bashar al Asad. Furthermore, international alliances also take part in the proxy war in Syria (Rauta, 2021, pp 1-24). The international allies of Saudi Arabia are the United States of America; they also came to support Saudi Arabia in the fight. United States of America indirectly support the Sunni sect and work against the Shia government. On the other hand, the international alliance of Iran- Russia- also came in the support of the Iran's government. Through this chain of sectarian divide and international alliances, the proxy war took place in Syria. The religion of both countries Iran and Saudi Arabia is Islam and fighting their disputes based on sects and involving the international alliances lead to the Great War among Muslims. We can summarize that due to the proxy war in Syria Islam remains active in the Middle East.

c. The Yemen theatre

Yemen lies about Saudi Arabia. It is a very old country that existed before Islam. Najashi who was a Christian was the king of Yemen. The society of Yemen was tribal. Tribes always have conflicts regarding power-sharing. Abdullah Salih makes government in Yemen who was the first and longest unified Yemen, and the 2nd was Abdul Rabah Mansoor Hadi. Badrudeen Houthi – belongs to Shia sect- contested Abdullah Salah's government. Abdullah Salih government was backed by Saudi Arabia while Houthi rebels were backed by Iran (Zweiri, 2016, pp 4-18). Again, sectarian divide became the bone of contention. Abdullah Salih died in the fight with Badrudeen Houthi. Saudi Arabia at the request of the Yemen government intervened in the fight and bombard Houthi rebels. Gulf cooperation was also involved in this shelling on Houthi rebels. Iran came to help Houthi rebels. In a nutshell, the sectarian divide among Muslims created conflicts between states keep the political system of Islam active in the Middle East.

d. The Iraq conflict and the role of religion

Iraq has the majority of Shia population, but it was ruled for the last thirty to forty-year by Sunnis. The sectarian divide was there in Iraq. In 2003, when the United States of America attacked Iraq, Saddam Hussein was executed he was a Sunni (Bassil, 2012, pp 29-47). After the death of Saddam Hussein Shia government was formed in Iraq and that government was headed by Noori al Maliki (Benraad, 2014). Terrorist organizations (like Al Qaida) came out and form a government against the established government. They form the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria known as Daesh. As they were against the government based on the sectarian divide, they fight against the government. In this scenario, the same sects' groups supported each other instead of state support. Saudi Arabia and other Sunni states support the opposition in Iraq while Iran which was the Shia populated state supports

the Iraq government. In a nutshell, the conflict in Iraq was strongly influenced by religion.

e. Active role of Islam in Palestinian issue

The Palestinian issue is religious. Palestinians are Muslims and Israelis are Jews. When the first intifada started, they kicked out Palestinians from their places and hence Arab Israel war took place, and religion plays its role in the conflict. In 1967 Arab Israel 2nd war took place, which was a war of bloodshed where Arab was defeated (Schulze, 2013). After that, they make the OIC Organization of Islamic Conference gather Arab states. The Arab states of the Middle East, Egypt Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, United Arab Emirate, Qatar, and Iran, all gather on the issue of Palestine and get involved in the conflict just because of the religion Islam. In contrast due to the Abraham accord United Arab Emirate, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Bahrain turned back from their promises and established formal relations with Israel but due to Islamic factors, the public opinion is still in favor of Palestine (Dazi, 2020). Here again, Islam is playing its role in the Middle East. All the Middle East states are combined for the cause of the Palestine issue purely based on religion Islam. This is the very big conflict for years that unite the whole Arab states. It has political impacts on the states of the Middle East due to which Islam remains active in the Middle East.

f. The use of Islam for making international alliances regional alliances

In Middle Eastern countries, Saudi Arabia has always used Islam for making international alliances. They always exploit Islam and used it for their vested interest. When the jihad against Russia started in Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia started propaganda in favor of America that Americans are the people of the book while the people of Russia are atheists, non-religious, communist, having no faith in Allah (Hoodbhoy, 2005, pp 15-30). Therefore, we should join the party with the United States of America. In short, Saudi Arabia has used Islam for its international alliances. As of now the tilt of Iran is toward Russia and China while the tilt of Saudi Arabia is toward America. Hence Saudi Arabia now convincing their friend to join the party of the United States of America and Iran is also compelling its friends to join hands with Russia.

In the light of the above discussion, it is clear that both Saudi and Iran are using Islam as a tool for making their international alliances with the superpowers. Islam has always been used as a political tool in the region for vested interests and to gain national interest. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran are the two major actors in Middle Eastern politics. They use Islam as a political tool to secure alliances in the region. Saudi Arabia has used Islam

to secure the alliance of Egypt, United Arab Emirate, Bahrain, and Lebanon (Bill, 1984, p.108). Similarly, Iran has used Islam as a political tool to get the alliances of Syria, Oman Yemen, and Qatar. These different roads taken by Saudi Arabia and Iran in the Middle East have great impacts on the political system of the Middle East which indirectly keep Islam active in the Middle East.

8. The future of Middle Eastern politics and the role of Islam

The politics of the Middle East has been continuing for the last fourteen hundred years. It has many different conflicts like sectarian divide, Arabia conquered, Persia conquered, etc. in the future Iran and Saudi Arabia will have fight for regional hegemony and they will use Islam as a political tool (Chen, 2017). Secondly, they will use a sectarian divide for their interest. For example, Iran which is a Shia-populated country will attract Shia and Saudi Arabia will attract Sunni to its circle. They will use the concept of Shia and Sunni to attract people from different states and in this way again they will use Islam as a political tool in the politics of the Middle East. Third important point is that the international actors have a big role in the politics of the Middle East. International actors are china Russia and the United States of America. Middle Eastern states are resource-rich states. Iran is the world's third-biggest oil producer country.

Similarly, Saudi Arabia is the world's largest oil producer state. The same is the case with other countries in the middle east they have some natural resources i.e gas, oil, coal, etc. that's why international always want to make their place in the middle east, international actors will collect their supporters in the middle east (Anderson, 2014). America will attract Saudi Arabia to play role in the politics of the Middle East and Russia and China will join hands with Iran for political stability in the Middle East. Then automatically their allies will come in their baskets. The other two important things in the politics of the Middle East are the: maximization of powers and acquisition of weapons. Saudi Arabia has signed a deal of three hundred and 10 billion US dollars in reign of Trump. It has a large variety of weapons, missiles, airplanes, etc. Iran is also trying to get weapons from international actors like Russia and China. But they are also working for the weapons of their country. They also try to make an indigenous weapon in Iran.

For that purpose, they want to use nuclear technology, to abolish the nuclear weapon strategy Iran. America has introduced a program P5+1 deal (Katzman, 2016). It was stated that we will give you incentives and will put off sanctions from you. This deal was made by President Obama and was scrap by President Trump. Then Iran started preparing for the making of the atom bomb. United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia have a high threat from

Iran. To overcome this threat, United Arab Emirates Bahrain and Egypt signed the Abraham accord with Israel. Just to encounter Iran Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Bahrain smooth their relationship with Isreal. Here again, these middle east states will use Islam that the United States of America are people of the book while Russia has no religion and by this way, they will cash Islam in their politics. Concluding, Islam was active in the political system of the Middle East and will be active in the future politics of the Middle East as well.

9. Conclusion

It is concluded that Islam has played a very important and active role in the politics of the Middle East. With its birth, it first conquered the neighboring states and started playing its role. Then it conquered the great Persian Empire. The rivalry between Arabia and the Persians still exists. The most important role played by the sectarian divide (Gause, 2014, pp 1-27). Today, Sunnis have their own block while Shiites have their own block in Middle East. The main actors of the Middle East are Saudi Arabia and Iran and both the rival states are contesting for regional hegemony. Both states are using Islam as a political tool. Similarly, all the proxy wars in the Middle East for instance in Syria, Yemen and Iraq are sectarian in nature and Islam is used a tool for political purposes (Kausch, 2017, pp 36-47). Moreover, Islam is used to forge regional and international alliances. In future, it can be predicted that the sectarian identity would be used to make and break alliances. The fight would further intensify to secure their own territories and national interest. Islam would play the key role in the politics of Middle East. It would be active from the shores of Bab-al-Mandab to the steep mountains of Lebanon and to the borders of Iran.

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