

## **Saudi-Iran Rivalry: Impacts on Sectarian Uprising in Pakistan**

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### **Abstract**

Sectarianism, a persistent issue in Pakistan, has been significantly influenced by Saudi-Iran geopolitical rivalry. This external involvement has led to sectarian tensions across three conflict-prone regions like Quetta, Parachinar, and Gilgit-Baltistan. This research analyzes the impact of the Saudi-Iran rivalry on sectarian uprisings in Pakistan, with an emphasis on these identified regions. The study explores post-1979 Iranian Revolution period, a turning point that has exacerbated the Saudi-Iran rivalry. While previous studies greatly discuss its geopolitical implications, the current analysis highlights its impacts on regional sectarian conflicts in Pakistan. The research employs two theoretical frameworks (proxy warfare theory and identity politics theory) to examine how sectarian identities have been utilized for regional and strategic gains. A qualitative research design has been used that combines historical analysis with a comparative case study approach. The study has been conducted by examining both primary and secondary sources like academic literature, policy reports, news articles, and expert analysis. This research shows that both internal factors and external struggles, especially Saudi-Iran rivalry, have affected sectarian divisions in Pakistan. The findings of the study can assist policymakers in developing strategies to reduce sectarian violence and bring long-term peace and stability in the affected regions of Pakistan.

**Key Words:** Saudi, Iran, Rivalry, Sectarianism, Pakistan, Identity-Politics.

### **1. Introduction**

The sectarian division between Shia and Sunni Muslims has been regarded as the most complex issue in the Muslim world. This sectarian divide has often been used by state and non-state actors, as a political tool to assert their influence and establish dominance at global level (Oraby, 2018). The most prominent players include Saudi Arabia and Iran, two regional powers that have utilized sectarian identity as an instrument to fulfill their ideological and geopolitical aims (Chen, 2017). Sectarianism has been a major source of violent sectarian clashes and instability in Pakistan. Although there are religious differences, it is primarily a geopolitical

rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, that has escalated the sectarian issue in Pakistan (Azal et al., 2012).

Saudi Arabia, a Sunni-majority country, is influenced by Wahhabi ideology, while Iran, a Shia-majority country, is influenced by the Shia political ideology. These two regional powers have fueled proxy warfare in Pakistan by providing financial, ideological, and military support to their respective Shia and Sunni groups, reflecting proxy warfare (Ghazali & Hussain, 2021). However, in recent years, Saudi Arabia has shifted its approach under the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS). He has reduced the power of religious scholars, restricted the export of Wahhabism, and cut off official funding to extremist and sectarian groups (Ismail, 2023). Despite these changes, some private religious groups in Saudi Arabia still finance the sectarian networks. Simultaneously, Iran openly funds various Shia (political and religious) groups throughout the region, including Pakistan (Ghasemi & Nasehi, 2019). In addition, through identity politics, the sectarian identities in Pakistan have been weaponized by both local and external actors in pursuit of their political ambitions (Iqbal, 2020). Ultimately, it led to sectarian violence across sensitive regions of Pakistan like Quetta, Parachinar, and Gilgit-Baltistan.

This study analyzes the geopolitical implications of the Saudi-Iran rivalry and how it has promoted sectarian fragmentation within the Muslim world. It specifically explores the impacts of the rivalry on sectarian uprisings in Pakistan, especially on Quetta, Parachinar, and Gilgit-Baltistan. The research further examines how the foreign actors have affected the existing local tensions and exploited local vulnerabilities to advance their strategic interests.

## 2. Literature Review

Sectarianism has been shaped by both the internal dynamics and the Saudi-Iran geopolitical rivalry in Pakistan. The Iranian revolution of 1979 has intensified the sectarian tensions in Pakistan, where the external forces have promoted their sectarian ideologies. The existing studies have greatly focused on the widespread implications of Saudi-Iran rivalry for Pakistan. However, they have failed to deeply analyze its regional impact on Quetta, Parachinar, and Gilgit-Baltistan. The purpose of the research is to fill this gap by conducting the comparative analysis of its impact on sectarian uprisings in these regions. This literature review has focused on two main themes.

This first theme examines the historical and ideological causes of the Saudi-Iran rivalry. Manan & Taran (2020), in “*The Sunni-Shia Conflict in the History of Islam: An Analytical Descriptive Study*”, discuss that the early Shia-Sunni split occurred because of their disagreement over the leadership which was then later institutionalized in 16<sup>th</sup> century Ottoman-Safavid conflict. Similarly, Iqbal (2020), in “*Sunni-Shia Division in Islam: Its Origin, Development, Political and Socio-Economic Implications & Contemporary Relations*”, argues that sectarianism has been politically driven and used as a strategic tool for power consolidation. Chen (2017), in “*Saudi Arabia and Iran: Sectarianism, a Quest for Regional Hegemony, and International Alignments*”, and Gul, Abbasi, and Haider (2021), in “*Iran and Saudi Arabia’s Strategic Rivalry and the Middle Eastern Security*”, both discuss that the Saudi Arabia and Iran have manipulated religious narratives for their aim of regional hegemony. Moreover, Ghasemi and Nasehi (2019), in “*The Competition*

*between Iran and Saudi Arabia: Internal factors*”, found out how the internal political dynamics have affected the conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Lastly, Tzemprin, Jozic and Lambare (2015), in *“The Middle East Cold War: Iran-Saudi Arabia and the Way Ahead”*, explore that sectarianism has been utilized as a tool in Saudi-Iran rivalry to secure broader geopolitical interests.

The second theme examines the impacts of Saudi-Iran rivalry on sectarian uprisings in Pakistan, specifically on regions under study. Yasmeen & Umar (2021), in *“Religious Extremism and Sectarianism in Pakistan”*, point out that the internal vulnerabilities of Pakistan have created a fertile ground for external intervention. Similarly, Ahmar (2007), in *“Sectarian Conflicts in Pakistan”*, argue that the Zia-ul-Haq’s Islamization policies led to sectarian polarization, which empowered Sunni Muslims and marginalized the Shia community. Additionally, Faheem, Hussain & Xingang (2021) in *“Sectarian War in the Middle East: Iran, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and an Unending War for Regional Hegemony”*, and Afzal, Iqbal, and Inayat (2012), in *“Sectarianism and Its Implications for Pakistan Security: Policy Recommendations Using Exploratory Study”*, indicate sectarianism as a national security threat motivated by local tensions and the external power struggles. Moreover, Kubra and Zhen (2022), in *“Impact of the Saudi-Iran Rivalry”*, explore that Saudi Arabia and Iran have promoted proxy warfare in Pakistan by supporting anti-sectarian groups. This geopolitical rivalry has deeply shaped sectarian tensions in Quetta, Parachinar, and Gilgit-Baltistan. In Quetta, both Muhammad et al. (2024), in *“Sectarian Violence in Quetta Using the Theory of Othering”*, and Majeed (2021) in *“A Historical Account of Sectarianism in Pakistan and Persecution of the Shia Hazara Community”*, investigate how social marginalization, militarization and external involvement have fueled sectarian violence against the Shia Hazara community. In Parachinar, Zahab (2009), in *“Unholy Nexus: Talibanism and Sectarianism in Pakistan’s Tribal Areas”*, explores that the foreign funding by the Saudi Arabia and Iran has transformed local issue into a geopolitical conflict. In Gilgit-Baltistan, Ali & Hussain (2023), in *“Sectarianism in Gilgit-Baltistan: An Analytical Study”*, and Abbas (2024), in *“Nexus of Non-Traditional Security Threats and Conflict Vulnerability of Gilgit-Baltistan’s Societal Sector to Sectarianism”*, point out that external forces have escalated sectarian violence and disrupted peace and stability of Gilgit-Baltistan.

Collectively these sources illustrate, though sectarian tensions are rooted in historical, local, and ethnic grievances, they have created a conducive environment for external powers to intervene, ultimately intensifying sectarian violence in Quetta, Parachinar, and Gilgit-Baltistan.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

This research employs two critical ideological perspectives to explain the sectarian uprising in Pakistan: proxy warfare theory and identity politics theory. The proxy warfare theory explains that powerful states compete without direct engagement by supporting the third-party state or non-state actors for regional dominance (Mumford, 2013). It is useful in exploring Saudi-Iran rivalry, that has turned Pakistan into theater for its ideological enmity. They have promoted proxy warfare in Pakistan, by supporting anti-sectarian groups financially, ideologically, and militarily to secure their geopolitical interests (Ghazali & Hussain, 2021). As a result, sectarian violence has been increased across sensitive regions of Pakistan like Quetta, Parachinar, and Gilgit-Baltistan. On the other hand, identity politics theory

is related to the internal dynamics of sectarianism. It argues that religious and sectarian identities are not the main reasons, but socially built and mobilized by political actors for power consolidation (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). In Pakistan, both local and external actors (Saudi Arabia and Iran) have shaped the sectarian identities to gain influence (Chen, 2017). Through this approach, sectarianism has been used as political tool rather than just a religious divide. Together, these frameworks offer a multi-dimensional analysis of both external involvement and internal identity-based mobilization.

#### **4. Research Methodology**

The research adopts a qualitative research approach to examine the impacts of Saudi-Iran rivalry on sectarian uprisings in Pakistan. It combines the comparative and the case study approaches. The case study approach analyzes its impacts on Quetta, Parachinar, and Gilgit-Baltistan, while the comparative approach examines the similarities and differences in sectarian violence across these regions. Data has been collected from different primary and secondary sources such as research articles, policy papers, news articles, academic books, journals, and reports of international organizations. The study has informed through various theoretical perspectives and centered around two main themes, such as the historical and ideological roots of Saudi-Iran rivalry and its regional implications for Pakistan. This approach allows an important understanding of how external conflicts affect local sectarian dynamics.

#### **5. Saudi-Iran Rivalry**

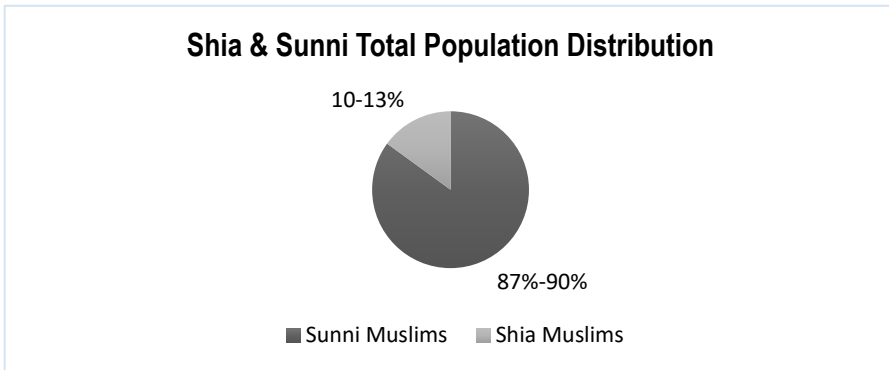
The Saudi-Iran rivalry is considered the most significant and long-term conflict in Middle East. Although linked to the Shia-Sunni divide, it has occurred primarily due to political, ideological, and strategic factors rather than mere religious differences (Iqbal, 2020). Many scholars view sectarianism as political and strategic tool. As Oraby (2018) highlights, “theological conflict was not a cause but a tool of political maneuvering” in shaping sectarian conflict. This reflects the identity politics, where sectarian identities are shaped by external powers for power consolidation (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Iqbal, 2020). Saudi Arabia, a Sunni monarchy under the Al Saud family, has been influenced by Wahhabi ideology, which seeks to maintain its global leadership in Muslim world. On the other hand, Iran, a Shia Theocratic republic under Supreme Leader, has been guided by the principles of 1979 Islamic Revolution, which aims for Shia dominance. These contrasting ideologies and political systems have fueled competition between them for regional dominance (Ghasemi & Nasehi, 2019). It led to several proxy wars in the Middle Eastern countries such as in Syria, Yemen, Lebanon and even extends to Afghanistan and Pakistan. It has resulted in regional instability and sectarian division within the Muslim world. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran have supported the local actors financially, ideologically, and militarily to serve their broader geopolitical interests (Mumford, 2013; Kubra & Zhen, 2022).

#### **6. Historical Genesis of the Sectarian Divide**

The Saudi-Iran rivalry has been deeply motivated by the theological divide between Sunni and Shia, which emerged after the death of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Over the time, both parties have politicized these religious differences to expand influence within the Muslim world. (Eltally, 2019; Manan and Taran, 2020).

It laid the foundation of two distinct factions: Sunni (from Sunnah, meaning tradition) and Shia (from Shiat, meaning party or group of Ali). Shia and Sunni are the two major sects of Islam. Although both sects share core Islamic beliefs, they primarily differ regarding leadership. Sunni Muslims make up most of the world globally, constituting about 87-90% of Muslims, while Shia Muslims are 10-13% of the total Muslim population (Iqbal, 2020). **Figure 1** illustrates the distribution of Shia and Sunni Muslims at the global level based on data from Iqbal (2020).

**Figure 1:** *Global Distribution of Shia and Sunni Muslims*



*Note.* Author's own creation based on data from Iqbal (2020).

This distribution varies regionally, with Shia Muslims mostly living in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon and Sunni Muslims in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. This uneven distribution allows Saudi Arabia and Iran to intervene in the sectarian imbalanced countries to support their ideological groups. **Table 1** outlines the distribution of Shia & Sunni population across selected Muslim states based on data from the Pew Research Center (2009) and Worldometer (2025).

**Table 1:** *Estimated Shia & Sunni Population Distribution Across selected Muslim states*

Country	Sunni population %	Shia population %	Total population %
Saudi Arabia	85-90%	10-15%	34.6 million
Iran	5-10%	90-95%	92 million
Pakistan	85-90%	10-15%	255 million
Iraq	30-35%	65-70%	47 million
Syria	80-85%	15-20%	25.6 million
Lebanon	45-55%	45-55%	5.8 million
Yemen	60-65%	35-40%	41.7 million

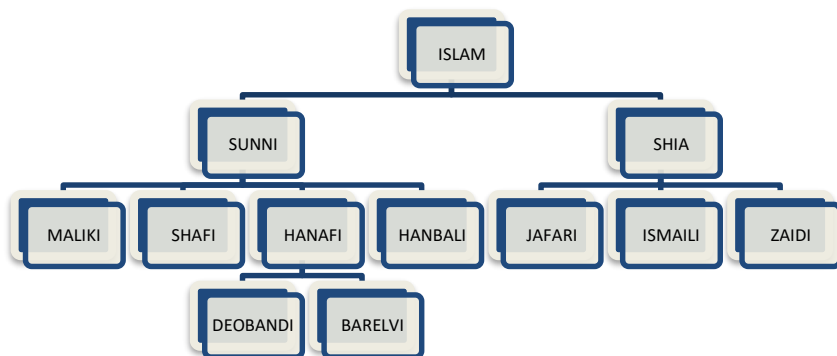
*Note.* Shia population percentages are taken from Pew Research Center (2009) and the total population of the states from Worldometer (2025). While the Sunni population percentages are calculated by the author based on Shia population percentages.

The Shia-Sunni split occurred due to their contrasting views on leadership. Sunni Muslims believe that a leader should be selected by a community through consensus, as supported by Surah Al-Imran (3:159), which emphasizes consultation. This belief has reflected in the selection of Hazrat Abu Bakar as the first caliph after the Holy Prophet PBUH. While, Shia Muslims believe that leadership should stay within the family line of Prophet PBUH, especially with Hazrat Ali. They refer to the event of Ghadir Khumm, where Prophet PBUH said, “For whomever I am his Mawla (leader), Ali is his Mawla” (Sunnah.com, n.d.).

This Shia-Sunni division has deepened after the martyrdom of Ali and his son Hussain in 7<sup>th</sup> century. The martyrdom of Hussain is regarded as the symbol of resistance in Shia identity, which Iran used to portray itself as the defender of the oppressed Shia Muslims (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Oraby, 2018). Despite early disagreements, they have coexisted peacefully for much of Islamic history. Many historians point out a long period of harmony between them. (Iqbal, 2020). However, external powers have often exploited the sectarian differences for their political gains (Chen, 2017).

A pivotal moment in the development of sectarian divide was the 16<sup>th</sup> century Ottoman-Safavid rivalry. The Sunni Ottomans clashed with the Shia Safavids. Both have used sectarian differences for their political and military purposes, which ultimately deepened the rift between them. This rivalry has also shaped the Shia-Sunni relations and the ongoing modern Saudi-Iran rivalry (Manan & Taran, 2020). Gradually, both groups divided into several branches and developed distinct schools of thought. **Figure 2** outlines the distinct branches of Shia and Sunni sects in Islam based on data from Iqbal (2020).

**Figure 2:** *Branches of Shia & Sunni sects in Islam*



**Note.** Author’s own creation based on data from Iqbal (2020).

## 7. Iranian Revolution

Before 1979 Iranian revolution, Saudi Arabia and Iran had stable and cooperative relationship with each other. Both were monarchies, Saudi Arabia ruled by Al-Saud family and Iran by the Pahlavi Dynasty. Their alliance was formed by mutual economic interests, especially in oil, and their alignment with the West during Cold War (Jahner, 2012). They cooperated through Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) for managing of oil prices and ensuring regional stability. The

1979 Iranian revolution marked a turning point where the Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Khomeini overthrew the Pahlavi Dynasty in Iran and called for the creation of an Islamic government based on the teachings of Prophets and Imams (Afray, 2025). This began to challenge the Saudi Arabia's leadership of the Muslim world. Saudi Arabia viewed Iran as a threat to its influence and religious legitimacy (Tzemprin et al., 2015). This ideological clash later converted into a geopolitical rivalry, promoting sectarian tensions and proxy conflicts across various regions (Ghazali & Hussain, 2021; Mumford, 2013). Both states have exploited sectarian identities to legitimize their influence (Oraby, 2018). Iran acted as the protector of the marginalized Shia community, while Saudi Arabia as the guardian of Sunni community. This highlights that though sectarianism was present, Saudi Arabia and Iran manipulated it to justify external intervention, support proxies and build alliances. (Chen, 2017).

## **8. Key Factors of Saudi-Iran Rivalry**

The Saudi-Iran rivalry is a multidimensional geopolitical conflict combined with complex political ambitions, sectarian identity, ideological differences, strategic and economic concerns (Gul et al., 2021). While Shia-Sunni split was the initial reason, this rivalry goes far beyond religion. Key factors influencing this geopolitical rivalry include:

**8.1. Political and Sectarian Competition:** Saudi Arabia aims for Sunni dominance, while Iran for Shia dominance in Islamic world. After 1979 Iranian revolution, Iran began challenging the Saudi Arabia's long-standing position and leadership of Muslim world. This rivalry has manifested in their foreign policy, where both have supported opposing sectarian groups in conflicts such as in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. This represents that sectarian identities have been constructed and mobilized by both countries to further their political ambitions, as pointed in identity politics (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Faheem et al., 2021).

**8.2. Economic Competition:** Saudi Arabia and Iran, two major oil producing countries have competed for regional economic dominance. As of 2023, Saudi Arabia, ranked as World's 2<sup>nd</sup> largest oil producer, contributed around 11% of crude oil production globally. Meanwhile, Iran produced about 4% of global output (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2023). Saudi Arabia view Iran's return to global oil market after the lifting of sanctions under 2015 nuclear deal as a threat to its economic power. However, despite this competition both have often collaborated with each other through OPEC to manage oil production and stabilize global prices. This highlights that while rivalry exists, mutual economic interests can lead to pragmatic cooperation when equally beneficial.

**8.3. Proxy Warfare:** The Saudi-Iran rivalry has fueled proxy wars in several Middle Eastern regions like Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, Iraq. Iran supported the Shia regimes such as Bashar Al-Assad's regime in Syria and Houthi rebels in Yemen. In contrast, Saudi Arabia backed Sunni opposition groups in both countries. These proxy conflicts had extended to Pakistan and Afghanistan and brought violence and instability (Mumford, 2013; Ghazali & Hussain, 2021).

**8.4. Military and Geopolitical Tensions:** Iran's nuclear ambitions and its growing military capabilities have heightened the Saudi Arabia's security concerns. In response, Saudi Arabia has strengthened its military and defense ties with the United

States (Ghasemi & Nasehi, 2019). Both countries compete for control over strategic regions such as Persian Gulf, Levant, and vital maritime routes like the Strait of Hormuz, ultimately worsening the conflict between them.

**8.5. External Forces:** External powers have further fueled the Saudi-Iran rivalry. The USA has provided its support to the Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia received 24% of USA arms exports between 2016-2020 (SIPRI, 2021). In response, Iran has sought alliances with the Russia and China. In 2021, Iran has signed a \$400 billion strategic pact with China (Knutson, 2021). These alliances have intensified the regional unrest and amplify both the proxy warfare strategies and identity-based mobilizations at domestic level (Kubra & Zhen, 2022).

These factors show that the Saudi-Iran rivalry has significantly influenced the sectarian division in the Muslim world. Consequently, different militant groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS emerged and have had far-reaching implications for regional stability and global security (Zahab, 2009).

## **9. Sectarian Tensions in Pakistan**

Sectarianism in Pakistan has been developed over time because of domestic politics and external influences. Two key perspectives dominate the discourse surrounding its origins and exacerbation. One perspective links the sectarianism in Pakistan to Zia-Ul-Haq's Islamization policies, which marginalized Shia community by empowering Sunni groups (Yasmeen & Umar, 2021). Moreover, the Afghan-Soviet war (1979-1989) also played a role. During this period, Pakistan supported Sunni militias backed by Saudi Arabia and USA and sidelined the Shia community, further exacerbating the sectarian violence. The other perspective highlights the role of external powers, mainly the Saudi Arabia and Iran. They have worsened the conflict by funding opposing sectarian groups, turning Pakistan into a battleground for regional proxy conflict (Ahmar, 2007). Although Pakistan created a general Islamic identity in 1947, minor sectarian clashes began during 1950s. The 1980s era saw a sharp rise in organized sectarian violence. The Sunni extremist group Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) emerged to establish a Sunni dominated state (Ahmar, 2007). In response, Shia extremist groups Sipah-e-Muhammad Pakistan (SMP) and Tehreek-e-Fiqh-e-Jafari (TNFJ) were created to support the oppressed Shias. The 1979 Iranian revolution marked a shift in the regional dynamics where the Saudi Arabia and Iran backed their respective ideologies to counter each other's influence. These actions worsened the Shia-Sunni divide (Afzal et al., 2012; Kubra & Zhen, 2022). While Iran continues to back some religious and political groups, Saudi Arabia has changed its approach under Muhammad Bin Salman. He has limited the Clerical authority, Wahhabi outreach and cut off official sectarian funding. Still, some private Saudi networks may continue their support to religious groups (Ismail, 2023). These internal dynamics and external influences have shaped sectarian violence in Pakistan and resulted in around 1824 deaths across 760 incidents reported between 2002-2010 (Mohanty, 2010).



## **10. Impacts of Saudi-Iran Rivalry on Sectarian Uprising in Pakistan**

The Saudi-Iran rivalry has transformed the local tensions into geopolitical conflict and fueled violence and instability in Pakistan. The following section represents the impact of the Saudi-Iran rivalry on sectarian uprisings in Pakistan.

**10.1. Sectarian Proxy Warfare:** Saudi-Iran rivalry has turned Pakistan into a battleground for regional proxy conflict (Mumford, 2013). The US cable says that Saudi Arabia and UAE have supported Sunni extremist groups in Pakistan with financial support estimated \$100 million a year, indirectly promoting sectarian violence (Reuters, 2011). In response, Iran backed Shia militias like SMP and Zainebiyoun Brigade to counterbalance Sunni extremism. (Faheem et al., 2021). Although, Saudi Arabia has curtailed official sectarian funding in recent years, Iran still supports Shia groups. This ongoing conflict keeps sectarian tensions alive in Pakistan.

**10.2. Sectarian Polarization:** The Saudi-Iran rivalry has deepened sectarian polarization in the Pakistani society. Many Sunni Muslims view Saudi Arabia as their Guardian, while the Shia Muslims consider Iran as the defender against oppression (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Kubra & Zhen, 2022). This polarization has fueled animosity and mistrust, creating difficulty in fostering national unity and social harmony among the groups.

**10.3. Radicalization and Militarization:** External support by Saudi Arabia and Iran has contributed to the radicalization and militarization of Shia and Sunni groups. With the ideological and material support, these groups evolved into well-armed militias. It has played role in intensifying the conflict and undermining internal stability (Ghazali & Hussain, 2021). It represents both the proxy warfare and identity politics, where sectarian identities have militarized to achieve strategic aims (Mumford, 2013; Brubaker & Cooper, 2000).

**10.4. Increased Violence and Instability:** The Saudi-Iran proxy war has created instability in Pakistan and led to sectarian violence; targeted killing and suicide attacks have resulted in the killings of thousands of people. External intervention has worsened the local tensions and weakened the state's ability to maintain law and order (Faheem et al., 2021). This rivalry through proxy warfare and identity politics has fueled sectarian violence in Pakistan. **Table 2** illustrates how both states exported their ideologies and promoted sectarian uprising in Pakistan (Ahmar, 2007; Ghazali & Hussain, 2021; Faheem et al., 2021; Kubra & Zhen, 2022).

**Table 2:** *Mechanisms used in Saudi-Iran rivalry to export ideologies and fuel sectarianism*

<b>Mechanism</b>	<b>Saudi Arabia</b>	<b>Iran</b>
Funding Shia & Sunni groups	Supported Sunni extremist groups such as LeJ, SSP with weapons, training, and finances.	Supported Shia groups such as SMP and Zainebiyoun brigade with weapons, training, and finances.
Exporting ideological ideas	Saudi Arabia exported Wahhabi ideology to counter Shia dominance.	Iran exported Shia political ideology to counter Sunni dominance.
Madrasahs / Educational institutions	Saudi Arabia spread Wahhabism through financial funding to Madrasahs to promote anti-Shia sentiments.	Iran spread Shia revolutionary ideology through Shia seminaries to promote anti-Sunni sentiments.
Proxy warfare	Saudi Arabia backed Sunni extremist groups and fueled proxy wars in various regions.	Iran backed Shia militias and further escalated the sectarian conflicts.
Geopolitical impact	Saudi Arabia supported Sunni extremist groups in 1980s Afghan-Soviet war and deepened the sectarian violence.	Iran used Iranian revolution to back Shia communities in Pakistan, turning local tensions into geopolitical conflict.

*Note.* Author's own compilation based on data from Ahmar (2007), Ghazali & Hussain (2021), Faheem et al. (2021) and Kubra & Zhen (2022).

### **11. Regions under Sectarian Unrest in Pakistan**

The Saudi-Iran rivalry has deepened sectarian divisions in Pakistan. Saudi Arabia has backed Sunni extremist groups (like SSP, LeJ, ASWJ), while Iran has supported Shia groups (like SMP). It has resulted in violence across Quetta, Parachinar, and Gilgit-Baltistan and killed over 2200 people between 2010-2015 (SATP, 2018). **Figure 3** illustrates the map of Pakistan showing different regions and their border sharing with other countries (Khan & Baig, 2011).

**Figure 3:** Map of Pakistan and Gilgit- Baltistan

**Note.** Khan & Baig (2011).

**11.1. Gilgit-Baltistan:** Gilgit-Baltistan, a part of northwestern region of Pakistan, is located near with China, Afghanistan, and Indian administered Kashmir. It has about 1.5 million populations, which approximately includes Sunnis (27%), Shias (39%), Ismailis (18%) and Nurbakshis (16%) (Shekhawat, 2011). The region remained peaceful until 1980s. However, General Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization policies affected sectarian conflicts in Pakistan (Ahmad, 1998). The state facilitated Sunni migration in Shia majority areas such as Gilgit and Skardu, which changed the demographic balance and displaced many Shias (Ali & Hussain, 2023). This demographic shift reflects identity politics, where sectarian identity was used to marginalize Shia community (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). They also faced discrimination in access to politics, education, jobs, and resources. Internal tribal and ethnic tensions increased the tensions, resulting in deadly events like Gilgit massacre, where hundreds of Shias were killed (Shekhawat, 2011). Externally, Saudi-Iran enmity entered the region. After the Iranian revolution of 1979, Iran fought against Sunni extremism by providing ideological and financial support to the marginalized Shias (Abbas, 2010). As a result, Saudi Arabia supported Sunni militant groups such as Sipah-e-Sahaba (SSP) and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) to spread Wahhabi influence (Ghazali & Hussain, 2021; Kubra & Zhen, 2022). This aligns with proxy warfare that turned Gilgit-Baltistan into a location of sectarian conflict (Abbas, 2024).

**11.2. Parachinar:** Parachinar is in Khurram district, near the Afghanistan border. It is home to approximately 5,583 people according to 2023 Pakistan census (City Population, 2023). Its population is predominantly Shia (mainly Turi tribe and some Shia Bangash) and Sunni population in minority (including the Sunni Bangash, Orakzai and Para Chamkani tribes). Although there were tribal tensions earlier, the sectarian conflict increased due to Zia's centered policies in 1980, which sidelined the Shia community (Ahmad, 1998). The Shia population is excluded from the political institutions and state appointments. It represents identity politics that worsened the rift and contributed to radicalization among Shia youth (Afzal et al., 2012; Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). In addition, the economic backwardness and limited state presence in the region have turned the local issue into a broader dispute. Due to its border near Afghanistan, Parachinar has become central to Saudi-Iran conflict. Iran supported local Shias, while Saudi Arabia empowered Sunni extremist groups to spread Wahhabi ideology (Kubra & Zhen, 2022). These measures have

escalated the conflict and resulted in 2017 Parachinar Twin blasts, which killed over 67 Shias (Al-Jazeera, 2017).

**11.3. Quetta:** Quetta (Baluchistan capital) is located near Afghanistan and Iran. It has about 1.9 million populations, including Balochs, Pashtuns, Hazaras, and Punjabis (City Population, 2023). Shia Hazara community make about 15-20 % of local population, primarily in Mariabad and Hazara town, while the Sunnis make about 75-80 % in Quetta (Kalin & Siddiqui, 2014). The Shia Hazara community faced systematic marginalization after Zia-ul-Haq's policies, which promoted the Sunni oriented state narrative (Abbas, 2024; Yasmeen & Umar, 2021). They are subjected to social discrimination, limited representation and heightened insecurity reflecting identity-based exclusion (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). It paved the way for Sunni militant groups like Sipah-e- Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), that began targeting Shia community openly (Majeed, 2021). Quetta thus became a vital zone in Saudi-Iran rivalry, with both states supporting their sectarian allies (Mumford, 2000). This external influence has intensified the local sectarian polarization and led to 2013 Quetta bombing attacks, which killed over 80 Shia Hazaras in one day (Dawn, 2013).

The sectarianism in Quetta, Parachinar and Gilgit-Baltistan cannot be analyzed through a single perspective. The internal factors such as the demographic variations, marginalization, and Islamization policies of Zia, have created an opportunity for the external powers (Saudi Arabia and Iran) to shape the sectarian tensions (Yasmeen & Umar, 2021). The interaction between internal and external factors shows how the geopolitical conflicts shape local dichotomy.

## 12. Conclusion

The Saudi-Iran geopolitical rivalry has greatly affected sectarian conflicts in both the Middle East and Pakistan. This contention has been linked to religious, political, and historical differences and played an important role in the emergence of extremist ideologies and regional instability. The two states have used Shia-Sunni divide as a political tool to achieve their strategic interests. This external intervention has intensified internal sectarian tensions, and turned Pakistan into a battlefield for proxy disputes. Under this scenario, three significant Pakistani regions have been badly affected like Quetta, Parachinar, and Gilgit-Baltistan. Saudi Arabia and Iran have shaped the pre-existing local tensions by funding anti-sectarian groups, highlighting proxy warfare. In addition, the sectarian identities have been shaped and mobilized by local and external actors for their political agendas, reflecting identity politics. This study reveals that sectarianism in Pakistan has been shaped by both the internal dynamics such as the political exclusion and marginalization and external dynamics, especially the Saudi-Iran rivalry. To foster long-term stability in Pakistan, both issues must be resolved.

### **13. A Way Forward**

To reduce sectarian violence and promote peace in Pakistan, a multidimensional approach is required. The following steps can be useful in enhancing understanding and harmony between different sects.

- Encourage dialogues between different religious communities to clarify misunderstandings and avoid conflicts within Pakistan and other countries.
- Facilitate the co-operation between religious leaders through joint community events and interfaith programs to promote national unity.
- Enforce inclusive educational programs that teach tolerance and respect for diversity in schools and universities.
- Use the media to challenge extremist ideas and highlight stories of unity and peaceful coexistence.
- The state should implement policies to address the social and political grievances of the marginalized communities and create a more inclusive society.
- Local organizations and community groups should be strengthened to support peace-building efforts at the grassroots level.
- Engage international and regional organizations to present neutral platforms for dialogue and in formulating strategies to mitigate sectarian tensions.

Together, these measures can turn division into opportunity for reconciliation and bring people closer. A joint effort at local, regional, and international level can transform the conflict into cooperation and establish lasting peace in Pakistan.

### **Conflict of Interest**

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