

# Documentation

## Sunnis against Shi'ites. On the Construction of an Antagonism

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## Welcome

*Magda Seewald*

Ladies and Gentlemen,  
My name is Magda Seewald and I am a project coordinator at VIDC and I am very happy to welcome you all tonight to the lecture:

Sunnis against Shi'ites. On the Construction of an Antagonism

My special welcome goes to our speaker of tonight Prof. Hamid Dabashi. Thank you for coming. Let me also thank the Austrian Development Cooperation and the Society for Austro-Arab Relation for their financial support and the Diplomatic Academy for its cooperation as well as my colleagues from VIDC for their support in organizing this event. Last but not least I would like to thank the interpreters Gabrielle Gallo and Heinz Scholz. Tonight's lecture is part of the Festival Salam Orient and I would like to thank Norbert Ehrlich for our long lasting cooperation.

Within the lecture series on the Arab uprising the VIDC has analyzed the uprisings from different perspectives.

Last time in spring we discussed jihadi movements by focusing on Sunni Islam. Tonight we will widen our perspective towards Shia Islam and will critically look on the split between Sunna and Shia, since currently the wars and conflicts in the Arab world are more and more analyzed along religious lines, especially since the rise of Islamic State or DAESH, as the IS is called in the Arab region. Commentators of the situation as well as some actors involved in the different conflicts explain the conflicts as a fight between Sunnis and Shi'ites or between Saudia Arabia and Iran or between secular and religious movements.

However the conflict lines are yet not so clear, it is a simplifying way to explain the situation in the Middle East, without reflecting on European and American domination within the region over decades or even centuries.

Prof. Dabashi will therefore not only put the split between Sunna and Shia into the historical context but will present us an alternative interpretation of the conflicts from a postcolonial perspective.

Before giving the floor to the podium let me briefly introduce to you our chair Dr. Helmut Krieger. He is a consultant to the VIDC. He is a social scientist and a researcher at the Department of Development Studies at the University of Vienna. His main research areas are the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, movements of political Islam in the Arab world, critical state theories and postcolonial theory. His most recent publication is: *Umkämpfte Staatlichkeit. Palästina zwischen Besatzung, Entwicklung und politischem Islam*

I wish us all an interesting debate and may ask you Helmut now to introduce our speaker. Thank you!



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## Introduction

### *Helmut Krieger*

Thank you very much, Magda, and thanks a lot to the VIDC for facilitating this lecture.

It is my distinct pleasure to chair this lecture on the construction of an antagonism between Sunnis and Shi'ites and we are very pleased to welcome Prof. Hamid Dabashi from Columbia University. I will introduce him in a few seconds.

As Magda already mentioned, the subject of tonight's event is, on the one hand, a critical analysis on the perspective that conflicts and war in the Arab world can or should be explained along religious or ethnic lines. Nowadays it is more than common when talking or writing about those conflicts and wars in the Arab world, to refer to sectarian dimensions perceived as driving forces of political conflicts. From that perspective, conflict and war are implicitly or explicitly naturalized.

In order to critically analyze such identity constructions, Hamid Dabashi will go deeper into Muslim history and will argue that sectarianism is entirely a byproduct of colonialism.

On the other hand, Hamid will conclude his lecture with a critical outlook on the issue of refugees fleeing to Europe from different regions and countries in the Arab world.

Hence, the following questions will be discussed at tonight's event:

- In what way can sectarianism in the Arab world be linked to the history of colonialism and today's imperial interventions? And how did that come about? Why could sectarianism gain such an important role?

- With regard to today's refugee movements: in what way can the arrival of refugees in Europe be understood as a return of the European repressed?

- Last but not least, how are these two phenomena linked together?

Before we are starting, let me briefly introduce Prof. Hamid Dabashi.

Hamid Dabashi was born in the south-western city of Ahvaz in Iran. He received his early education in his hometown and his college education in Tehran, before he moved to the United States in the 1970s, where he received a dual Ph.D. in Sociology of Culture and Islamic Studies from the University of Pennsylvania in 1984, followed by a postdoctoral fellowship at Harvard University.

He wrote his doctoral dissertation on Max Weber's theory of charismatic authority with Philip Rieff (1922-2006), the most distinguished Freudian cultural critic of his time.

Hamid Dabashi is the Hagop Kevorkian Professor of Iranian Studies and Comparative Literature at Columbia University in New York. This is the oldest and most prestigious Chair in his field. He has taught and delivered lectures in many North and Latin American, European, Arab, and Iranian universities. Furthermore, he is a founding member of the Institute for Comparative Literature and Society, as well as a founding member of the Center for Palestine Studies at Columbia University.

Hamid Dabashi has also served as jury member on many international art and film festivals, for example the Locarno International Festival in Switzerland. In the context of his

commitment to advancing transnational art and independent world cinema, he is the founder of Dreams of a Nation, a Palestinian Film Project, dedicated to preserving and safeguarding Palestinian Cinema.

He has written 25 books, edited 4, and contributed chapters to many more. He is also the author of over 100 essays, articles and book reviews in major scholarly and peer reviewed journals on subjects ranging from Iranian Studies, medieval and modern Islam, Islamism, feminism, empire, ideologies and strategies of resistance, visual and performing arts in a global context to comparative literature, world cinema, and the philosophy of art.

An internationally renowned cultural critic and award-winning author, his books and articles have been translated into numerous languages, including Japanese, German, French, Spanish, Italian, Russian, Hebrew, Arabic, Korean, Persian, Portuguese, Polish, Turkish, Urdu and Catalan.

Hence, among his numerous publications I will name just a few books:

- Post-Orientalism: Knowledge and Power in Time of Terror, published in 2008
- Shi'ism: A Religion of Protest (Harvard, 2011),
- The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism (Zed, 2012),
- Being A Muslim in the World (Palgrave 2013), and
- Can Non-Europeans Think? (Zed, 2015)

For further information on all his publications and activities please visit his website, [hamiddabashi.com](http://hamiddabashi.com)

Last but not least, some words about the format of our event: Hamid will speak for about 45 minutes. After that, I will open the floor to questions and comments. So, please let's begin our session and welcome Hamid Dabashi.



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## **“I am Sushi”**

*Hamid Dabashi*

With the rise of the self-appointed Islamic State (IS) in the Arab and Muslim world in the aftermath of the Arab revolutions of 2011, the increasingly complicated geopolitics of the region is systematically and consistently oversimplified by often falsely analyzing it along sectarian and ethnic lines: Sunnis versus Shi’ites or Arabs versus Persians. Such false and

falsifying binaries not only do not help us understand the nature of the conflicts now flaming the world at large but in fact camouflage them in deceptively simplified conceptual categories.

Presumed sectarian differences between Sunnis and Shi’ites or between “secular” and “religious” convictions and sentiments, ideologies and their corresponding movements, serve as main explanations for conflicts and war in different Arab and Muslim countries. These are the result of specific political developments and propaganda machinations and must be understood in those terms and not assimilated backward into long historical developments in Islamic theology.

By critically reflecting on such identity constructions and their significance, we need to look for very different and alternative interpretation. We need to think through multiple starting point of our narrative: from the cataclysmic events of 9/11/2001, or from the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-1988, or perhaps from the Iranian revolution of 1977-1979. In either of those cases the geopolitics of the region will give us a much more realistic assessment of the current crisis rather than outdated and misplaced theological differences between one group of Muslims who followed one Muslim leader or another after the death of the Prophet more than 1400 years ago.

### **Deep History**

If we were forced to cut back to a much deeper history we can argue that both Sunnis and Shi’ites have been integral to the worldly context of Muslim empires, from the Umayyads and the Abbasids early in the Islamic history more than a thousand years ago down to the Ottomans, the Safavids, and the Mughals, when European empires began to infringe on these later empires. These prolonged integrations have been in a variety of theological, philosophical, mystic or altogether scholastic and humanist traditions. No one except scholars of these fields today has any patience left for these panoramic views of Muslim history. Suffice it to say that the juridical reasoning of the Islamic legal heritage at the roots of Sunni-Shi’i divide has been systematically, consistently, and institutionally challenged and framed within a pluralistic social setting by its philosophical and mystical interpretations. It is a matter of historical fallacy to disregard that discursive context and cherry-pick on only sectarian dimension of the divide and draw any meaningful conclusion.

It is only under the European colonial domination that Muslims have been instrumental in robbing themselves of that multifarious heritage and turning their own faith into a monolithic totality, and their heterodox effervescence into sectarian conflict. This dominant sectarianism I therefore suggest is entirely a byproduct of colonial contestation, when Muslims began aggressively transforming their own worldly religion into a singular site of ideological resistance against European imperialism, or what they called “the West.”

In other words, what today passes for “Sunnism” or “Shi’ism” are in fact a complete distortion of Muslim historical experiences and the continuation of an aggressive degeneration of Islamic moral, intellectual, imaginative, and worldly pluralism under colonial duress.

If as I suggest this application of the Sunni-Shi’i conflict as the root cause of the current crisis in the Arab and Muslim world is indeed fallacious, then how are we to understand these two major branches of Islam? The initial conflict between the nascent communities of Muslims regarding the question of succession to Prophet Muhammad (who died in 632 CE) did not give rise to anything more significant than a mere family feud among the early Muslims. These feuds were eventually conflated with the internecine tribal rivalries among pre-Islamic Arabs and led to a number of formative battlefields and civil wars among Muslims. What was later theologically systematized and known as “Sunnism” was and has ever since remained the confessional matrix of the overwhelming majority of Muslims—and conversely what was much later systematized theologically and termed “Shi’ism” did not in any significant sense differ from the majority in terms of principled theological centrality of God, the sanctity of the Qur’an, or the significance of the Prophetic traditions as three pillars of Islamic law. As I have argued extensively in my scholarly works, Sunnism and Shi’ism were in essence two different manners of coming to terms with the charismatic authority of the Prophet and the trauma of his death. While Sunnis opted to institutionalize his authority, the Shi’ites transferred it to individual members of his family, from his daughter Fatima and his son-in-law Ali to eleven other male descendants in the main branch of Shi’ism.

Sunnism and Shi’ism therefore emerged as two complementary takes on the prophetic authority of Muhammad, and they each reflected and augmented the other. While Shi’ism preserved the Prophet’s charismatic revolt, Sunnism reflected his proclivity for institution building—so that one might even suggest Shi’ism celebrated his early Meccan period, while Sunnism his later Meccan period. As I have repeatedly argued, all Muslims are Shi’ites when they follow a charismatic leader and revolt against tyranny, and all Muslims are Sunnis when they seek to institutionalize the juridical terms of their endurance as Muslim communities. Neither Sunnis have been exempt from chronic uprisings against tyranny nor Shi’ites hesitated from developing enduring intuitions of juridical authority.

### **From Theology to Demography**

We have to place this theological argument I put forward here briefly (and developed much more extensively in my books) next to a sociological, demographic, and anthropological fact that Muslims (Sunnis and Shi’ites) have lived and intermarried as Sunnis and Shi’ites throughout their histories, and therefore the satirical term “Sushi” is in fact a perfect indicator of the reality of Muslim lives throughout the world.

This reading of Sunni and Shi'i divide should prevent any more undue emphasis on the manufactured sectarian divide and far more urgently draw our attention to the current scene of masses of millions of Muslims from war-torn areas leaving their homelands and some of them eventually finding their ways to Europe, facing two diametrically opposed receptions: (1) welcomed by many Europeans, and (2) conversely aggravating the xenophobic neurosis of many others. These refugees are the more intensified forms of labor migrations from poorer to richer countries and as such are a much more global phenomenon and not limited to Muslims coming to Christian countries.



But so far as these migrations are happening from Muslim countries it is high time Europe came to face with two contradictory facts: (1) their own colonial histories, that Europeans crossed these borders long before Muslims did, and (2) the Muslims arrival in Europe is the return of the European repressed, something in the making in the deeply forgotten European history: Since Tariq ibn Ziyad led the Islamic Umayyad conquest of Visigothic Hispania (711–718), since the Battle of Tours/the Battle of Poitiers (October 732), since the Muslim conquest of Sicily (827-902), since the Fall of Constantinople (1453), and since the Christian European anxieties expressed in Dante's Divine Comedy (1308-1320). Christian Europeans and Muslim Arabs are perhaps destined for a renewed formation of the Mediterranean civilization.

The pluralistic and syncretic disposition of successive Muslim empires were paradoxically compromised in the course of Muslim encounters with European imperialism. It is now a rather strange historical destiny that perhaps also in Europe Sunnis and Shi'ites will overcome their manufactured sectarian opposition to conceptualize a different cosmopolitan setting for themselves in conversation with their European interlocutors. Thank you for your interest.



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