

The Dynamics of the Anti-Shia Movement: An Analysis of International and National Geopolitics

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the dynamics of the anti-Shia movement within the context of international and national geopolitics, emphasizing how sectarian issues are exploited as tools for political, ideological, and power mobilization. The research is based on the premise that the anti-Shia movement is not merely a theological conflict but also encompasses geopolitical dimensions that affect international relations and domestic stability in Indonesia. The study employs a qualitative method with a descriptive-analytical approach. Data collection was conducted through literature studies, media analysis, and reviews of relevant documents from both primary and secondary sources. Social movement analysis was applied to understand the mobilization strategies of anti-Shia groups, while a geopolitical approach was used to evaluate the influence of international relations on the emergence of this movement in Indonesia. Furthermore, content analysis of publications in print, digital, and social media was conducted to explore the narratives and communication strategies of anti-Shia groups. The findings reveal that the anti-Shia movement is closely tied to the geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East, particularly the conflict between Sunni and Shia forces supported by state actors such as Saudi Arabia and Iran. In Indonesia, this issue has been adopted by certain groups as a political tool to bolster the dominance of specific ideologies, often leveraging religious sentiments. The study also found that media plays a critical role in amplifying anti-Shia narratives, thereby creating societal polarization. These findings underline that the anti-Shia movement cannot be understood in isolation but must be examined as part of a broader and more complex geopolitical dynamic.

Keywords: *Anti-Shia Movement; Geopolitics; Middle East; Sunni Islam*



Introduction

A historical review of the emergence of the anti-Shia movement and its relationship with international geopolitics serves as the focus of this study. The origins of Shia Islam are believed to date back to the time of the Prophet Muhammad. However, it raises the question of whether the anti-Shia movement emerged concurrently with Shia Islam itself. While the anti-Shia movement might not have been identifiable as an organized movement in its early stages, indications of resistance to Shia ideas can be categorized as a form of anti-Shia sentiment in terminological terms. Understanding the rejection of Shia Islam is crucial, as it sheds light on the development and objectives of the anti-Shia movement. Over time, how significantly has the Sunni-Shia conflict impacted religious life in Indonesia (Makhsum, 2019).

In its early context, anti-Shia sentiment was more about rejecting political claims concerning the succession of the caliphate after the Prophet's death. Several companions of the Prophet are recorded as having political conflicts with Ali ibn Abi Talib, including Talhah, Muawiyah, and Zubair. Among them, Muawiyah is noted as having one of the most intense political rivalries with Ali. According to Ahmad Amin, the peak of the political split among Ali's followers (the Shia) occurred after Ali's death. The caliphate was succeeded by his son, Husain, but this transition was met with rejection, eventually leading to the caliphate being assumed by Muawiyah (Amin, 1986). If anti-Shia sentiment is understood as the rejection of Shia political ideas, then Muawiyah's followers can be considered part of the early anti-Shia movement.

The term "anti-Shia" was first defined by Shia Rights Watch (SRW) in 2011. Anti-Shia refers to prejudice or hatred toward Shia Muslims, rooted in opposition to their groups and ideology (Syarif et al., 2017). SRW introduced this term to describe resistance against crimes targeting Shia Muslims. It can be argued that anti-Shia sentiments primarily reflect the contestation between Sunni and Shia communities. This bidirectional conflict not only fosters anti-Shia movements but can also generate a counter-current, namely anti-Sunni sentiments. In a memo by Fanar Haddad, it is noted that the intensity of anti-Shia movements surpasses that of anti-Sunni sentiments, largely due to the dynamics of majority-minority relations (Haddad, 2018).

Shia Muslims are recorded as being among the most marginalized groups, often subjected to intimidation in several countries. Their resistance gained significant momentum following the Iranian Revolution in 1979. This period saw the emergence and widespread dissemination of Sunni-Shia sentiments, which eventually led to the formation of two political currents within Islam: the Saudi Arabian bloc representing the Sunni majority (Ahlu Sunnah) and the Iranian bloc representing the Shia Imamiyyah authority. Frequently, other Middle Eastern countries have been used as battlegrounds for proxy wars in the Sunni-Shia conflict, including Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, and others (Abied, 2015).

The political differences between Sunni and Shia groups are, in fact, an outdated issue that has persisted for centuries. However, the current of conflict refuses to cease and continues unabated. Political issues that should be addressed remain concealed under the guise of ideology, thereby inciting society to participate in acts of violence and intimidation. For the people of Syria, where the Shia dominate the government, it is understandable that followers of Sunni Islam experience intimidation and violence, leading to the emergence of anti-government movements, which are, in this context, aligned with anti-Shia sentiments (Sahide, 2013). Similarly, in Yemen, the Sunni-led government seeks to legitimize its rule without Shia Imamiyyah involvement, prompting Yemen's Shia followers to oppose the government through anti-Sunni movements (Indriana, 2017).

Broadly speaking, anti-Shia movements often represent an Islamic belief that views Shia as heretical. This sentiment against Shia has had far-reaching impacts in several areas. Economically, Shia followers in Saudi Arabia are prohibited from career promotions, especially within government institutions (Anyar, 2014). Socially, Shia followers in Malaysia are excluded from the mainstream Islamic discourse (Rodger, 2014). In terms of social relations, Shia followers are treated as second-class citizens, with significant restrictions placed on their activities.

This study is grounded in the argument that various forms of rejection of Shia have fueled sentiments against them, extending beyond ideological conflicts to encompass political, economic, and social dimensions. As an ideology rooted in Islam, Shia Islam has spread rapidly across the globe, including to Indonesia. Therefore,

research on anti-Shia movements aims to provide a more comprehensive and contextual analysis, both genealogically and geopolitically.

Method

This study employs a qualitative research method with a descriptive-analytical approach, aiming to provide an in-depth understanding of specific social phenomena. The primary focus of this research is to comprehensively analyze various aspects related to conflicts, events, and movements of individuals or anti-Shia groups, as expressed and disseminated through various media channels, including print, digital, and social media. This approach allows the research to explore in greater detail the patterns underlying the dynamics of these movements, including ideological motivations, communication strategies, and their impact on public perception.

The data collection techniques employed include intensive literature studies to gather relevant academic references, literature, and historical sources. Additionally, the study utilizes various media content such as articles, news reports, social media posts, and digital documents as primary materials for analysis. Through this method, the data collected is not only descriptive but also contextually rich, encompassing diverse perspectives related to anti-Shia narratives.

The data is then analyzed qualitatively using a social movement analysis approach to identify patterns of Islamic activism carried out both individually and collectively. This approach emphasizes an in-depth examination of the narratives produced, structured communication patterns, and mobilization strategies employed by anti-Shia groups. The analysis also includes mapping ideological, social, and political factors that influence the formation of these movements, including how such movements utilize media as a tool to strengthen ideology and shape public opinion.

The results of this analysis are expected to provide a holistic understanding of the mechanisms driving ideology-based social movements in Indonesia. Moreover, this research aims to reveal the impact of these movements on social structures at both local and national levels, contributing new perspectives to the study of social and religious dynamics in the digital era.

Discussion

The Anti-Shia Movement and International Geopolitics

In 2006, tensions in the Middle East intensified due to conflicts between militant groups and ruling governments, particularly as Hezbollah confronted Israel over prisoners in the struggle for Palestine. Era Muslim (www.eramuslim.com), a conservative Sunni website, repeatedly called for Sunni-Shia unity to defeat Israel in Lebanon. At other times, the website praised Hezbollah and Ahmadinejad as role models for anti-Western rhetoric. This unification against a common enemy blurred the Sunni-Shia dichotomy, demonstrating that Hezbollah was uniquely positioned in this role (eramuslim.com, 2006).

However, the Syrian conflict introduced a new dimension, potentially reigniting Sunni-Shia tensions in the Middle East. The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) declared war against Shia, and some groups in Indonesia pledged loyalty and vowed participation. Despite the shared animosity toward Assad, Indonesian jihadists supported al-Nusra and aligned closely with Salafi Tarbiyah, reflecting the fractures between al-Qaeda, al-Nusra, and ISIS in Syria.

In Indonesia, the Syrian conflict was widely portrayed in Muslim media as an instance of Sunni oppression, with Bashar al-Assad accused of massacring Sunni civilians. Salafi networks capitalized on this narrative, incorporating it into their campaigns to attract Salafi jihadists. From 2012 onward, Salafi and Salafi-jihadist groups organized public discussions on Syria, humanitarian fundraising, and delegations to support their cause (IPAC, 2016). Salafi groups were the first to respond, launching initiatives like the Syrian Medical Mission, initially framed as humanitarian but ultimately linked to militant support.

This response reshaped relationships within Salafi networks, leading to renewed connections between Salafi Tarbiyah and Salafi jihadists (Hasan, 2018; Amghar, 2023). These developments underscore the geopolitical complexities and sectarian entanglements that continue to shape the anti-Shia movement and its broader implications. After the Syrian conflict, negative stigma against Shia movements intensified. For Salafi jihadists, portraying Shia as the perpetrators of Sunni Muslim massacres in Syria became a justification for deeming the killing of Shia

as legitimate and obligatory. Certain pro-ISIS groups in Indonesia, particularly Salafi jihadists, are suspected of being the masterminds behind this propaganda.

In Indonesia, the existence of Salafi jihadist movements has been evident through groups such as the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), Laskar Jihad, Laskar Fisabilillah, Hizb ut-Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), the Preparatory Committee for the Application of Islamic Sharia (KPPSI), and Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), which later transformed into the Indonesian Mujahidin Council (MMI) and subsequently became Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT) (Wahid, 2009).

However, the intensification of anti-Shia stigma is disproportionate to the actual number of Shia adherents in Indonesia. The small proportion of Shia followers is often portrayed as a serious threat to democracy. According to a report by the Pew Forum's *Global Muslim Population 2010*, the proportion of Shia in Indonesia (1.2%) is much smaller than in Egypt (approximately 3.75%). When compared to Western countries, the number of Shia adherents in Indonesia is larger than the Muslim population in the United States (0.8%) but smaller than in Europe (4.5%) (*pewresearch.org*, 2011).

Anti-Shia Movements and National Geopolitics

The modern history of anti-Shia movements in Indonesia began after the Iranian Revolution in 1979. The revolution introduced Shia aspirations into educational and cultural realms (Yumitro, 2017). However, several Sunni organizations reacted by rejecting Shia doctrines, declaring them heretical. This development caught the attention of Saudi Arabia, which responded by funding the publication of anti-Shia materials in Indonesia (Syarif et al., 2017). These efforts significantly impacted both Sunni and Shia Muslims politically in Indonesia.

Between 1985 and the end of the Suharto regime, Shia communities garnered intense scrutiny from both the government and religious groups. Anti-Shia discourse became increasingly associated with domestic issues and was labeled as a potential threat to national integration. Several opinions about Shia emerged during this period. First, Shia were depicted as disruptors of the nation's social order. Second, Shia sympathizers were accused of undermining the beliefs of Indonesia's *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah*. Third, religious scholars from various affiliations were urged to adopt

dogmatic approaches and dedicate time and effort to preventing the perceived social dangers posed by Shia (Hisyam, 1986).

Since then, discussions between Sunni and Shia adherents have been laden with political, social, and theological sentiments, which have generally painted a negative image of Shia Islam in Indonesia.

The Shia community in Indonesia is divided into three groups: *Ahlul Bait Indonesia* (ABI), *Ikatan Jamaah Ahlul Bait Indonesia* (IJABI), and the *Ahlul Bait Social and Educational Support Organization* (OASE) (IPAC, 2016). IJABI was established in 2000, while ABI was founded in 2010 and is considerably smaller than IJABI. However, ABI is dominated by *Sayyid* (descendants of the Prophet) and local scholars aligned with the doctrines and political stance of Iran. Meanwhile, OASE, the smallest among these groups, holds a more puritanical view. This puritan stance stems from their awareness of the anti-Shia advocacy around them. Unlike ABI and IJABI, which have historically been cautious to avoid antagonizing the Sunni majority, OASE is less reserved in its approach.

The presence of Shia Muslims in Indonesia has drawn significant attention from some Sunni groups, prompting efforts to curb its growth. The first major initiative emerged in 2012 through a National Congress organized by the *Forum Ulama Umat Indonesia* (FUUI). FUUI was founded in 2001 by Athian Ali, a reformist figure from Bandung, and focuses on combating liberalism, Christianization, apostasy, and deviant sects (Novianti, 2014). One of FUUI's most well-known fatwas, issued in 2002, called for the death penalty for Ulil Abshar Abdalla, the founder of *Jaringan Islam Liberal* (JIL). Abdalla was accused of desecrating Islam by freely interpreting the Qur'an without referring to traditional *salaf* exegesis (tempo.co; Samsudin et al., 2020). As the chairman of FUUI, Athian Ali's name frequently appears in connection with the organization's activities, including protests against church construction, preventing interfaith dialogues with Christians, attacking Ahmadiyah followers, and conducting raids under the banner of *nahi munkar* (commanding right and forbidding wrong). Within this framework, FUUI responded to the presence of the Shia sect by establishing the *Aliansi Nasional Anti-Syiah* (ANNAS), or the National Anti-Shia Alliance.

Although Athian Ali once had a personal relationship with Jalaluddin Rakhmat – a prominent Shia scholar in Indonesia (hidayatullah.com, 2015) – his stance shifted to antipathy toward Shia teachings. This antipathy was fueled by accumulating anti-Shia sentiments, influenced by Sunni-Shia conflicts in the Middle East, including in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, which shaped a formalized attitude. On February 28, 2012, FUII officially issued a fatwa declaring Shia teachings as deviant.

“Positioning the Aliansi Nasional Anti-Syiah (National Anti-Shia Alliance) as a strategic force for the Muslim community to foster unity and brotherhood in confronting the deviant teachings of Shia in Indonesia.”
(annasindonesia.com)

The legal presence of ANNAS (National Anti-Shia Alliance) in Indonesia has made the Sunni-Shia sentiment increasingly explicit. As an alliance claiming to represent the Muslim community in opposing Shia as a common enemy and declaring it outside of Islam, ANNAS suggests the emergence of a new religious authority within the framework of Islamic theology. In this regard, Al-Makin (2017) argues that this anti-Shia alliance reflects a homogenic Sunni movement in Indonesia aiming to establish orthodoxy. Furthermore, Al-Makin emphasizes that the presence of this alliance adds to the list of conservative and radical Islamic groups in Indonesia. Additionally, Noorhaidi Hasan (2013) asserts that the rise of exclusive, dogmatic, and militant Muslim circles is part of the broader process of Islamism. Over time, Islamist movements tend to participate in democratic and modern political systems, despite previously perceiving these systems as un-Islamic.

Propaganda Through Fatwas

The puritan and reactionary elements within various political spectrums of Islamic movements in Indonesia, as well as the unwillingness to accept differences, are often addressed with a single-sided approach. The first response came from the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) in 2006, affirming that the Sunni understanding is the true and recognized Muslim identity in Indonesia. The presence of exclusive Islam gives rise to self-justification and the condemnation of others. Based on the 2007 MUI fatwa regarding the criteria for defining heretical sects, the MUI of East Java in 2012

declared the Syiah Imamiyah Itsna Asyariyah sect, or the so-called Mazhab Ahlul Bait, as heretical and misleading (republika.co.id).

In response to this, ANNAS legitimized its position in Indonesia to reject all forms of Shia activities. The ANNAS declaration produced three key points: First, Shia teachings deviate from the Qur'an and Sunnah. Second, the courage of Shia groups in Indonesia to propagate their beliefs and teachings through various methods, including *taqiyah* (hypocrisy) in education, social affairs, and politics. Third, the progressive attitude of Shia in delivering their teachings has caused unrest in various regions, leading to horizontal conflicts and resulting in rejection by the community and political neglect toward the spread of Shia heresy (annasindonesia.com). Below is an excerpt from Farid Ahmad Oqbah's speech at the National Anti-Shia Alliance Declaration in Bandung:

"Shia is based on political foundations, making it a man-made religion created by the Imams. The teachings that come from the Imams do not refer to the Qur'an and Hadith; they only refer to books created by their Imams, such as the book *al-Kafi*, which has defiled Islam. The teachings contained within Shia are no longer within the scope of differences in *furu'iyah* (jurisprudential differences), but rather represent a new doctrine that is detached from Islam." (@FaridAhmadOkbah, June 2015)

For ANNAS, Shia has desecrated Islam by corrupting its purity and comparing the words of God with the words of their Imams. Shia only refers to books related to their Imams. The difference between Sunni and Shia is no longer in terms of *furu'iyah* (jurisprudential issues), but at the level of *ushuliyah* (fundamental principles). The establishment of the concept of Imamah as the basis for Islamic law, along with the rejection of the three caliphs before Ali bin Abi Talib, forms the basis of why Shia is not accepted among Sunni Muslims. ANNAS has declared that Shia is not part of Islam and has urged Shia followers to abandon the name Islam in their teachings. Shia is no longer categorized as a sinful Muslim but rather as a form of disbelief (*kufr*). This disbelief compels the anti-Shia alliance to clearly establish principles of *wala' and bara'* (loyalty and disavowal) with the Shia (Wagemakers, 2014).

From August 15-18, 2014, 800 Shia leaders from 130 countries, including Shia from Indonesia, gathered in Tehran to affirm the observance of Iedul Qadir and

Ashura as major Shia holidays. Seeing the growing influence of Shia, ANNAS sought to consolidate its strength to expel Shia from Indonesia. Among the provocations made by ANNAS were calls to avoid being deceived by the name Ahlul Bait, as behind this name lie many falsehoods originating from Shia. The presence of Shia was seen as a threat to the stability of the Muslim community in Indonesia. Even the government, including the President, was urged to immediately ban the heretical and misleading Shia teachings.

ANNAS's vigilance increased when Jalaludin Rakhmat, the founder of IJABI, became a member of the Indonesian Parliament (DPR RI) for the 2014-2019 period. The entrance of a high-ranking Shia figure through the "Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan" (PDI-P) sparked anger among the Sunni community. The involvement of Shia in the formulation of laws was perceived as a threat. The proposal that Jalaludin intended to advocate for was to defend minorities, namely Ahmadiyah and Shia, two religious groups considered by some Sunnis to be corrupters of Islam. For them, both groups had desecrated the religion and deserved to be declared outside Islam. The involvement of Shia in the political realm of governance created acute trauma for anti-Shia groups. The presence of Shia figures in the political context could strengthen Shia networks in Indonesia. Drawing from the movements of Shia in Syria and Yemen, ANNAS's vigilance necessitated repressive actions against Shia in Indonesia, so for them, Indonesia would remain safe without the presence of Shia (voa-islam.com, 2012).

As a defensive effort and to weaken Shia teachings, ANNAS sought to assert its position through a declaration. The ANNAS declaration included: First, positioning the National Anti-Shia Alliance as a means for *dakwah* (Islamic propagation) of *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* (enjoining good and forbidding evil). Second, taking anticipatory measures against the spread of Shia and proactively defending and protecting the Muslim community from Shia deviations. Third, fostering *ukhuwah Islamiyah* (Islamic brotherhood) with various da'wah organizations in Indonesia to hinder the spread of Shia teachings. Fourth, urging the Indonesian government to ban the spread of Shia teachings and revoke the licenses of institutions, foundations, and organizations related to Shia (annasindonesia.com).

Conclusion

Historically, the anti-Shia movement emerged from the rejection of Shia ideology regarding *imamah* (leadership) in determining the caliphate after the Prophet's death. In the modern era, the anti-Shia movement began to intensify following Khomeini's successful overthrow of Reza Pahlavi's regime, known as the Iranian Revolution. The Iranian Revolution gave birth to a new theocratic constitution, establishing the country as the Islamic Republic of Iran. The emergence of the Shia Republic of Iran was perceived as a threat to Sunni governments in the Middle East. Thus, the anti-Shia movement cannot be separated from the broader context of international politics, particularly the strained relationship between Sunni and Shia states in the Middle East. This tension is particularly evident in the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran as they vie for influence in the region.

The rise of the anti-Shia movement in Indonesia has been largely driven by Saudi Arabia's envy of Iran's success in promoting a new form of Islamism, spreading from the Middle East to Muslim-majority countries worldwide. Saudi Arabia's resistance can be seen in FUUI's efforts to counter Iran's influence by issuing a fatwa declaring Shia teachings heretical. This fatwa quickly gained traction, leading to the formation of ANNAS. The establishment of ANNAS further illustrates how Middle Eastern Islamism has extended its reach into Indonesia.

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