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Islam in Higher Education: Exploring the Intra Religious Interactions between Shia & Sunni Students

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Introduction

The point of entry for this paper is the conflict and the peaceful coexistence between the two major sects in Islam, the Sunni sect and the Twelver Shias sect. Through this, the study aims to answer the following questions; how does the political conflict between Sunni and Shia Muslims affect Muslim youth and intra-religious interaction in a university setting in Canada?

Very little academic research has been conducted on this issue, as such, examining this topic will add insight to the current research and provide a different perspective on this sensitive topic. There is a clear lack of dialogue when it comes to these two majors Islamic sects. This division has resulted in much tension in the Muslim community, however, that being said many more Muslims live together in complete harmony and respect. It is for this reason that this study does not simply focus on the conflict and its influence in higher education, but will also seek to understand the prerequisites for a peaceful coexistence among Muslims in these two major sects.

My interest in this study stems from the hidden and at times clear divisions this political divide has done to my community. Personally I identify myself as a Muslim, but I chose not to put myself in a sect. I was born in Syria and lived there for the first eleven years of my life. Historical sectarian differences were not of great concern to me growing up. That being said, I was born into is the Alawite sect, the same sect the governing family in Syria is from. At first, I personally did not understand the privilege a person would have if they were the same sect as the Government and I surely did not understand the negative stigma that it may cause if a member from another sect knew of my sect.

I remember my mother telling me stories of how she would always avoid Sunni neighbourhoods due to them being perceived as being more religious and the fact that she would always be harassed if she passed through them. This was the main reason as to why when we lived in Syria, we did not live in Muslim neighbourhoods, neither Shia nor Sunni. We always lived in either an Alawite neighbourhood or a Christian neighbourhood. This is why for a very long time I thought I was Christian rather than Muslim. It wasn't until someone asked me what was my religion did I become aware of the separation, tension, and political influence religion had on a person's life.

That being said, many of my friends here in Canada and in Syria are Muslims and belonged to other sects. The topic of sects has never truly been discussed among my friends, we tended to avoid any religious topics mainly due to the tension it created among some. One thing I noticed however was that some of the more religious individuals who came to know my sect, stated that I was not a Muslim. Such statements point to the tensions within Islam, however, we cannot forgo the many peaceful interactions that occur daily.

It is for reasons such as this that show the importance of more academic research regarding this topic. It is my goal to add to the current research in hopes that through conducting research and shedding more light on this topic so that more attention is given to the struggles and challenges within Islam and intra religious interactions. How does the political conflict between Sunni and Shia Muslims Military exemption forms affect Muslim youth and intra-religious interaction in a university setting?

To ground my proposed study, I will conduct a literature review of both the current tensions and of the peaceful coexistence between the two sects. The focus will be on the review

of relevant literature surrounding Muslim students in the education system and Islam in general. This section will be divided into four subheadings: 1) Christian Privilege, 2) Politics and Islam, 3) Discrimination within Islam, and lastly 4) Peaceful Coexistence. The first subsection of the literature review, on Christian Privilege, will expose how the current education system has allowed for the intolerance of Muslim practices. The second section on Politics and Islam, will examine the influence political institutions and political events have on the lives of Muslim youth. The third section on Discrimination within Islam, will expose the struggles Muslim youth face within the religion itself and the consequences. Lastly, Peaceful Coexistence will show how even though tensions may be high between the two major sects, it has not deterred some to live peacefully amongst each other.

In addition to the literature review, a historical context is provided that will discuss the origins of the tension. The focus here will be the root of the division and how it has been used to create tension and weaken the bond amongst Muslims. This section will be divided into four subheadings: 1) Statistics, 2) Origin of Tension, 3) Political influence, and 4) Current Political Manipulation. In the first subheading, Statistics, a brief statistical and historical account of the number of Muslims that are in Canada is provided. The second subheading, Origin of Tension, will explore how the Sunni/Shia split originated. In the third and fourth subsections, I examine and discuss examples of how this split and divide has been politically manipulated to further western and European goals and objectives.

I will then present the findings from two student focus group interviews, one Sunni and the other Shia, to examine the impact this political division has on their lives. These interviews also address the prerequisites needed for a peaceful coexistence between the two major sects.

The interviews take the form of a conversation in order to examine student experiences and views regarding the tensions as well as opportunities for the peaceful coexistence of the two sects.

Literature review:

Christian Privilege:

Starting from a broader perspective, where the environment of the school plays a great influential part in every student, Warren J Blumenfeld (2006) examines the "Christian privilege". Blumenfeld (2006) argues that through the privileging of the Christian religion throughout the education system, it allows for the domination and the subordination of all other beliefs and religions. By allowing one religion to take hold of a public or private realm, such focus will privilege and favour all who resemble it. This privileging puts all other students at a disadvantage which limits their practices and marks them as different from beginning to end.

Bernard Lewis (1993) echoes Warren J Blumenfeld statement by explain that the current understanding of modernization has a Christian bias that sees Islam as incapable of distinguishing between religion and politics. With such a view combined with the current and ignorant understanding of Islam, it makes it very hard for Muslims to be accepted by others.

With such an approach taking hold of the public education system, it is no wonder being Muslim in a Christian oriented education system is resulting in the negative outcomes experienced by all who resemble Islam and its practices. For this reason Nyang (2000) argues that as a survival mechanism, Muslim individuals begin to alter their identity and image so as to 'weather the icy waters of racial or cultural prejudices' (Nyang 2000: 2). This results in Muslim

student, for example, altering their names to fit into the dominant culture due to the reluctance of displaying their Muslimness.

Jasmin Zine (2007) argues, as a result of this religious domination and the difference in cultural values, the need of a separate school system, Islamic schools, emerged to protect Muslim students from the exposure, integration, and assimilation of the values harboured in the western education system. Furthermore, this separation is seen as creating a safe zone where Muslim students are free to practice their religion without any discrimination or stigmatization. That being said, on the other hand some argue that such a separation will result in the "ghettoization" of Muslim youth.

Gutmann (1996) argues that such a separation will only sustain the division surrounding minorities by reinforcing the confidence of students who belong in these groups thus, strengthening the ties within the group and weakening the ties with all others. Halstead (1991) however, argues that instead of self-exile, Muslim students are facing social isolation where parents are refusing to send their children to schools where Muslim students makeup the majority of students. Garbi Schmidt (2011) echoes Hallstead's point when examining the Muslim community in Denmark. Schmidt (2011) argues that the identity Muslims carry out in Nørrebro is linked to the historical, internal, and neighborhood specific tension that exists there. Similar to pervious points, the external aggression Muslims face result in actions, such as protesting and riots, that subject them to more negative stigma and social isolation.

Politics and Islam:

Schmidt (2011) exposes the view held by Denmark which perceives Islam as being an intolerant religion. The view held that Nørrebro was once a place populated by all types of people, people who drank and lived a life with no care, however that all changed when Islam arrived to the community. This view is held by many besides Denmark. Due to the terror attacks happening around the world, this resulted in many Muslims and Islam as a whole to be viewed as incompatible with the western way of life. Liyakat Takim (2011) expands upon this by examining how such intolerance to Islam is being manifested in America.

Takim (2011) explains that Islam has been demonized by the west with many institutions attacking Islam and the Quran. These attacks and stigmatization significantly increased after the 9/11 attack on the twin towers. Such attacks aim to portray Islam as being inherently violent and establishing a militant ideology everywhere it goes (Takim 2011). This resulted in the acceptance of Islamophobia by the national media and the American culture which only worsened the situation and increased the hatred and tension between Muslims and the western communities (Takim 2011). This stemmed the constant fear of attack and discrimination Muslims endure on a daily basis.

Shabana Mir's (2011) book explores the construction of identity amount undergraduate female Muslim youth in America after 9/11. Mir (2011) identified three ways Muslim youth have adapted to living in west: 1), Passing and Hiding, 2) Loud Identities, and 3) Back to Assimilation. Mir explains that as a result of the negative stigma created by 9/11 and the hostility America held against Muslims, Muslim youth had to resort to ways that ranged from either asserting their identity to avoiding it all together in fear of stigmatisation and harassment. In

"passing and hiding" Mir (2011) explains that the youth resorted to completely avoiding

anything that resembles Islam in public. This way they are accepted into the broader society,

however, still face backlash from their own community (Mir 2011).

That being said, being able to hide and avoid identifiers of Islam is not something all

Muslim youth can do. Mir (2011) explains that instead of avoiding the stigma "Loud identities"

resorted to asserting their identity and facing the stigma head on. This however resulted in many

students changing their perspective of western society, especially when it came down to careers

in government. With the hostility that result from 9/11, any identifiers of Islam resulted in one's

loyalty being questioned therefore making it very difficult to obtain or even be motivated to

pursue such career paths (Mir 2011).

In "back to assimilation" Mir (2011) argues that youth attempt to strike a balance where a

mix of the two ways of life come together in an attempt to show that the two can comply. By

altering and "tweaking" the practices, the youth saw themselves as subtly adding to the western

way of life (Mir 2011). By attempting to balance both views, the youth needed to satisfy both the

Muslim way of life and the western way of life.

Discrimination within Islam:

Unfortunately the struggle of a Muslim student does not stop there. Jasmin Zine and

Asma Bala (forthcoming) examine the national network of Muslim students in Canada. Through

conducting interviews with more than 100 Muslim youths their findings show that Muslim

students are not only under pressure by broader society, but are also facing attacks and even

threats from other Muslims belonging to other sects in the religion. Their research focused on the

MSA (Muslim Student Association) and its impact on Canadian campuses. What is revealed is that the great majority of members are Sunni thus alienating all other Muslims sects including the Shia sect.

Such representation give the Sunni student's great authority to design and influence how the MSA will operate and be represented. Furthermore, the research yielded findings which explain that the Shia students endured discrimination thus further deterring them from joining the campus club (Zine & Bala 2016). This discrimination ranged from harassment in the prayer room to excluding Shia students from membership into the MSA.

As a result of this, Shia students split off and created their own club called Thaqalayn Muslim Association (TMA). The club explain such a move by stating on their website "the TMA was formed when it was felt that the MSA, and other Islamic clubs, did not sufficiently address the needs of Shia students"[1]. The sectarian influence resulting in a majority sect influencing and governing a club thus sustaining the division between the two major sects in Islam and advanced its division into higher education.

Peaceful Coexistence:

Despite the various tensions that exist between the Sunni and Shia sects they can and have been in a peaceful coexistence. For example, many Sunni and Shia Muslims pray at the same mosque, and follow the same imam. In regards to prayer, there is not a major differences

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[1] Shia Services in Waterloo - Waterloo Thaqalayn Muslim Association. (n.d.). Retrieved December 02, 2016, from https://sites.google.com/site/waterlootma/shia-services-in-waterloo

between the two sects. Furthermore, as a sign of respect, at the time of Muhharram Sunnis avoid conducting celebrations such as wedding (Balci 2010).

Sprusansky (2015) explains that it is only when politics and the government become involved does this sectarian difference emerge. The use of sects as a "cover for nationalism" leave many under the control and influence of politics (Sprusansky 2015). Such manipulation divides the people and attaches their identity and beliefs to a highly volatile topic, politics. It is for this reason that Sprusansky (2015) explains that in order to restore peace, governments need not use religion as a tool of governance and control. Furthermore, privileging one sect over the other does nothing but fuel this political divide and amplifies the differences that weaken the unity of the people.

Similar to how some religious community leaders resort to the slander of other community leaders, we cannot forget that there is still religious community leaders who advocate for unity amounts the sects. These leaders attempt to unify all Muslims under one banner, Islam. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, knowns as the highest-ranking political and religious figure in Iran, expresses the importance of unity by pointing out that allowing such differences to consume us, we allow for the nation and community to weaken (Friday prayer 1999).

Even though much of the focus is on the divide and conflict between the two sects, overlooking the attempts of unifying Islamic sects does not do this topic justice. Muslims of all sects have long lived amongst each other and amongst other religions in peace. However as stated before once we allow politics to govern how we see each other, we surrender our ability to accept and celebrate difference.

Leonard (2015) discusses such difference through the example of Oman. Oman long understood that conflict simply breeds more conflict thus benefiting no one. However, peaceful coexistence has many economic and social benefits that will strengthen a society through diversity. As stated by Sultan Qaboos when addressing the council of Oman:

"The more thought becomes diverse, open and free of fanaticism, the more it becomes a correct and sound basis for building generations, the progress of nations and the advancement of societies. Inflexibility, extremism and immoderation are the opposite to all this and societies which adopt such ideas only carry within themselves the seeds of their eventual destruction." (Qaboos' 2011)

Furthermore, such an approach allows Muslims from different sects and all religions to be able to practice and carry out their religious obligations with no limitation. With such policies in place, western views which see Muslim societies as incapable of fostering a religiously diverse society due to disinterest or incapacity are simply false. Leonard (2015) explains that such views are the result of media focus on troubled Muslim societies under the influence of many factors besides religion.

Lastly Leonard (2015) explains that the aim of inter religious and intra Islamic dialogue is to deepen understanding between difference, it is to find commonality while also appreciating difference. Through this, we are able to better understand each other and discover common values and goals. To simply focus on difference and attempting to convert or disprove the opinion or belief of others leaves no room for trust thus dismantling coexistence.

Al-Madhahib (2013) through Rapprochement echoes what was stated by Leonard. Al-Madhahib (2013) presents 10 principles listed by Al-Qaradawi which should be used to guide the Sunni-Shia dialogue. 1. Understand properly, husn al-fahm ; 2. Consider properly, husn al-zann ; 3. Concentrate on matters undisputed; 4. Discuss matters controversial; 5. Avoid provocation; 6. Refrain from anathematizing those who testify 'There is no God but Allah'; 7. Avoid the exaggerations of religious extremists, shatat al-ghulat ; 8. Speak plainly and solve problems wisely; 9. Guard against the machinations of the enemy; 10. Unite perforce in times of trouble.

In summary, these principles guide individuals to peacefully approach the topic while avoiding any accusations and judgment which may result in the breaking down of communication. There is a great focus on understanding of commonalities and non-conformational approach which keep the dialogue peaceful and with a positive purpose. This focus reminds the individuals that even though they may represent different sects, they all are Muslims and are under the same Umma. As stated by Al-Qaradawi "We should cooperate on what we agree upon, and we should find excuses for each other on what we differ on" (Al-Madhahib 2013: 419). Through this Al-Qaradawi aims to focus more on the commonalities and downplay the difference.

Historical Context:

Statistics:

The latest recording of Muslims being in Canada is from 1854 who were mostly young men fleeing from being recruited into the Ottoman army. By 1901, 47 Muslims lived in Alberta and Saskatchewan, this number grew to 1,500 Canadian Muslims by 1911 (Zine 2012). Most of

these Muslims were Syrian and Turkish migrants many of whom made a living by working in construction of railways. In 1951 these numbers increased to about 3,000 and after the Second World War Muslims started to enter Canada as skilled labourers (Zine 2012). Near the end of the twentieth century Muslims have become the largest non-Christian group in Canada.

According to a 2011 house hold survey, Muslims make up about 3.2% of the Canadian population totaling at 1,053,945 Muslims living in Canada (Statistics Canada 2013). Furthermore, the great majority of these Muslims are living in Ontario specifically in the Greater Toronto Area making up 7.7% of the population and totaling at 424,925 Canadian Muslims (Statistics Canada 2013). In Kitchener, Waterloo, and Cambridge there is a total of 18,940 Muslims. There is no data or statistics on how many different sects of Islam are living in Kitchener-Waterloo.

Origin of Tension:

If there is an exact point where the schism between Sunni and Shia began, it would be when the prophet Muhammad died in 632 AD. The prophet's death marks the start of a life-time of political tension, war, and death for many Muslims and non-Muslims who were caught in the cross fire. At the root of the problem was the question of who would succeed the prophet. This would not have been such an issue if the prophet had any sons who would take their fathers position and authority, however, the prophet Muhammad did not have any sons at the time of his death. This gradually resulted in the emergence of the two major sects in Islam, where one side known as the Shias, labelled as such for being Ali's followers, claimed that Ali ibn Abi Talib, the prophet's cousin, first male believer, adopted son, and the husband of the prophet's daughter Fatima, should be the next caliph (Rogerson 2007). The other side, the Sunni's known as such

for being the people of the Prophet's Sunna and of the majority, claimed it should be one of the prophet's closest companions and father in law, Abu Bakr (Rogerson 2007).

What follows was a meeting consisting of Mohammad's companions who elected Abu Bakr, thus becoming the first caliph after the prophet's death (Cooperson & Shawkat 2005). Some of the companions however disagreed and claimed that Ali was to be the caliph stating he was chosen by Mohammad himself to be the next Caliph. Both the Shias and the Sunnis however agree that Ali did eventually accept Abu Bakr to be the first Caliph; however, the Shias state that it was only due to the fact that he was under duress (Cooperson & Shawkat 2005). In 656 CE Ali ibn Abi Talib became the fourth Caliph, and his first action as a caliph was to try to remove the governor in Syria. The governor refused to step down which resulted in the governor gathering support and declaring Ali's caliphate illegitimate.

This split between the Shia and the Sunni in Islam has been manipulated and used for many political gains. Governments have used it to gain support and discriminate purely on what sect a person is from. Understandably, with such an infiltration into government and the political system, many have become angered by the way religion is being used. This resulted in much tension between individuals in different sects, so much that many neighbourhoods in the Middle East are separated based on sects.

Political Influence:

Favouring one's people has never been a new way of governing, it secures the leaders position and keeps the followers happy. However, such an approach will have an opposite effect on the people who received the short end of the stick. This is what Ali Bin Abi Talib was trying

to end by going to war with the governor of Syria who followed the same approach as the pervious caliph 'Uthman. 'Uthman was known for openly favouring his own clan members, Banu Umayyah, and placing them in governing positions. In 656, 'Uthman however was slain by a group of Muslims from Egypt and Medina. This resulted in Ali Bin Abi Talib taking the caliphate (Cooperson & Shawkat 2005).

Ali ordered Mu'awiyah, the governor of Syria and a member of 'Uthman's clan, to step down. Mu'awiyah did not only refused to step down but declared Ali Bin Abi Talib as an illegitimate Caliphate (Cooperson & Shawkat 2005). This resulted in both Ali and Mu'awiyah going to war. Hearing of this 'Aishah, the widow of the prophet and the daughter of Abu Bakr decided to enter the war against Ali due to a pre-existing conflict (Cooperson & Shawkat 2005). Through using the fact that the murderers of 'Uthman were among Ali's followers she gathered support. For 'Aishah the murderers of Uthman needed to be brought to account, and she was supported by Talha and Zubayr, two of the Prophet's Companions. This battle is known as the Battle of the Camel, because of the camel that Aishah rode into battle.

Once Ali Bin Abi Talib secured victory against 'Aishah, he turned his attention to Syria to oust Mu'awiyah resulting in a battle known as The Battle of Siffin. Following 'Aishah's tactic, and drawing upon the tribal custom that a relative should avenge the death of a clansman, Mu'awiyah used the murder of 'Uthman to gather supporters and went to war with Ali (Cooperson & Shawkat 2005). The war was stopped when Mu'awiyah resorted to the arbitration of the Book of God by hold the Quran on spears so as to stop the fighting. This resulted in Ali losing the arbitration thus throwing many into confusion. This confusion resulted in more

fighting until January of 661, when Ali Bin Abi Talib was struck with a poisoned sword while praying at Kufa mosque (Cooperson & Shawkat 2005).

Conclusively according to Sunni doctrine Ali Bin Abi Talib is considered as a close companion of the prophet and the fourth caliph (Cooperson & Shawkat 2005). While in the Shiite doctrine, Ali is considered the first imam, that is the legitimate temporal and spiritual successor of the prophet and believe that he was publicly appointed to that role by the prophet himself at Ghadir Khumm (Cooperson & Shawkat 2005). These beliefs are still held dearly to some and have resulted in divisions within the two major sects. While there are many sub-divisions within Shiism, due to timing restrictions this study will only focus on the Shiite Twelver sect.

Current Political Manipulation:

This discrimination between different sects has long been manipulated by governments globally therefore making the issue a much vulnerable and defining aspect of a person. Trevor Wade (2012) explains such government manipulation through the enactment of religious bureaucracies by Indonesia and Malaysia from 1982 to 2008 (Wade 2012). These regulations control Islam, discriminate and oppress Muslim minority sects and restricted the political independence of socio-religious groups entrenched in Islam (Wade 2012). Wade (2012) explains that the rise of Islam in Indonesia and Malaysia had the intent of modernizing the two countries. Wade (2012: 19) states, Islam "creates distinctions between a Western rationalism of modernization and secularism, while contrasting it with an Islamic approach that embraces modernization and renewed religiosity."

Wade (2012) explains that with the arrival of Islam in the Malay world, many locals found the religion very appealing due to its similarity to the local cultural and religious beliefs. Such similarity built trust thus resulting in many joining the religion. The Sunni school of thought was the dominant approach to Islam in Southeast Asia, while the Shia influence was completely absent (Wade 2012). The rulers at the time were attracted to the religion due to its prestige and power, while the subjects were attracted due to its social message (Wade 2012)

The only other sect that appealed to the people of Malay was the Sufi sect which was due to its similarity to the local traditions and beliefs (Wade 2012). Sufism grew and the people organized themselves. They created a structure led by respected Sufi masters and institutional bases that continue to exist until today (Wade 2012).

Discrimination may be exacerbated by the modern state, which claims a monopoly on violence (i.e. army, police, etc.) and has many ways of intruding into people's private lives in a way that premodern empires were not able to do. The Islamic modernity was a response to the dominant European colonialism which threatened the traditional values of Islam (Wade 2012). The European colonialism resulted in the emergence of many movements that attempted to realign the government with the challenges of modernity. However, in the end the result was a clash between the traditional school of thought and the modern school of thought (Wade 2012). The clear separation was seen by the imperialists and worked in their favour. Through expanding the division between the two schools of thoughts, it became easier to manipulate and restructure in accordance to the imperialists (Wade 2012). The restructuring created a system where people who followed the traditional school of thought were ranked below the modernists which resulted

in modernists holding powerful positions and enacting laws and regulations that sustained their positions as rules (Wade 2012).

As Yoginder Sikand (2008) explains, practices such as slander and defamation of other religious leader is common so as to justify their beliefs and attack others who disagree. However, labeling the other as "Kafir" only adds to the feud between the two major sects. With such an approach being used as common practice, the division will only grow and be passed on to the next generation. By doing so, the problem becomes not only a political one, but a personal one.

It is clear how religion influences the lives of people in the Middle East. However, with the advancement of society and the becoming of a more globally connected world, it's important to examine how these historical and influential ways of life have affected the way of life here in the west. This is where the importance of this research stems from. Due to the lack of academic coverage of intra-religious interaction between Muslims, there is little understanding of how these historical events have influenced individual's lives in our modern times, especially in the west.

By conducting this research, the aim is to add to the current literature surrounding Islam in Canada and also pave the way for more research in the intra-religious interactions among Muslims in this context. Globally Islam is one of the largest religions, therefore understanding how it has shaped the lives of those who follow the faith from different sectarian vantage points will improve our understanding of the religion and its impact on people's lives.

Methods:

Framework:

A qualitative approach is proposed for this study, the framework will focus on the intra religious dialogue and peacebuilding between groups. Quite frequently, religion is a factor when it comes to global conflicts. Rarely is it the principle reason, however, it still plays an important part in much of the conflicts globally. It is clear that there is an avoidance when it comes to the topic of religion even though it is at the core of many Muslim's lives. Such avoidance does nothing to remedy the division happening within Islam and within Muslim communities.

As Tariq Ramadan (2005: 226) urges Muslims to rediscover pluralism and asks Muslims to get out of their "internal ghettoes" so as to make God's vision of Muslims and this world possible. By accepting that there are other views and beliefs, Muslims of all sects can reduce the division created between them. This peacebuilding can open doors and create a safe zone to possible conversations and proper communications between Islamic sects.

As noted before, many of the Muslim campus clubs are dominated by Sunni students. Furthermore, echoing what was stating before, these campus clubs function as a source for Islamic knowledge where knowledge received from community leaders and sheiks is communicated to members of the club. However as noted by Sikand (2007) slander of other religious leaders is common practice. Such an approach could have an impact on the intra religious dialogue among Muslim students.

Through examining the interactions of Muslim students in higher education, this research will shed light on how this global conflict has seeped into the institution that is seen as a place of

enlightenment. The intra-religious interactions these students have will speak to how different sects communicate in a predominantly western environment.

Sampling:

Given the time limitation of this study, the sampling of this study consisted of 3 self-identified Shia students and 4 Sunni students. The age of these participants ranged from 18 to the age of 25. The reason for this age limitation is that 18 represents the age of majority in Ontario and the age of 25 is the age where being considered a youth ends. Given that this research focuses on the experience of Muslim youths in the university setting, the participants have been or are currently university students at either Wilfrid Laurier University or The University of Waterloo for two to four years. This insures the participants have a general understanding of the education system and have a wide variety of experiences. Furthermore, this research focused strictly on youth who have lived in the city of Kitchener and Waterloo. For the sake of consistency, these individuals will have to have resided in Canada for a minimum of four years so as to once again ensure they are familiar with the environment and possess an understanding of the system.

The initial aim of this study was to have 6 self-identified Shia students and 6 Sunni students totaling in 12 participants. However due to time restrictions and scheduling conflicts only 7 individuals were able to participate. The number of participants was chosen due to the scope of this study which aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the participant's experiences. Furthermore, this number proved to be practical due to the limited amount of time granted to conduct this study. Of these seven participants five were men and two were woman. In one group there was 3 Sunni men and 1 Sunni woman, in the other there was one Shia woman and two Shia men.

Recruitment:

Snow ball sampling and personal contact were used to recruit participants. In addition to this, campus groups were contacted in order to recruit participants willing to talk about their experiences. Group Administrators and club presidents were contacted and asked for permission to recruit members from the group. These groups were the MSA, Muslim Student Association, TMA, Thaqalayn Muslim Association, and the SAS, Student Arab Association.

Word of mouth was another method used to recruit participants. Participates that were unable to take part in the study provided contact information of individuals that thought may be interested. These individuals were all contacted and asked to participate. In total, over twenty three were contacted, ten showed interest, and seven actually participated.

To conduct this communication, Facebook was used to look up and initiate first contact. Once a participant showed interest, an email detailing the study was sent out to them. The reason that Facebook was used was due to its popularity among the age groups this study is targeting thus providing ampule access to potential participants. Furthermore, since information such as name, age, school, and club association were visible, I could make a quick judgement regarding the suitability of potential participants.

In addition to this, participants in turn can also view my profile and judge my trust worthiness. Also because this was done through my personal account, it allowed for a more personal contact with participants rather than simply a researcher-participant contact. Furthermore, participants could also see from my Facebook profile that I was a Muslim, attended Wilfrid Laurier University and was from Waterloo. This further allowed for a more personal point of contact.

By using Facebook to personally initiate first contact, it brings the focus on the individual rather than the club they are in. Through this, the idea that the participants have to represent their club and speak in regards to the interest of the club is avoided. This is of course reasserted at the beginning of the interview and also throughout the interview.

The goal of this study is to explore the participant's intra-religious interaction with other Muslim youth in the education system. In doing so, sensitive topics are anticipated to emerge. To ensure complete comfort and trust, prior to the interview each participant will be asked to read and sign a consent form in agreement to participate and to guarantee their anonymity.

Data Collection**:**

To conduct this study, two separate focus groups consisting of four Sunni students and three Shia students were interviewed. The reason a focus groups was used is due to time restriction and participial reasons to conduct this study. Each focus group shared the same religious outlook and thus assist in building upon each other's experience. This allowed for the participants to freely express their experiences in a comfortable environment. The interview began by asking unstructured questions such as "what has it been like being a Muslim in the education system?" such a question, along with others, allow for the participant to talk about a variety of topics throughout the interview. The aim is to have the participant talk about their experiences of being a Muslim and interacting with other Muslim students in the University, with little interruptions in regards to clarification.

The interview was tape-recorded and was approximately one hour. This time limit, however, was flexible. The aim here was to gain as much detail as possible from the participants and if more time was needed the interview will not be interrupted and may exceed the time of one hour. That said, a hard time was given at 2.5 hours.

Furthermore, since this is a study in regards to the higher education system, it was proposed to conduct the interview at Wilfrid Laurier University however, this was a flexible plan. The reason being, it was predicted that the majority of the participants will be students of Wilfrid Laurier University. Nevertheless, the aim was to put the participant at ease and make the interview processes as pleasant and comforting as possible. Another location that was proposed was the University of Waterloo campus if it proves more convenient for the participants. I predicted that these location would make for a very comforting place to conduct this interview due to the setting and the relevance of this topic.

Field notes were taken throughout the interview. Furthermore, field notes were also taken while listening to tape recordings, transcribing the recording, and while reflecting upon a particular interview. Since this study focuses only on these focus groups, data will only derive from these participants and no outside source will be added.

Analysis:

To fully capture the experience of these participants, thematic analyses used to interoperate the data. The reason for this is that thematic analysis provides a flexible, rich and detail account of the data. This study will analyse the data to provide themes that express the intra-religious interactions of these Muslim youth in order to understand the experiences they have in the higher education system. The themes that will be noted will represent accounts that are experienced by the participants. It will be noted that the themes should not be taken as a generalization of the experience of other Muslim youth in the higher education system.

Once interviews were conducted, the answers of all participants from each focus group was reviewed and read to expose any commonalties. While doing this, I was taking notes of my

first impression. Then the data was reread once again to insure no data has been missed. Once relevant data was noted, it was coded. Once coded, the relevant data was categorised into themes. Once themes were developed, they were linked to other themes that emerged from the data. Only the relevant themes were noted and organized in accordance to how relevant they are to the experiences of the participants. This part included my interpretation and how these themes relate to the literature surrounding this study.

Limitation:

This study, like all other studies does have limitation. One of them is myself as a researcher. My understanding and perspective on this topic is limited to my experience. As an individual, my understanding of Islam is limited to this research as I have never truly indulged in the religion. Therefore, my data and my analysis is very much limited to what I learn throughout this study. Another limitation is that this will be my first time conduct an interview on this topic. Some of the individuals that I will be interviewing will possess a much greater understanding of Islam than I, which may influence my data collection. That being said, I am confident that the outcomes of this research far outweighs any limitations this study may have. Through undergoing the processes discussed above, much of these limitations will be mitigated and controlled.

Modifications:

There is only one modification made to this study. The planned sample for this study was originally to be twelve participants, six Shia students and six Sunni students. However, due to time limitation, scheduling, and the fact that many students were away from the university due to it being summer. The sample size was modified to seven participants, four Sunni participants

consisting of one Sunni woman and three Sunni men and three Shia participants consisting of one Shia woman and two Shia men.

Ethics:

Prior to beginning any interview, all participants signed a consent form and confidentiality agreement. Understandably, due to the interviews being a focus group it was difficult to insure complete anonymity which is why at the beginning of the interview I once again went over the consent form and confidentiality agreement and stress the importance of not discussing any matters that goes on in this interview with anyone else outside of this interview. Furthermore, the location of the interviews was selected so as to minimise any chances of any participant of the group being recognized by anyone outside the interview group.

The consent form explained to the participants the intent of this study, what was expected of them, how this research will use the information given, and the procedures put in place to protect their safety.

Participants in this study were rewarded with monetary compensation of $20. This insured interest and made up for any additional time needed to conduct the interview. This compensation was given to each participant at the end of each interview.

Participation in this study was voluntary, participants were able to withdraw at any time and refuse to answer any question they did not feel conformable answering. Furthermore, no pressure was put on anyone to answer or explain why they chose the answer they did. Once the interview was over, all participants were able to withdraw all or parts of their testimonials from the data or request to modify any answers they gave before. This ensured that participants felt

comfortable and that no long term or psychological ramifications would be experienced by any of the participants.

Findings:

Community:

Through examining the relationship Muslim student youth had with the other sect, it became clear that the sense of community and belonging played a major role in both groups. To belong and feel welcomed was a major factor when it came to the creation and becoming a member of clubs such as the MSA. Interviewees expressed that seeing other students who are similar to them in dress, such as hijab, or faith gave them a sense of safety and comfort. Even though the topic of political and religious divide did at times have an influence when it came to interactions with the other sect, the main focus however was kept on the unity of the Umma. Through focusing on similarities, the interactions with the other sect continued to back and support the sense of community and belonging which drove the desire to join a club from the beginning.

By simply identifying as a Muslim, it was reason enough to start this bonding. Mays, a former executive member of the MSA and a Sunni Muslim, explains,

> "Once they know you are a Muslim they try to bond as much as possible because they consider us part of a minority so as soon as we find people with similar backgrounds we try to connect with each other."

By viewing themselves as a minority, the need to build a bond and ties with other Muslims deepens. Through finding and discussing commonalities, members of Muslim clubs and Muslim students in universities seek to identify and broaden their community and the sense of belonging. This echoes Leonard's (2015) statement in which he emphasises the need to focus on

commonalities and appreciating the differences Muslims may have. However, from the data gathered, difference seemed to not be appreciated but avoided.

The difference between the two sects appeared to always be in the background of every conversation once the sect is known. In order to sustain this sense of comfort and belonging, members expressed that the topic of difference either was avoided by simply not discussing it or it is downplayed. As Maryam who identifies as a Shia Muslim and was a former member of both the TMA and the MSA explains,

> "There is so much within just that we can communicate on and unite on. You know what, sometimes we have really petty arguments of I pray with my hands down to my side or I pray with my hand to my chest... what is that?"

Mohamad who identifies as a Shia Muslim and has experienced this tension first hand in the Middle East, adds by stating,

> "Just remember that we are Muslim in the end, focus on the similarities between us because we probably have 90% similarity and 10% difference but this 10% is what makes the division between the sects."

The participants noted that discussions of the sectarian divide were mostly avoided simply so as to not cause discomfort. Even though this approach was apparent in the Shia group more than the Sunni group, both groups avoided the topic. Understanding that they were the minority, the Shia group explained that when interacting with the other majority sect they would avoid exposing the fact that they were Shia. Ahmad, who identifies as a Shia Muslim and is a former executive member and co-founder of the TMA explains,

> "In my case I have been just trying to sort of like avoid mentioning that at all. If it comes up I'll mention that I'm Shia but like I don't see it as something that I need to go and flaunt, and that allows me to make a lot of friends who are Sunni Muslim"

Through adopting this avoidance approach, Ahmad avoided any tension this divide may cause. When it came down to the discussion, the approach was none confrontational. The

conversation focused on general aspects, with the main goal of building a bond and closing the gap between the two sects. Mays adds to this by explaining,

> "We would discuss how we were raised and how we were brought up to see the other sect and how that didn't make any sense and by the end of our schooling together she became one of my closest friends"

By downplaying the difference and the negative views that they were told to hold, more focus and attention is given to the similarities thus allowing for a more peaceful interaction and dialogue.

Lack of Education:

Although the sectarian divide was a well-known fact amongst the participants, many expressed their lack of understanding and knowledge of the other sect. What was clear was the fact that many of the information which constructed the opinions of the participants were simply transmitted from either parents, friends, or media outlets. There was little to no personal experience or interaction with the other sect before coming to university which only sustained their beliefs. Ibrahim who identifies as a Sunni Muslim and was not a member of either the TMA or the MSA explains,

> "Until recently I was quite ignorant in the differences of the sects within Islam and that's only been sort of taken care of through academics, through school as opposed to at home… a lot of these I guess stereotypes are kind of reinforced to the point it's not encouraging of understanding the other sects so I think that given maybe 8 months ago learning about conflicts between Shia and Sunni I'd have a lot more attitude between the differences in sects as opposed to now"

This lack of understanding affected the comfort and the interaction between the Muslim youth to the point where it became an "Us versus Them" mentality. As Ibrahim further states "ignorance breeds more hatred based on not really knowing what the differences are". Through

the adoption of this mentality, the sense of comradery within each sect is strengthened, however, this does nothing to solve the current sectarian divide.

One thing that all participants agreed with was the lack of knowledge they had towards the other sect. Many Sunni participants explained that their interaction with Shia students was none existent until coming to university. This interaction encouraged them to learn more and attempt to understand the other sect. Omar who identifies as a Sunni Muslim adds to this by stating,

> "I was not really taught or given the right information about how and why Shias do the things they do, until I came here to university and was exposed to different kinds of sects"

Through this exposure, their understanding and views changed in that they became more positive and accepting of the other sect. With this new understanding, the participants explained that much of the understanding and information they held and received prior to interacting with the other sect was riddled with bias and false "opinions".

Likewise the Shia participants explained that as they were growing up, they would never attend Sunni events. The great majority of their religious experience is, similarly, centered on Shia events and Shia teaching with little Sunni exposure. As with the Sunni group, this resulted in much of their understanding to be constructed by family, friends and media. Maryam adds to this by explaining,

> "Growing up we are not going to Sunni events, mosques or like if we have a Shia mosque we are going to the Shia mosque kind of thing... and so growing up it was so overtly inundated to us that there was a Sunni Shia divide and specifically a theological divide so we begin to form a distrust for what the other says"

As a result of this sectarian focus at such a young age, negative attitudes and distrust of the Sunni sect began to manifest. Further surrounding oneself among similar minded and similar

opinionated individuals only added to the lack of understanding and willingness to appreciate or

learn about the other sect. As both groups explain, this distrust and lack of understanding did

result in harassment and negative circumstances.

These harassments were rarely confrontational, but subtle. These forms of harassment

ranged from theft to subtle actions which showed how the presence of the other sect was

unwelcomed. Mahmoud who is a Sunni Muslim and a former president of the MSA explains,

"I mean again it's a small little thing but I noticed that the next couple of times that I
walked into the room the (Shia) books were either taken off the shelf or was turned around so it
didn't say... you couldn't see Shia on the book. Little things like that... I would fix it, then
another day it would be taken off or turn around again."

When questioned for their opinion on why this would happen, all participants agreed that

it was due to the lack of understanding and unwillingness to appreciate the difference. Similarly,

Sunni participants experienced similar divisive behaviour where statements on the material of

Shia clubs stated "for more information on the authentic Islam visit this Shia website". By

putting such a statement on club material, it was perceived as an attack on the Sunni sect as

being unauthentic or false which is a very grave and offensive accusation in the Muslim religion.

Of course such a statement will only result in more divisive ideologies and teachings.

Exclusivity:

One aspect of the MSA that was questioned by the Shia participants was its inclusivity.

The majority of the Shia participants express that the MSA was exclusive to only Sunni

Muslims. When asked about this, the Sunni participants at first expressed that the MSA was

inclusive to all sects, however what Mahmoud states brings this into question. Mahmoud

explains that the MSA caters to all sects and aims to make all its events multi-faith so as to

include not just Muslims but also all religions as well. However that being said, it does not always turn out as planned or as stated on paper.

When asked about the MSA's executive team, Mahmoud stated,

"We were all Sunni on the exec team, even the directorship were all Sunni and unfortunately the majority of the exec team were all Pakistani as well. So it didn't just become a Sunni exclusive group, it became a Sunni Pakistani exclusive group."

Mahmoud further explains that the sense of exclusivity is felt by not only the Shia students but also other members. He explains that Muslims from different sects and Muslims who identify as LGBTQ also feel as though they do not belong in the MSA. Mahmoud concludes by stating that "On paper yes I would say so, but I think that in practice it's definitely lacking".

When asked about events, the Shia participants expressed that they would go the events hosted by the MSA, however, they felt that once it was known that they are Shia there would be no place for them to become an executive member. Ahmad explains,

"I have heard horror stories from people like Shia Muslims that tried to get on the MSA executive team and then it might have gone smoothly until they are uncovered as Shia and then their lives became very hard."

It is due to this that the Shia participants expressed that revealing their sect would not do them any good and further motivated them to create another club. Some of the Sunni participants on the other hand seemed to not have any idea this was happening. When asked about the inclusivity of the MSA Mays stated with surprise "I guess not".

Bridging:

Throughout the interview, it was clear that both groups demonstrated a strong will to mitigate the gaps that have been sustained through time. Both groups agreed that the responsibility to initiate such bridging is on the bigger group which was the MSA. Due to the

MSA being a bigger club and represented the majority sect, it is believed that they had the authority to contact and start the bridging processes. As Ahmad explains,

> "We are smaller we are the minority... it's like a mouse trying to convince an elephant to try to do what a mouse wants. It has to be somebody that both groups take seriously that could actually have the power... if the MSA initiated then I know that the TMA will respond"

Given that the MSA has been in existence for a much longer time than the TMA, it was felt that if the TMA initiated this bridging it would not have as much of an impact. Furthermore, we cannot forget that the creation of the TMA was a result of Shia students believing that their needs as Shia Muslims were not being met by the Sunni majority MSA. As Mays explains,

> "It's seems like a majority versus the minority. In any relationship like that there is privilege and there's power and with that, you know, the ball is automatically in one group's court."

To conduct such bridging, both groups agreed that by focusing on shared holiday events it would play as a reminder that they are not simply a Sunni or Shia student, but Muslims. Similar to as discussed above, through focusing on similarities and shared values the importance of unity is once again ignited.

Another point that was stressed along with bridging the current gaps between the two sects was, cooperation. In order to develop this bridging it was stressed that both groups need to equally cooperate in building this relationship. What worried both groups the most was one group feeling as though they are guests of the other group. Even though it was clear that it is the responsibility of the MSA to initiate the first contact, the event coordination and planning needed to be a group effort of both sects. As stated by Mahmoud,

> "I think it's important to get their input from the get-go and say let's build an event together, let's build this initiative together".

Through initiating this bridging by emphasizing this togetherness, the sense of comradery is expanded beyond the sectarian limits, thus acting once more as a reminder that they are more than Sunni or Shia, they are Muslim.

Resolutions:

Both groups stressed the need for dialogue in order for this tension to be dismantled. Such dialogue need not take the form of a debate or an argument of what the other has done, it must be done in a form of a discussion where both groups attempt to resolve a single issue that is hindering and limiting the growth of both groups. As Maryam explains,

> "We have to start approaching dialogue where we are coming together as equals not that Sunni's believe they are better than the Shia or the Shia believe they are better than the Sunni's. I think there is a necessity to come as equals where in a space we are willing to learn from each other and accept others differences."

Such a statement is reflective of the Canadas diverse approach of multiculturalism and tolerance of difference. With this approach being the countries vision, it plays a very influential role on the citizens of the country. For such a reason, it is understandable why Maryam has extended this approach to this issue. However, the same cannot be said to other countries who do not hold the same mentality or approach regarding difference.

To allow for such a space to exist the main focus needs to be education, something that both groups agree is lacking. This education came as a reminder of the history Muslims and how such history was manipulated and altered to weaken the bond and create division between Islam. As Ahmad explains,

> "I think the first thing we need to accept is that the west neocolonial, neo oriental, neo imperialist have exploited our vulnerabilities and that sectarian tension. People lived side

by side and engaged with each other for centuries and we have so many rich histories where there has been dialogue, where there has been communication without the sectarianism"

This echoes Trevor Wade's (2012) point of the negative manipulation endured by the Muslim people due to external government and political influence. This plays as a reminder that the true enemy and true divisive factor is not the sects and the simple differences that exist amongst the people, but it is the external influence and their divisive ideologies that we, unfortunately, have adopted.

Throughout the interview with both groups, a clear trend started to emerge. Both groups sought to find a third option so as to no longer allow for this clear divide and this black and white mentality. As all that is definitive about this topic, the third option came as a label that would allow for both sects and all other sects to unite under. With such an approach, both groups may tackle the issue with an open mind thus allowing for a safe space to be created where learning and acceptance can grow. The aim is that with such an approach, a precedent would be set in that all communication would follow such an approach where learning and acceptance is the essence of every conversation and interaction. Maryam further adds to this unity by mentioning the term SUSHI in which both sects can unite through the use of humor to shake the foundations of this divide.

> "If we have that social experiment where one says I'm Shia, one says I'm Sunni and the other says I'm SUSHI and see how people come and approach it and within the university setting, I think then we can start thematizing things and saying ok these are the kind of issues that are in a university setting"

By conducting this experiment, Maryam aims to send a message that there is a third option in which no label or conversation is being discussed. With the label SUSHI, Muslim youth can now answer the question of which sect they are from with this term. Through the use of humor and a third option, it shows that we are more than simply Sunni or Shia and allows for

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choice so as not to be forced to choose between the two. As discussed by the participants, such

an answer undermine the impact and meaning of such a question.

Furthermore in order to combat the lack of knowledge about the Muslim religion, it was

proposed that more educational sessions should be held so as to allow for students to educate

themselves and be exposed to other Muslim students. Omar expresses this point by stating,

> "A lot of students are not really educated about both sects so I think holding sessions
> where we talk about how and when everything all started just because that's going to cure
> a lot of ignorance and bias towards other sects whether its Sunni or Shia."

In addition to these sessions, Ibrahim brings up a good point where he shifts the focus to

the first year students who may also have never interacted with Muslims of other sects. Ibrahim

explains,

> "It would be great to kick the year off to get people situated here and again that first year
> community is a huge important mark for the MSA and TMA to kind of rinse themselves
> and wash themselves of the prejudges they had before coming in."

By allowing these sessions to take place, the aim is not only to allow for the exposure and

interaction with other Muslim students. It is also to encourage students to take classes that

discusses the culture and the religion so as to educate themselves both academically and socially.

Commonalties:

With this focus on unity, the ability of both groups is magnified in the sense that they are

no longer fighting each other but are standing side by side. There is much to be done for the

Muslim students in universities and in the west, the greatest one of them being, Islamophobia.

Such discrimination has been a plague on our campuses. The article, "Final Report of The Task

Force on Needs of Muslim Students" examines islamophobia on Canadian campuses. This report

yields unfortunate cases of discrimination that have violated many Muslim students' rights. Their

findings echo this study's findings in that there is a clear lack of understanding and an extensive ignorant ideologies that make the lives of Muslim students full of worry and suspicion.

They further reveal that Muslim students are unable to seek counselling on university campuses due to the limitation of the councillors knowledge and understanding of the problems faced by Muslim students on Canadian university campuses. Such issues are in need of immediate attention so as to not allow such ignorance and hatred to fester further and negatively influence students. If differences were in fact put aside and unity becomes the norm, the fight against the true evil and divisive ideology would become the main focus.

Furthermore, as many of the participants in both Sunni and Shia groups expressed, there is a lot to be done in regards to supporting Muslim students on campus, as Mays explains,

> "I mean the whole time I was in university we were trying to get extra prayer rooms, I think you guys got them now but it didn't happen in the four years I was in university and every year we made proposals and every year we had meetings and every year we were told it would happen but that never really happened"

Mahmoud adds to this by explaining how his efforts as the president of the MSA were ignored by the university.

> "If we had a Chaplin there, someone who is qualified to help Muslim students to get through that and that I think is a big gap missing and unfortunately there is no support from the university"

It is this lack of support and engagement of our institutions that resulted in the need of a separate school system that Dr. Zine (2007) pointed out. With no to little support given to Muslim students, practicing the religion becomes something of a worry and discomfort. Further adding sectarian tension to the issue only supplements this discomfort and weakens the bond necessary to build a positive force of change and acceptance.

These are but a small example of the many obstacles that Muslim students and Muslim clubs face on a university campus. The MSA and similar Muslim clubs have become more than simply university clubs, they have become a support group that provides a very important service to Muslim students that may feel left behind and ignored by either the university or the western society. Referring back to what was stated by Liyakat Takim (2011), the Muslim religion has been and continues to be demonised by the west. In addition, the increased political association with the Muslim religion such as labeling rebels in accordance with their religious sect, and politicians such as Donald Trump's use of islamophobia to gain support further increase this hatred and intolerance towards Islam and anyone who represent it.

When the participants were questioned about the influence such association may have, all agreed that this association negatively impacts the Muslim religion and spreads more divisive ideologies not only regarding Islam and the world, but within Islam as well. As Mays explains,

> "I think… that resonates with me as well… growing up there was this really weird, very fishy, vague things that I was told about other Muslims."

This conflict has become somewhat of a personal mission to somewhere such negative, intolerant ideologies have been passed down over generations, as Ibrahim explains,

> "Just saying that you are different than me… I don't like you because of it, and you know my father, my great father have nurtured this idea of the other being the enemy whether it's a Muslim sect or not they are all the enemy because they are not Sunni"

The simple fact that the other is different somehow gives justification for hatred and rejection. As Sprusansky (2015) stated, once politics is involved the sectarian difference becomes the focus. Much of the conflict between the two sects have been the result of such political influence. Influence with a goal to divide and cause chaos in order to throw the region into imbalancement and constant rivalry and fighting. This constant rivalry and fighting is sustained and passed on from government to government and generation to generation. With

such a continuous process this fight and the hatred of the other becomes a personal mission to fulfill and gain the respect of one's group or family.

Regret:

What is clear about this issue, is that at its center lies a lack of understanding and willingness to appreciate and accept the other. As long as the two sects do not interact and communicate, this rivalry will continue as a fulfillment to ones kin. The Us versus Them mentality will simply continue to be passed along through the generations. It is due to this, the importance of interaction and exposure is revealed in order to move forward to a peaceful coexistence and possibly an end to this ancient and historic intra-faith conflict.

When asked about the Shia-Sunni club divide on campus, participants expressed a sense of loss that a resolution was not found earlier. Mays expresses her reaction by stating,

> "I felt kind of sad about it that we weren't able to be, you know, have the united group of Muslims that I always wanted Muslims to be."

Other participants understood such a move as they saw that the MSA did not attend well to the Shia students' needs. Mahmoud explains his understanding by stating,

> "To be honest, I get it. I get what they're saying completely in the quote. I don't know, if I were a Shia Muslim would I be able to relate to the MSA that I was a part of."

That being said, with the continued globalization of our world and increase reliance and trade between all kinds of people. Such interaction and tolerance will need to happen for the simple reason of survival. As both groups agreed, newer generations are becoming more and more open and willing to learn and interact with the other sect. This is a hopeful sign that interaction and acceptance of both groups may well happen on a global and massive scale. To hate and discriminate simply based on faith is becoming something that is "petty". Thus, on a

global scale, to discriminate on such bases will only harm ones chances of success. Mahmoud expresses his view on the next generations by stating,

> "I noticed that the younger generation is, even the execs of the current MSA the younger kids. I think they care less and less about these kinds of divisiveness. They are so much more open to dialogue."

As this study demonstrated, what is lacking about this conflict is the education and the understanding of the other. Most importantly, is the familial education of the other. Once the processes of hatred and intolerance stops being passed along, we will become more open to understand and accept other ways of worshiping and practicing the Muslim religion.

Furthermore, relating back to the research's question of how does the political conflict in Muslim-majority settings between Sunni and Shia Muslims affect Muslim youth and intra-religious interaction in a university setting in Canada, it is revealed that this tension continues to be an issue that Muslim youth experience. It is through ones willingness to be open and appreciative of the other sect will this tension ever have a chance of dismastment.

By allowing such an ideology to differentiate and control us, we are allowing and sustaining the very barriers that were once used against Muslims to benefit the aggressor. As such, the responsibility of educating and understanding other sects and ways of worshiping and practices Islam falls on the person themselves. It is through this that we are able to break free of these barrier that we allow to limit and divide Muslims not only in the west, but globally.

Conclusion:

The purpose of this study was to examine the conflict and peaceful coexistence between the two major sects in Islam, the Sunni sect and the Twelver Shias sect. This study shows that the ongoing tensions and conflicts between Sunnis and Shias in Muslim-majority societies continues

to be an issue that Muslim youth are struggling with in minority settings such as Canada. It is evident that even though Muslim youth from both sects have experienced harassment, there is a trend to mitigate the gaps this conflict has caused. Just like all religions, Islam is taken as a way of life, a guide, or a purpose. However, the meanings of these words varies in difference from one person to another. As seen in the findings, the mentality of each individual, although may share some elements with other participants, was shaped by the environment around them. Ranging from media, family, to social norms, we are at the mercy of these influences to guide and shape how we see each other and everyone around us.

The findings of this research emphasise the importance of religion in our lives. Starting with the first theme, community, it is clear how important building a bond is to Muslim students. In a land that may be strange to some, Muslim students sought to create a community that holds their values and ways of life so as to ease the integration processes into a new society. In doing so, the focus was put on the shared values and shared beliefs so as to avoid any discomfort that may threaten the creation of this bond.

Furthermore, it is this bond that resulted the attachment to one's sect. As shown in the findings, this attachment to one's sect has been harboured from a very young age thus strengthening the attachment Muslim youth have towards their sect. With such an attachment, the participants expressed that it left them vulnerable to distrust of the other sect. This distrust resulted in some distancing themselves from and avoid Muslims of other sects.

Similar to any sensitive topic that may cause discomfort among members of a group, avoidance was a key method of protecting this bond. Whenever possible, difference was overlooked and purposely avoided. However, such a method cannot always protect this bond

which is why whenever forced to face any differences, the significance of this difference is downplayed so as to mitigate any negative influence or discomfort it may cause.

The second theme exposes the limited understanding and interaction both the Sunni and Shia sects had towards each other. Due to such limitations, a chance to understand and learn about the other sect was never given. As a result, the only information these students had about the other sect was through the general understanding, the conflict, and rivalry between the two sects. With such a focus, it is no wonder the Muslim youth have such a negative attitude towards the other sect.

The limited understanding justified the avoidance of the topic. Since many did not understand the other sect, they did not want to put themselves and the other in a position of having to explain their way of life. To put someone in such a position in a university club setting was seen as not being appropriate.

This negative understanding led to harassment on both sides where misleading information and indirect aggravation was directed to individuals of the other sect. When given the chance to communicate, however, it was quickly shown that the other sect was anything but the understanding previously held. With a little exposure the university setting allowed for, the lack of knowledge was quickly shown as the main reason as to why this rivalry continues to be an issue between Muslims.

In light of this new understanding and exposure, it was clear that there needs to be processes put in place to bridge and close the gaps created. As such, the third theme revealed the way in which such bridging could be started. By allowing the commonalities between the two sects to be the main focus, both clubs the MSA and the TMA could celebrate together the many

holidays shared and celebrated by all Muslims. By doing so, the bond is strengthened and commonalities emboldened. Furthermore, such events allow for the interaction and communication to take place which further downplays the difference between the sects and exposes the commonalities that are shared.

With this communication and interaction taking place, the limited, oppressive and inherently aggressive mentality is shaken in that students are not allowing this historic and political conflict to separate them and cause further divisiveness. By proposing terms such as SUSHI, a third option is given so as to show that there is no need for this religious separation. Such a term shows that both sects, Sunni and Shia, need not be separate but be as one.

Once the meaning of unity is understood, it revealed the vast issues facing Muslim students that needed to be resolved. With this unity in place, more strength and focus would be allocated to assisting and providing support to Muslim students on university campuses. With the current increase of islamophobia due to political tensions and political scapegoating, the need to unite and support each other has never been in such demand. It was expressed that by allowing differences to create gaps and distance Muslim students from each other, the struggle against oppression and discrimination is weakened and if continued will put the whole cause under immense danger.

It is for such reasons that the expression of regret is very well place and expected. The essence of this issue, is the influence and manipulation of foreign interest and by allowing this negative influence to continue to divide us and make us out to be each other's enemy is but an unfortunate decision. As expressed in the findings, what is needed is the willingness to be open and appreciative of the other. Once appreciation and understanding is the drive for the

communication and interaction between these sects, the inherited hate and demonization of the other will be dismantled and left in the past where it rightfully belongs.

Recommendations:

The hope of this study is to shed more light on the intrafaith issues Muslim youth are experiencing. As discussed earlier, Muslim students are facing tension from individuals outside and inside the religion. Therefore, as a researcher and a Muslim, I feel it is my duty to attempt to mitigate this problem by exposing the difficulties endured by Muslim students and give them a voice to share their concerns and recommendations. For that reason, this section is created to share the recommendations proposed by the participants of this study on how to better the circumstance and improve intrafaith dialogue between the Muslim youth.

An aspect that is stressed throughout the study is the importance of unity. Understandably, an internally sound organization could focus all of its energy and resources striving to expand and better the environment around it. With the MSA being viewed as representing the Sunni sect and the TMA representing the Shia sect, there will always be a clear physical divide between all Muslim students. It is for such reasons that the participants of this study expressed regret and a great will to restore and fix the relations between the Shia and the Sunni members.

One of the proposals by Mohammad was that the MSA and the TMA change their name to a more uniting and inclusive name which accounts for the Sunni sect, the Shia sect and all other sects within Islam. The United Muslim Association was the proposed name. It may seem as a good idea, however, the MSA has been in existence for a very long time. Furthermore, the

MSA exists in many universities across Canada and the United States thus the chances of all agreeing to change the name are slim to none.

What is important and what needs to change is the mentality held by the executive members of the club. As discussed in the findings, the executive team of the MSA at Wilfrid Laurier University has become not just Sunni exclusive but has also been dominated by one ethnicity. In order to prevent this from happening there needs to be, in writing, a requirement to establish a multiethnic and multi-faithed group so as to reflect the general members of the club.

Another proposition was to hold discussions so as to talk about the internal issues facing Muslim students. The aim of these discussions are to raise awareness about the tensions that exist within the two organization and discuss steps to resolve these issues in order to continue to be united. It was emphasised that this discussion needs to be in a neutral environment with the understanding that placing blame is not the reason for such a meeting.

Relating back to what was stated before, it is vital to remind everyone of the commonalities that both sects share. However it is foreseeable that differences will be discussed which is why the participants explained that appreciation of differences is key when discussing matters of difference. It is also vital to not allow the discussion to turn into an argument. Once a discussion turns into an argument, it creates a clear divide where two opponents argue over a topic. In order to prevent this, it is recommended to continuously remind everyone of the reason this discussion is being had and assure everyone that there are no sides to defend or to attack.

Furthermore, it is recommended that the 10 principles listed by Al-Qaradawi should be used to guide this dialogue. 1. Understand properly, husn al-fahm ; 2. Consider properly, husn al-zann ; 3. Concentrate on matters undisputed; 4. Discuss matters controversial; 5. Avoid

provocation; 6. Refrain from anathematizing those who testify 'There is no God but Allah'; 7. Avoid the exaggerations of religious extremists, shatat al-ghulat ; 8. Speak plainly and solve problems wisely; 9. Guard against the machinations of the enemy; 10. Unite perforce in times of trouble.

All participants of the discussion should be familiar with these principles and allow these principles to guide and shape their opinions and points of discussion. With these principles acting as the rules of the discussion, the goal of the meeting is continuously reasserted and kept safe from deviation.

In addition to this, a topic that needs to be discussed in these meetings is history. The participants explained that it is important to remind all Muslim students that this tension is the result of foreign manipulation to advance foreign agendas. By doing this, the participants expressed that this may serve as a wakeup call to some and allow for clarity to see the true "enemy". Furthermore, this would serve as a reminder to everyone of the rich histories that Muslims of all sects shared. We cannot forget that Muslims once lived among each other and among other religions peacefully where what sect a person was from and how they prayed were not an issue to divide and cause tension.

Holding such discussions allows for the students to discuss issues that they are happening now by analysing any event that is of concern or in need of any attention. Participants explained that the current events of political scapegoating of Muslims and the increase in racism are topics that need immediate attention. By holding these discussion, Muslims of all sects would feel that the issues they face are attended to and are given a voice to share and discuss any form of discrimination. These discussions, not only expose the many issues Muslim students and Muslim

individuals face daily, but also strengthens the bond, the drive, and the unity that will end this sectarian tension.

In order for any of this discussion to happen, it is proposed that a third party intervene so as to mediate between the two clubs. This third party needs to be a neutral figure that is willing to organize the first meeting where these issues could be discussed. It was proposed that I as a researcher be the mediator between the two clubs, however, unfortunately due to timing restriction and limitation of this MRP such a task could not be fulfilled by myself. However that being said, such a proposition is recommended for future researchers interested in further investigating this topic.

Discussion:

Throughout this study, I am reminded of the many things I was told as a child about other Muslims in other sects. It was made clear what an impact familial influence has on our opinions. Understandably so, our family and parents are the first ones to tell us about the world and how to navigate through it. It is difficult to simply put the blame on the parents and accuse them of continuing this trend of hatred and divisiveness. As parents they are doing everything they could to keep us out of harm's way, and if that harm meant other Muslims of other sects then it is understandable why such a divisive mentality was used to keep us separate.

It was quite fascinating to see how we have become victims of the same divisive mentality, where the children on both sides were told the other was the aggressor while they were the righteous ones. This was clear when Ahmad expressed that he always thought the Sunni's were always the ones "bashing" the Shia Muslims. However, it was shown throughout

the interview that wrongs have been done on both sides. This was further shown when Sunni participants expressed hearing odd and "weird fishy things" about the other sect.

As individuals, we need to be critical of all that we hear and attempt to find the intent behind all that is said to us. In this example, the method some families decided to take although may be out of protection and may not have intended to contribute to the hatred and divineness within Islam, it did however, negatively influenced the perception of the other sect. what is important here is that in order for us to take a step closer to ending this issue, we need to stop the inheritance of this negative mentality. Once the sterilization of this mentality and way of thought takes hold, the continued negative outlook and the hatred which is the essence of this issue will no long have a life line to spread and cause more hatred and separation.

As expressed in the findings, more and more students are caring less about this divide and the conflict that has split Muslims apart. Although this may be a good sign that this mentality is ending, it is still important to understand the issue so as to not leave ourselves ignorant of the history we endured. Which is why we need to shed more light on the sectarian issues that Muslim youth are experiencing. Some of the resolutions proposed by this study's participants were to hold discussions amongst students to discuss and talk about the issues they face and how they were taught to perceive the other sect in an open minded and accepting discussion. However I would further add that more academic courses should be available for students to learn and enlighten themselves regarding this issue.

With more courses being available, students of all religions and beliefs could learn about the history and the struggle Muslims have to endure. Such discussion of suffering may not be suitable for discussion among students or friends alone, but would server to be very informative if taught in a classroom by a professor who is ready to explain all sides of the issue. Furthermore,

as made evident by the discussions had by the participants, a great focus is put on avoidance of the issue. However discomforting this topic may be to some, in order for us to understand the issue and its complexities we need to indulge ourselves in the comfortable and the uncomfortable aspects of this topic. This is where the importance of a classroom comes into play.

A class room provides a safe space to discuss these sensitive topics and allow for students to share their opinions and thoughts however divisive or different. It is only by allowing this safe space to exist, that this complex and uncomfortable topic could be examined in great detail. This academic approach would serve as neutral grounds for examination and learning. The aim of this method is that no individual from any sect would feel overwhelmed, outnumbered, or feels responsible to whatever sect they belong in.

With the increased will and interest of Muslim students to learn, providing courses will demonstrate the care and interest a university has towards Muslim students. As shown in the findings, the participants did not feel as though the university provided much support. Many of their proposals were declined and a great amount of struggling was needed to secure a prayer room. Providing more courses would give the Muslim students the space needed to discuss the great amount of issue facing them in regards to Muslim and none Muslim topics.

As explained by Mahmoud previously, university clubs such as the MSA and the TMA are there to assist students and solve some of the problem facing students. However, they are not there to solve the world's problem. This is the reason the role of a university is stressed. It is due to the fact that however important the cause is, students come to university to learn and obtain a degree. This is the mentality of a great amount of students. Which is why, however organized a university club is, the interest and the aim of a member is always seeking to provide and support

that degree they are here for. By allowing for more courses, it permits for learning while also providing an opportunity to still work towards the academic aspect of a person's degree.

Furthermore, more academic research is needed so as to counter the negative perspective that the media has put on this issue. Sectarian division has long been used to ratchet up tensions and ease the processes of conflict creation. With more academic research, we can further expose the manipulation and the agenda that is being pushed on to the Muslim people. With the direction the media and politics is heading, being Muslim is going to continue to be a struggle and a disadvantage. The aim here is that by increasing academic studies in this topic, the university and other influential outlets would bring more awareness to this topic thus allowing for more resources of learning and education.

Reflection:

As an Alawite Muslim I completely understand the avoidance approach taken regarding this topic. However, by conducting this study it was made clear that this avoidance approach does nothing but sustain the issue at hand. It is very clear that the Alawite sect is looked at suspiciously by many Muslims, as such, exposing my sect would put me in a situation where I constantly have to explain my sect and our beliefs. It was as though every aspect of myself is put into question. It is for this reason that I understand why the Shia participants of this study did not expose their sect unless asked.

Unlike the Shia participants however, many a time I was advised by family members to simply lie about my sect in order to avoid any tension. This exposes the aggressive side of this topic, where belonging to the wrong sect could have a very negative impact on an individual and their future. Before conducting this study, for me an individual's sect only had a political

influence. For example, on one hand in some countries being a certain sect could be very dangerous while in other country being a certain sect could be very beneficial and lucrative.

As discussed previously, the reasons for these advantages and disadvantages are purely political. In a climate that is very volatile knowing who to trust is very important when it comes to survival and protection. As an Alawite, I was always told to be warry of anyone that is not of the same sect. there reason for this is because it is perceived that the Alawite sect receives a lot more privileges than other sects do. For this reason, it was perceived that once an Alawite is discovered some may want to take revenge or vent their frustration through harming them or placing blame on that individual.

Clearly, these frustrations are a result of poor politics and governance. However, as discussed previously, when religion is thrown into the mix the issue becomes much greater. Politics is an already personal matter where ones government can highly influence an individual's life. Furthermore, by openly favouring a certain type of individuals it is completely understandable why everyone else would be furious with the government and the people it favours.

When adding religion to this tension, the personal aspect of this issue is broadened and expanded thus making the issue vulnerable to greater dangers and divisiveness. When there is a political issue, that issue is dealt with at that time and the blame is put on a certain government. However, when it comes to religion that issue becomes part of the identity of the individual living through it. With this taking hold, the cycle of hatred continues where it becomes inherited thus deepening the anger and the hatred.

It is for this reason that I believe that in order for us to end this cycle we need to instead of inheriting our children this divisive mentality. We need to pass to them the dangers of this mentality and the suffering it has caused people globally. There needs to be a greater focus on the fact that religion is there for peace not war and dealing with the ones who have offended the religion or are not living in accordance to this religion is not up to us.

In addition to this, in order for us to further tackle this mentality of sectarian divide. There needs to be a greater push for self-control, moderation, and tolerance. These traits need to be taught and preached by all aspects of a society. Starting from the family, the school, and the media. A greater focus is put on the media to continuously educate the people and sustain the mentality of coexistence so as to allow for difference to exist in a peaceful manner.

Furthermore, a great responsibility is put on religious leaders to educate their followers and extend this peaceful mentality through their preaching and teachings. As community leaders to some, religious leaders have a great responsibly in shaping the mind of their followers and harbouring a peaceful approach. As discussed before, some religious leaders have speared negative views on not only other religions but other Muslims as well. Such negative and divisive teachings need not exists and should be strictly prohibited.

I would further this sectarian responsibility to the government and law enforcement. Sectarianism needs to be taken seriously and strict disciplinary and rehabilitative measures need to be put in place to deal with anyone attempting to spread hatred and exploit this sectarian divide. That being said, this topic and any similar divisive topic cannot be resolved through punishment alone. Greater focus needs to be put on rehabilitation and educating the public on these topics and their harmfulness.

I personally approach this negative mentality as an illness that needs to be treated. However, just like any other illness when it starts to cause harm to others it needs to be contained so as to mitigate the damage that can occur. Due to this issue being so integrated into our society, we cannot expect the solution to quickly solve this problem. By educating the public from a young age, this issue and many other similar issues will eventually be resolved.

Similar to the medical field, illnesses are treated by doctors, nurses, and other specialists. When it comes to society, these social illnesses are treated by public figures such as teachers, community leaders, and other public servants. Furthermore, in order for the treatment is be effective, there needs to be communication between all these individuals so as to cure this illness. Without this communication or with different aspects of society working against each other the result will only be divisiveness and intolerance.

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Appendices:

Recruitment letter

Hello,

My name is Ghaith Khadour, I am a Master's student working under the supervisions of Dr. Jasmin Zine at the Sociology Department at Wilfrid Laurier University. The reason that I am contacting you is that I am conducting a study that examines how the political conflict between Shia and Sunni Muslims affect Muslim youth and intra-religious interaction in a university setting. The aim here is to uncover any experiences that stems from the larger political conflict that is the cause of the tension between the Shia and Sunni Muslim university students. The focus will be on the university environment where the political conflict may have had an influence upon social interaction and dialogue between these groups of students.

Participation in this study will involve a semi structured interview where participants will answer questions regarding their experiences of interacting with other Muslim students. The interview will consist of two separate focus groups consisting of six Sunni students and Six Shia students. I will be meeting with each group separately and the whole interview will be tape recorded.

The interview is scheduled to take one hour to complete. In appreciation of your time commitment, you will receive a $20 Tim Hortons Gift Card. I would like to assure you that the study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Wilfrid Laurier University Research Ethics Committee. However, the final decision about participation is yours.

If you are interested in participating, please contact me at *Khad1300@mylaurier.ca* I will then send a confirmation email indicating that you have been signed up and provide you with further information concerning the location of the study. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Ghaith Khadour

Consent Letter

Wilfrid Laurier University

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

Islam in higher education: exploring the intra religious interactions between Shia and Sunni students

Researcher: Ghaith Khadour

Supervisor: Dr. Jasmin Zine

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to examine how the political conflict between Shia and Sunni Muslims affect Muslim youth and intra-religious interaction in a university setting. The aim here is to uncover any experiences that stems from the larger political conflict that is the cause of the tension between the Shia and Sunni Muslim university students. The focus will be on the university environment where the political conflict may have had an influence upon social interaction and dialogue between these groups of students.

INFORMATION

The interview is scheduled to take one hour to complete. This will be a semi structured interview where the participants will answer questions regarding their experiences of interacting with other Muslim students. The interview will consist of two separate focus groups consisting of six Sunni students and Six Shia students. I will be meeting with each group separately and the whole interview will be tape recorded.

RISK

Due to the topic's political concern it may pose some limited social risk for participants who have strong feelings about the issue. However, all the members of the focus group will be of the same religious sect and will share the similar political outlooks and views. In order to keep the participants anonymous, all participants will be given different names and no information that could identify them will be used in the research. Furthermore, personal information outside of the basic demographic make up of the sample will not be noted in the research paper.

BENEFITS

Due to the lack of research in this field, there is little literature regarding the views within the Muslim religion focused on a university setting. This study will expose how political views influences individuals from these two Islamic Sects, Shia and Sunni, in regards to their views and interactions with each other in a university setting. It is clear that there is already existing

tension between these two sectors. This study will inform us of how this tension is affecting students and their interactions. By exposing this, the aim is that more research is conducted to examine whether or not discrimination is occurring within the religion as well. This study will also examine the possibilities opened up by intra-faith dialogue and peace-building strategies.

Initials _____

CONFIDENTIALITY

Once data is collected it will be transcribed and saved in a password protected computer. THE RAW DATA WILL ALSO BE KEPT FOR 2 YEARS AND THEN DELETED (2). I, THE PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR, WILL BE RESPONSIBLE OF THE DISPOSAL OF THE RAW DATA (1). My supervisor Dr. Jasmin Zine and I will be the only individuals allowed access to the data collected.

COMPENSATION

For participating in this study you will receive a $20 Tim Hortons Gift Card. All participants will be responsible for reporting the $20 gift individually to the Canada Revenue Agency.

CONSENT

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, (or you experience adverse effects as a result of participating in this study) you may contact the researcher, Ghaith Khadour, at 519-781-5365. This project has been reviewed and approved by the University Research Ethics Board. If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Dr. Robert Basso, Chair, University Research Ethics Board, Wilfrid Laurier University, (519) 884-1970, extension 4994 or rbasso@wlu.ca

CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT STATEMENT

 I AGREE TO NOT COMMUNICATE THE IDENTITIES OF PARTICIPANTS NOR SHARE COMMENTS MADE BY OTHERS IN THE GROUP (3).

PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study,

every attempt will be made to remove your data from the study, and have it destroyed. You have the right to omit any question(s)/procedure(s) you choose.

FEEDBACK AND PUBLICATION

All Participants will have access to the MRP upon request. I will submit abstracts to relevant conferences such as the Congress of the Social Sciences and Humanities which will be held in Toronto in 2017.

CONSENT

I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

Participant's signature_____ Date _____

Investigator's signature_____Date _____

Interview Questions

- How has your experience been like with Muslims of the other sect?

- How do you think the political conflict between Shia and Sunni Muslims affect Muslim youth, especially in university setting?

- Have you noticed or experienced tensions between Sunni/Shia Muslim students on campus?

    o What do you think are the sources of these tensions? What might be done to help resolve this?

- Do you have any specific concerns as a Sunni/Shia student on your university campus?

- What do you think of the Shia students creating their own club and distancing themselves from mainstream Muslim clubs such as the MSA?

- What has your experience been with MSA or similar student groups on campus?

- Is your MSA inclusive of all sectarian groups?

- In your opinion how can intra-faith dialogue on campus be better facilitated?

- Who should organize this?

- Have you found support for your concerns on campus? What kind of supports are needed?

- Have you encountered any forums on campus or in the community that allow for interaction and dialogue between Sunni/Shia students?
    o If so please describe. If not, what might these spaces or forums look like?