



## **Islamic Sects and Terrorism: Similarities and Differentiations**

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**Abstract:** There is a constant debate about the connection between Islam and terrorism. In fact, Muslims are subjected to more heinous crimes than west of terrorism which is significantly result of continued western interventions in Islamic countries. This paper aims to give more understanding of Islamic sects. Islamic sects were divided into four groups in this paper based on level of religiosity. Although, majority of Muslims are moderate and modern but very small groups are considered as extreme or radical Islamic sects. Comparative and descriptive analysis were used in this paper to distinguish between moderate, modern, extreme and radical Islamic sects. Fifteen most Muslim population countries in the world (65% of Muslims around the world) were selected in this paper for comparison among the four Islamic sects. Results showed that, majority of Muslims (near to 87%) are moderate and modern, 10% are extreme and less than 3% may participate in acts of terror. This paper also discussed how these Islamic sects impact on the social and political life of the Islamic societies.

**Key words:** Moderate, Modern, Radical and Extreme Islamic sects, Terrorism

### **1. Introduction**

Islamic Sects play a significant role in social and political life of Islamic countries. Although most of these countries adopted modern governance systems, majority of citizens in Islamic countries consider religion (Islam) as a real role for everything in their life and these governance systems are means. According to OIC (Organization of Islamic Cooperation) which is an international organization founded in 1969, there are 57 Islamic member states, with a collective population of over 1.6 billion as of 2008 [1].

In general, Islamic sects are divided into four main groups which are moderate, modern extreme and radical groups. Moderate Islamic groups are represented by many Islamic organizations in Islamic countries and west. These groups usually don't have political goals, but they play an important role in social

life of the Islamic societies. Modern groups or political Islamic groups are leading some of countries in Islamic World while others are opponents. Extreme groups are usually small groups in every Islamic country but sometimes they could bring serious issues to the societies. While the radical groups is the most dangerous groups which brings serious problems for their societies, country and world.

Islamic sects are similar to each other in the main pillars of worship and faith but they have different approaches of explanations and interpretations of Quran and Traditions (Sunnah). There are many different Islamic doctrines, but all of these doctrines are gathered under the main sects which are Sunni and Shi'a. Countries such as Indonesia, Pakistan, Nigeria, Turkey and Egypt have majority of Sunni while countries such as Iran and Iraq have majority of Shia. Most majority of Muslims around the world belong to Sunni Sect including many groups such as Wahhabi, Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi while Shi'a sect includes the rest of these groups such as Twelvers (Ethan-'Asharis), Seveners (Isma'ili's), Fivers (Zaydis), Alevi and Sufis.

This paper gives simple comparison between Islamic sects based on different understanding of these sects of Islam and traditions. In addition, this paper describes the role of Islamic sects in the social and political aspects in their societies by giving examples in some Islamic countries where those sects are more active.

## **2. Literature Review**

At the first century of Islam, there were two branches Sunni and Shia Islam in addition to Khawarj. Each one of these branches separated into many schools. For instance, Sunni branch spilt to four different schools which are Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'I and Hanbali while Shia school was divided into many schools such as Isma'ili's, Jafri, Zaydi, Sofi and Alevi. With the passage of time, these schools separated again and again to tens or even more groups and bands. The figure below showed some of these branches and schools [2].

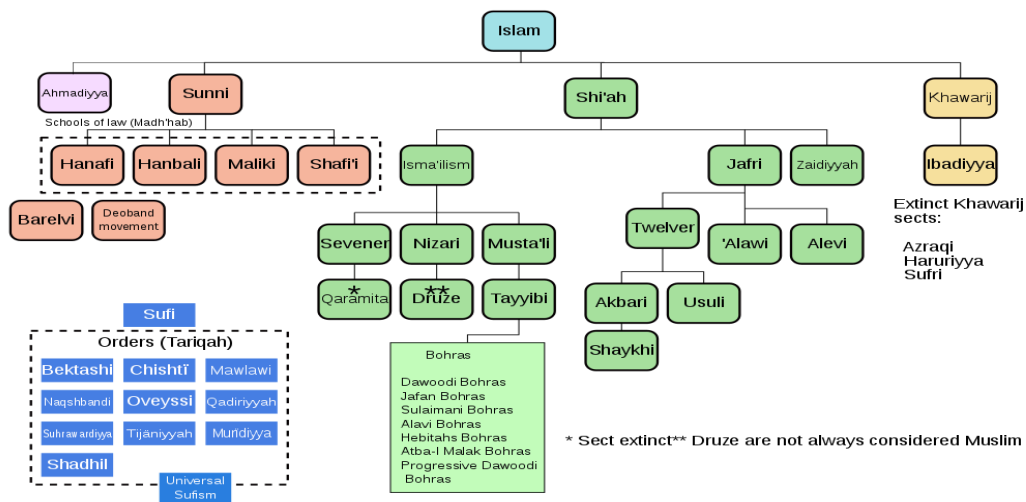


Figure 1: Branches and Schools of Islam

There are many studies about Islamic sects and doctrines but this paper describes the similarities and differentiations between these sects and explores the role of such sects in social and political life of Islamic countries. In this paper, Islamic sects were divided into three main categories which are moderate, modern and extreme (Radical) based on different extraction of Islam.

**2.1 Moderate Islamic Sects:** the reality is that most of westerner’s researchers and even politicians see Islam world through Islamic sects and doctrines. But the truth is majority of Muslims don’t belong to any of these doctrines even they are accounted part of them. If we ask this simple question for any Muslim who are under the determination of main Islamic sects Sunni or Shia “Are you Sunni or Shia?” the answer will be “I am Muslim”... Just a Muslim... which means that majority of Muslims around the world consider themselves a Normal Muslim who doesn’t follow any one of the Islamic sects or doctrines. Moderate Muslims are those Muslims who are represent Islam around the world and have the majority of population in Islamic countries and non-Islamic countries. While followers of some Islamic parties are small part in some Islamic countries and in the best case, they are a one component of many in one Islamic country. Moderate Muslims Believe in God and follow His prophet Mohammed. They believe in five pillars of Islam and six pillars of Iman and they ignore any differentiations between Islamic doctrines and sects (sub-issues in Islamic Jurisprudence).

**2.2 Modern Islamic Sects:** Modern Islamic Sects or Political Islamic Groups are those groups who believes in Diligence (Ijtihad). Ijtihad is an Islamic legal term referring to independent reasoning [3] or the thorough exertion of a jurist’s mental faculty in finding a solution to a legal question [4]. Modernists of both Islamic Schools (Sunni and Shia) have advocated Ijtihad as an important role

in the current time and future. During the turn of the 16th to 17th century, Sunni Muslim reformers began to criticize taqlid, and promoted greater use of ijtiḥad in legal matters. They claimed that instead of looking solely to previous generations for practices developed by religious scholars, there should be an established doctrine and rule of behavior through the interpretation of original foundational texts of Islam—the Qur'an and Sunna [3]. Islamic modernists have formed new life style by mixing new regulations and systems of governance with Islamic roles and traditions. They have drew many sentences of Holly Quran and traditions (Hadith) to justify their orientation and understanding of Modern Islam. According to united state institute of peace, modernists have re-opened the gates of ijtiḥad, in order to accommodate the religion with modern society. These thinkers all wanted to reconcile Islamic traditions with the rapid pace of the modernizing world [5].

**2.3 Extreme Islamic Sects:** Extreme Islam sects are related to those groups who follow traditions (Taqlid). Actually, they are followers of their understanding of Quran and Tradition or at least some exclusive parts of Islamic religion. Such groups are Salafism, fundamentalism, Islamism and Wahhabism. These groups are considered as part of Islamic Sects or doctrines and they are different of what are called terrorist groups. Islamic extremism has been defined by the British government as any form of Islam that opposes "democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs [6]. Islamic fundamentalism has been defined as a movement of Muslims who think back to earlier times and seek to return to the fundamentals of the religion and live similarly to how the Prophet Muhammad and his companions lived [7].

**2.4 Radical Islamic Sects:** In addition to the three main Islamic sects, there are some groups such as Jihadism and Radical Islamic groups which act under the name of Islam. The term "Jihadism" is a 21st-century neologism found in Western languages to describe Islamist militant movements perceived as military movements "rooted in Islam" and "existentially threatening" to the West [8]. Islamist terrorism or radical Islamic terrorism is defined as any terrorist act, set of acts or campaign committed by groups or individuals who profess Islamic or Islamist motivations or goals [9]. Islamic terrorists justify their violent tactics through the interpretation of Quran and Hadith according to their own goals and intentions [10]. Although most of all Islamic sects consider these two groups as "Terrorist or Takfiri", but they are categorized as Muslim groups especially by the west. These groups have harmed Islam and Muslims more than the west and most of their activities happens as reaction to the policies and behavior of west against Muslims. The best example of these groups are Hezbollah and Houthis under the Shia sect and al-Qaeda and ISIS

under the Sunni sect. the main difference between radical and extreme Islamic groups is that; extreme Islamic groups are strict in applying the provisions of Sharia but they don't believe in violence as only solution. While Radical groups believe in violence and terrorism as suitable way to achieve their goals.

### 3. Method

Comparison method was used in this paper to determine the similarities and differentiations between different Islamic sects. Comparison was based on number of followers, place (country), level of religiosity and their different understanding of Quran and Hadith (traditions). There were four levels for this measurements which are moderate, modern, extreme and radical religiosity. Descriptive analysis method was used in this paper as well to describe the role of these Islamic sects in social and political life of Islamic societies. Determinants of social activities were education, religious activities, cultural and sport activities and charity. While the determinants of the role of Islamic sects in political life of Islamic societies were determined by joining political parties, participation in elections and rejection of parties and elections by standing against these parties and all people.

**3.1 Classification Instruments:** to indicate which Islamic sect is moderate, modern, extreme and radical, there are some indicators for each of them such as; **moderate:** 1) no ideology (Normal Muslims), 2) high nationalism, 3) no acts out of borders, 4) no violence; **modern:** 1) Islamic Ideology, 2) normal nationalism, 3) civil act out of border, 4) no violence; **extreme:** 1) high Ideology, 2) no nationalism. 3) Suspicious act out of borders, 4) conditional violence; **radical:** 1) hard ideology, 2) reject nationalism, 3) terror acts out of border, 4) high violence, 5) Classified terrorism by local or national governments.

**3.2 Data collection:** data collect from many resources. For moderate population of Islamic sects in every country, data was collected based on number of each group in presidential and parliament elections (usually the last or real elections). Some of political and extreme sects have estimated numbers based on local and international research centers. Some of Islamic sects has exact numbers according to their internal regulations. General data about Islamic sects was collected by many research centers, references and documents.

**3.3 Acts of terror:** what means acts of terror in this paper is any acts cause of killing people in any conditions. Many of Islamic radical sects have criminal acts inside their societies which is in some ways considered local regulations such as carrying out killings, torturing and imprisonment. Most of radical sects have external agenda and they are linked with each other across borders implementing terror acts.

### 4. Findings

#### 4.1 Comparison between Islamic Sects

Islamic sects were divided into four main categories in this paper. Although, there is no real estimate of number of Muslims in the world, however, according to a study in 2015, Islam has 1.8 billion adherents, making up about 24% of the world population [11]. The diverse Asia-Pacific region contains the highest number of Muslims in the world, easily surpassing the Middle East and North Africa [12]. Table (1) shows the largest thirteen Islamic population in the world in addition to Saudi Arabiya and Yemen [13]. Moderate Islamic sects include all Muslims who are not following any of political, extreme and radical groups which means they are representing the majority of Muslims around the world. These moderate sects are interesting in national and local issues and usually they look to regional and globe issues based on their nation's benefits. Based on table (1), there are around 57% of Muslims in the largest Islamic population of 15 countries belong to moderate sect. modern Islamic sects are those groups who don't see discrepancy between Islam and modern democratic systems. Sometimes, they have intention to intervene out their country borders such as supporting same parties in other regions. But at least they don't believe in violence as solely solution. There are around 30% of the Muslim Population in 15 countries that were included in this study considered as modern Islamic sects. Extreme Islamic sects are those groups who refuse democratic systems and elections. They are fanatic to traditions of Islam even these traditions have many unacceptable thoughts. There are around 10% of these Muslims included under the extreme sects. Finally, radical Islamic sects are those groups who believe in violence as necessity and legitimate duty. Most of these groups are prohibited and banned by local, regional and international government. These groups usually have some activities out of their country and operate globally. There are around 3% of these Islamic sects around the world [14]. Table 1 shows these thirteen Islamic big Islamic population in the world in addition to Saudi Arabia and Yemen based on the four categories of Islam.

**Table 1: Muslim Population based on four Categories**

No	Country	Muslim Pop. (m)	Moderate	Modern	Extreme	Radical
1.	Indonesia	209.1	PDI-P, Golkar, Gerindra, Democrat	Muhammadiyah, PKS, PAN, PKB, PPP	NU, FPI	HTI, MMI, JAT
		99%	60%	30 %	9%	
2.	Pakistan	176.2	PTI, PPP	JIP, PML	JUI-FPML-F	Lashka -e-Taiba
		84%	23%	56%	5%	

3.	India	168.4	AIMIM, JKNC, PDP	IUML, AIUDF	JIH	IM
		90%	30%	50%	10%	
4.	Bangladesh	134.4	BNP, BAL	BJI (Jamaat)		Ansarullah, Mujahedeen
		98%	90%	8%		
5.	Nigeria	77.3	APC	Islamic Movement	Salafism	Ansaru Boko Haram
			90%	5%		
6.	Egypt	77	NDP, Ghad, EB	FJP, al-Nour	Jama'ah Islamiyah	ABM, ISIL
		95%	54%	41%		
7.	Iran	73.6	People Voice, FPD	Reformists	Principlist s	MEK
		97%	28%	41%	28%	
8.	Turkey	71.3	MHP, CHP, HDP, IYI	JDP (AK Parti)	HIK	PKK, TH
		97%	40%	57%		
9.	Sudan	39	NCP	(PCP, NUP, SCP) NCF	Aletsam, Mojahdee n	Al-Qaeda
		94%	91%	3%		
10.	Algeria	34.7	FLN, PT, RND	IRM, MSP, MNR	FIS	LGSPPC
		88%	68%	20%		
11.	Afghanistan	34	Junbish, Wahdat, Mellat	Dawah, Hezbi Islami, Jamiat- e Islami	Hizbu Tahrir	Taliban
		51%	25%	26%		
12.	Morocco	31.9	PAM, Istiglal, NRI, PM, USFP	PJD	Al Adl wal Ihsane	AL-Qaeda
		94%	63%	31%		
13.	Iraq	31.2	UIA, DPAK, INC	Iraqi List, Dawa	NIA, Badr, Fatah	ISIS- AL- Qaeda

		95%	68%	21%	6%	
14.	Saudia Arabiya	25.5	Sunnah and Jamaah – Shia	--	Wahhabism - Salafism	AL-Qaeda
15.	Yemen	24	GPC-YSP-NUPO	Al-Islah Al-Haq	Salafism-Ar-rashad	Houthis Al-Qaeda
		96%	78%	16%	2%	
All	Total popu.	1,176.4 m	670.5 m	350.8 m	117 m	35.3 m
%	Percentage	65%	57%	30%	10%	3%

Islamic sects are similar to each other in basics of Islam and vary in branches. They are similar in believe in God, Prophet is the last messenger, angels, jinn, life and death, heaven and hell, pillars of Islam, pillars of Iman and holly Quran and Traditions. These sects are different in interpretation of Quran and Hadith. In addition, these sects have variety perceptions of old and modern issues such as governance system, Jihad and Ijtihad, elections and parties, executions, education and even approaches of worshipping God. Table (2) showed the similarities and differentiations among Islamic sects in addition to three important factors which are estimated number of followers in every state, place of exist and level of religiosity. Although all Islamic sects are same in main issues of Islamic law, but there are very significant different in their perceptions of some important issues such as jihad where moderate and modern sects believe that jihad is not necessary at the time while some extreme and radical sects believe if Jihad is very important especially nowadays. Another important issue is Ijtihad where modern groups believe in while extreme groups rejected it. Some of modern issues were chosen in this paper to explain the different perspectives of Islamic sects in the current time such as elections, execution and education. Elections and new governance systems are accepted and experienced by moderate and modern sects while extreme and radical sects are still reject and fight against such thoughts considering them as part of following west.



**Table 2: Similarities and Differentiations among Islamic Sects**

Islamic Sects	Moderate Islamic Sects	Modern Islamic Sects	Extreme Islamic Sects	Radical Islamic Sects
Sub-Sects: Examples	National Parties, Local Parties, not mediated	Islamic Brotherhood- NU Islamic Society in India	Salafism-Wahhabism Jemaah Islamiyah	Jihadism- al-Qaeda, Hezbollah- Houthis
Number of Followers	Very High (55%-65%)	Moderate (25% – 35%)	Low (10% – 15%)	Very Small (less than 3%)
Place of exist	All Islamic States and West (big communities)	Most of Islamic States	Some Islamic States	Some Islamic States and West (small groups)
Level of Religiously	Moderate	Moderate to High	High to Extreme	Very Extreme
<b>Similarities:</b> Belief in God, Prophets, Angels and life after death	Fully belief	Fully Belief	Fully Belief	Also Some believe in Prophet's family as Infallibles (Shia)
5 Pillars of Islam	Fully belief	Fully belief	Fully belief	In addition to (Wilayah-Shia)
Holly Books	Quran and Traditions	Quran, tradition & Ijtihad	Quran & Strict tradition	Quran & very strict hadith
<b>Differentiations:</b>				
Jihad	Not Necessary	Not Recommended	Conditionally Necessary	Necessary
Ijtihad	Necessary	Important in some cases	Not Agreed (Taglid)	Rejected
Elections	Rational Approach	Acceptable Approach	Unacceptable Approach	Illegal Approach
Executions	Only by Law	Agree with conditions	Agree	Highly agreed
Government	Secular	Mix (Secular and Islam)	Sharia law	Strict Sharia Law
Islamic Education	Part of Other Studies	Very Important	A Legitimate Duty	Necessary and above all

## **4.2 Role of Islamic Sects in Social Aspect of Society**

Without doubt, Islamic movements and organizations play an important role in leading and shaping public lifestyle, and even more, regulations in every Islamic country. Some of Islamic countries consider religion (Islam) as the main source of legislations, while others consider Islam as the sole source of legislations. Actually, religion has significant impact on people's social life. This impact appears in many social aspects such as education, worship places, cultural activities and even food or cloths.

**4.2.1 Education:** studying Islam is compulsory for all students in different settings of learning. In addition, there are special Islamic schools for teaching Islam in all Islamic countries. Even secular or governmental schools teach Islamic materials as important part of curriculum as well. Most of Muslim families encourage their children to take additional courses to learn Quran and Hadith. Some of schools have extracurricular to teach Islamic materials and others hold more activities in holidays/summer to teach Islam [15]. Islamic education is the first step to build character of Muslim individuals and families. All Muslims share the same values and believes about life and death, good and evil, and many other aspects in their social life based on what they learn from family, school and society. More than this and based on the different schools and sects of Islam, there are some different perspectives of individuals about the Islam itself related to the doctrine or school. Islamic education also differs from one doctrine to other. This differentiation and differences sometimes lead to many social conflicts between Muslims. We could say that, every Islamic sect has its own schools, mosque and activities in addition to followers. All these factors show how Islamic sects and doctrines impact on people's social life in Islamic countries.

**4.2.2 Religious Activities:** although there are two main doctrines (Sunni and Shia) and many different schools in Islamic world, Islamic society in this paper are divided into three groups which are moderate, modern and radical. Every one of these groups has different activities in their societies related to their perception, position and understanding of Islam. Based on their capabilities in each Islamic country, these groups operate under certain names and practice their religious activities through the establishment of religious and social events. Mosques and Islamic schools are always used to revive these activities.

**4.2.3 Cultural Activities:** There is always confusion between culture and religion in Islamic countries. In other words, different societies adopt Islam in their own way, resulting that there is a difference in the practice of religious rituals from one society to another. Moderate or light Islamic sects are more than other sects accepting local culture and mix it with religion. They think there is no collision between culture and religion. While modern Islamic sects more

like to adopt modern systems and thoughts as part of religion. The extreme groups are the most opponent of both local culture and modernism as part of religion. Regardless of the country in where they live radical or extreme groups follow the same role and tradition of Islam. The same approach of the Islamic modern groups where they are more loyal to their thoughts than their countries. Moderate groups see religion through their own culture and country.

**4.2.4 Charity:** in addition to education and religious and cultural activities, charity is the most famous activity in the Islamic world. This fame goes back to the money obtained from zakat, five (khoums) and other donations.

### **4.3 Role of Islamic Sects in political Aspect of Society**

Importance of Islamic sects comes from the importance of politic in Islamic states. Indeed, Islamic sects are main player in political life of every Islamic society.

**4.3.1 Political Parties:** many of Islamic sects have formed their own party to participate in elections and government. Some of moderate and modern Islamic sects have accepted democracy and modern systems as a suitable approach to lead country and form government while radical or extreme sects are disagreed with any kind of forming parties or modern systems.

**4.3.2 Elections:** The idea of the religious parties is to restore Islam to its former glory and each one of them is different in how the appropriate way of doing so. Modern Islamic political sects leads many country in Islam world such as Turkey, Sudan and Iraq. In other Islamic countries, these sects dominate or participate in government with non-Islamist parties. Most of them are moderate and modern sects while the extreme and radical sects deny elections or at least disagree with election system.

**4.3.3 Rejection of Parties and Elections:** some of Islamic sects reject the idea of political parties and elections. Their reason is due to many different backgrounds and references of their understanding and interpretation of Quran and Hadith. Extreme Islamic sects are likely to follow the tradition of Islamic role such as succession (Khalifah). They think that participation in such political parties or elections is kind of similar to west which is illegal (Haram) in Islam based on their traditions.

## **5. Discussion**

Islamic sects, in many previous studies and debates were divided into Sunni and Shia, moderate and radical. There is always misunderstanding about Islam where many of western people see Islam through some accidental radical acts in their

societies. This paper gave more explanations and thoughts about Islamic sects and their representativeness in almost 65% of Muslims around the world. More than 85% of Muslims around the world are moderate or modern Muslims. Thirteen biggest Islamic states/societies were chosen to prove this truth. Radical act or extreme is denied by majority of Muslims officially and individually.

## 6. Conclusion

There are hundreds of Islamic sects, parties and organizations around the world. In this paper, researcher discussed Islamic sects based on their commitment to Islamic thoughts which don't mean that the more radical they are, the more religious they become. Level of loyalty or commitment to Islam's thoughts differ from one Islamic sect to another based on their own perceptions of Islam which also doesn't mean they are right. Islam is religion of peace. But some Islamic sects manipulate with interpretations of Quran and Hadith. This paper showed that majority of Muslims are moderate and some of them are modern (followers of Islamic political parties). There are small part are extreme and very small numbers of these sects are having terror acts. All these number for Islamic sects are estimated due to the lack of accurate statistics and ambiguous about some extreme groups. This paper also included a descriptive analysis about Islamic sect's activities in their societies. Most of these sects have social, culture and political activities to support society and expand their popularity. Some of these social and political activities are building schools and mosques, holding religious and cultural activities, teaching children, literacy and charity.

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