

IS THE SUNNI-SHIITE RIFT MOSTLY POLITICS AND MEDIA HYPE?

A panel discussion Tuesday in Doha, Qatar, was dominated by the perception that the Western media hypes up tensions by focusing too much on the minority of radicals.

By Nicholas Blanford | Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor
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DOHA, QATAR - As imam of the largest mosque in North America, Sayyed Hassan al-Qazwini feels the frustration of trying to convey a moderate image of Islam to a Western media seemingly fixated on extremists.

"When I speak, or other moderate Muslim scholars speak, we will not find any outlet for our words," he says. "But if a grocer in Karachi goes out on the streets and calls for jihad [holy war] against America, he will find many media outlets there ready to cover his insanity."

A televised public debate Tuesday in this tiny Gulf state was dominated by the perception that it is extremists – whether Islamic militants or anti-Islamic commentators in the West – coupled with a "sensationalist" Western media that set the parameters for defining Islam's global image.

Mr. Qazwini, the Iraqi-born imam of the Islamic Center of America in Detroit, was one of four panelists debating the motion "This house believes the Sunni-Shiite conflict is damaging Islam's reputation as a religion of peace." The event was part of the prominent Doha Debate series, hosted and funded by the Qatar Foundation, an educational nonprofit organization, and broadcast by BBC World.

In a series of separate interviews with the panelists before the televised debate, however, it was evident that all four essentially agreed that the current tensions between Sunnis and Shiites is guided by political forces, rather than religious differences.

Sunnis and Shiites, after all, have learned to "grudgingly" tolerate each other for centuries, despite doctrinal differences, says Hisham Hellyer of the Oxford Center for Islamic Studies and an adviser to the British government on Islamic extremism, who opposed the motion with Qazwini.

"Those differences have never turned into religious wars like we saw in Europe. They never turned into inquisitions, genocides, or anything like that," he says.

The distinctions between Sunnis and Shiites simply were not an issue during the height of Arab nationalism in the 1950s and 1960s, says Juan Cole, a professor of history at the University of Michigan and author of the influential Informed Comment blog, who defended the motion.

While Shiite- and Sunni-dominated countries have fought each other in the past – such as the Sunni Ottoman Empire and the Shiite Safavid dynasty of Persia and more recently the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War, those conflicts were not motivated by disputes over religious interpretation.

"They were about power and politics," Mr. Hellyer says.

For Hellyer, the debate provided an opportunity to explore how the image of Islam is shaped by the media's inclination to ignore the silent moderate majority that comprises the bulk of Muslims and follow instead the sensationalist violent rhetoric and militant actions found on opposing fringes, from Al Qaeda leaders to some American commentators.

"The media listens to people on [the far] sides of the equation," he says.

The repeated airing of such extremist opinions has helped mold Western attitudes about Islam that, Hellyer argues, are a distortion of the reality.

It is a sentiment shared by Qazwini, who argues that there is no conflict between Sunnis and Shiites, only between extremist Sunnis and Shiites "who represent 1 percent of Muslims at best."

"Islam is still the fastest-growing religion in the world," he says. "It is a religion of 1.5 billion followers and it is not going to be damaged by the conflict between the extremists. No one says that Christianity was damaged by the conflict between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland."

So far, Sunni-Shiite violence has been confined largely to Iraq, confounding initial fears that the conflict would ignite unrest elsewhere in the region.

"It's actually quite remarkable that with all that's happened in Iraq it hasn't spilled over in that way," says Mr. Cole.

General Ali Shukri, a former adviser to the late King Hussein of Jordan and co-defender of the motion with Cole, says it is clear that Iran is seeking to increase its influence in the traditionally Sunni-led Arab world.

"The extension of Iran into the Middle East is there, a reality," he says.

But Qazwini, who studied Islam at Qom in Iran after fleeing Saddam Hussein's Iraq in 1980, says there is a "trend in the Arab media" to blame Iran for the region's problems.

"Why don't we talk about the Saudi role in allowing terrorists to go to Iraq? Why don't we talk about the Jordanian role in allowing terrorists into Iraq?" he asks.

The subject of Iran, however, did not come up in the debate. Rather, the two panelists opposing the motion concentrated on the role of an "infotainment"-oriented Western media as responsible for distorting the image of Islam, rather than the actions of Muslims themselves. This may help explain why the motion was defeated 61 percent to 39 percent.

The debate will be aired on BBC World on May 3 and repeated on May 4.