

# Intra-Muslim Conflicts: A Linguistic Representation

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## **Abstract**

The global Muslim community is multi-racial, multi-lingual, and multi-cultural. Over the centuries, religious groups emerged due to historical circumstances, political allegiances, interpretation of texts, cultural influences, and varied theological denominations. In some cases, the resulting intra-group rivalry has led to intra-Muslim conflicts characterized by various levels of violence, conflict, rhetoric, and verbal abuse.

This article investigates the linguistic trends related to representing intra-Muslim conflicts, the factors and strategies of utilizing linguistic representation, and the classification of common terms within the context of such conflicts. It also analyzes the implications of certain vocabularies, structures, and discourse styles that represent the positions of opposing groups, perceptions of self and others, and how linguistic representation can help resolve intra-Muslim conflict. I use a pragmatic analysis to search for cultural and religious connotations in samples of common terms employed in the conflicts in question.

Although the global Muslim community is multi-lingual, Arabic terms are commonly used in intra-Muslim conflicts. Given this reality, I focus on Arabic terms and present only a few non-Arabic loan words that have been adopted.

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## Introduction

The global Muslim community (*ummah*) consists of people who have different cultural, linguistic, and religious backgrounds. This phenomenon may result in minor or major intra-Muslim conflicts characterized by linguistic expressions designed to present, either overtly or covertly, opposing positions that may have a considerable impact on certain conflicts. Hence, there is a need for extensive research that analyzes the implications of such linguistic representations within the context of how language can influence the initiation, spread, management, or resolution of intra-Muslim conflicts. Its influence is also recognized in reconciling social affairs and rectifying broken relations.

Any investigation of this social phenomenon has to embrace the assumption that the use of specific words and structures within the context of a certain discourse reflects each group's support of its own political interests, cultural norms, or theological beliefs and attempt to discredit those of the other group. It also presupposes that a linguistic investigation will provide an in-depth understanding of these conflicts and that a careful selection of linguistic expressions will contribute to the conflict's management, resolution, and even avoidance.

The significance of this investigation lies in the fact that terms and expressions are strong weapons in any conflict and that opposing groups may misuse some expressions by endowing them with negative meanings or connotations in reference to others. Such a practice may be dangerous to social relations in a large religious community, such as the global Muslim community. Thus, studying how some intra-Muslim conflicts are portrayed linguistically will contribute to mutual understanding and foster peaceful intra-Muslim relations.

In this paper, I cover strategies of language usage in intra-Muslim conflict; the social, psychological, and religious factors that lie beyond it; the implications of linguistic representation as regards an opposing group's position within this type of conflict, and how linguistic representation may help resolve such conflicts. I do not assume that the words' religious origin guides the participants' socio-religious thought in their conflicts, since it is practically impossible to make any generalized observation of this nature. One must remember that words, whether belonging to the language or loaned from another one, denote many things in different languages. In addition, varied social factors influence the use of words and expressions in any language, regardless of the existence of social similarities.

I have chosen a pragmatic textual approach to analyze samples of common expressions used in intra-Muslim conflicts. However, I give due attention to possible intended or unintended connotations in intra-Muslim conflicts by analyzing influential factors that surround language symbols used to communicate ideas, such as the context of the situation and the inter-relation of individuals and groups. Such an approach is considered appropriate for this type of study. For example, Allen Grimshaw uses it to analyze the expressions of interpersonal conflicts,<sup>1</sup> and Bernard Lewis used a similar approach to study the terms and expressions of political Islam.<sup>2</sup> Neither of them focused on intra-Muslim conflicts.

My analysis concentrates on the facts expressed about beliefs, persons, group identity, and cultural practices. Therefore, it is not based on structural features and meanings. In order to minimize long quotations, the expressions and terms are taken as the focus of analysis, while their textual contexts are used as a background to guide the analysis. This technique covers both the pragmatic use as well as the theological and political connotations and implications of the context.

I seek to indicate group affiliation and the expressions adopted by a particular group's members or leaders to express their positions on certain conflicts. Members of the group frequently use or quote these expressions to convey their views and convictions concerning their opponents' cause and the nature of their actions. The selection of such expressions is not intentional; rather, it is done purely for the sake of proving my assumption: like any other group, the Muslims' use of language can initiate, prolong, or even end a given conflict.

## **The Linguistic Representation of Conflicts**

Intra-Muslim conflict is expressed through physical combat, demonstrations, war, and other ways. Language makes its own contribution either through direct involvement (as an indicator of wider cultural and political conflict) or by serving as a means of conflict representation.

As a vehicle for interaction, inter-communication, and symbolic values, language represents a factor in social and national conflicts, which generally include linguistic conflicts. Such conflicts arise out of the language diversity that prevails in many societies and nations. However, according to Itmar Even-Zohar, the possibility of diversity leading to a conflict between speakers of different languages or remaining a recognized social fact depends upon the level of cultural, historical, and political interaction in a

bilingual or multilingual society.<sup>3</sup> For instance, Iraq's Kurdish population struggles with that country's Arab population in order to preserve its unique (non-Arab) identity and accord an official status to the Kurdish language, while their counterparts in Turkey view their existence as incomplete without Ankara's official recognition of their right to use their native language in all socio-cultural and academic functions.<sup>4</sup>

Linguistic representation, in its capacity as a semantic symbol that conveys concepts, positions, and values, becomes a factor in both intra- and inter-Muslim conflicts among social groups. Its functions cover initiating enmity and turning a foe into an ally (and vice versa), thereby causing anarchy or war; stirring up social relations; and suspending, stopping, or avoiding anarchy. Ambiguous terms and slang may lead to conflict through a pragmatic interpretation or how the various linguistic groups or subcultural groups understand their connotations. Thus, a language of conflict emerges to represent action and reaction to the conflict in question.

The effects of linguistic representation upon intra-Muslim conflicts become clear when we analyze the role played by linguistic expressions in conflict situations. How the language of conflict is used, however, depends upon the situation and the positions of each group's members. In addition, some aspects of linguistic expression may symbolize certain aspects of intra-Muslim conflicts.

Representing a conflict through language is not restricted to those who speak the same language, for it also exists among speakers of different languages. Such conflicts may be caused by clashes over regional cultural norms, conflicting religious beliefs, and conflicting political interests. Linguistic expressions of intra-communal conflicts among groups are fueled by intolerance, failure to reach a compromise, a conflict of interest, heightened tension in relations, or a state of war. The influence of linguistic expressions among rival groups extends to relations between individuals and nations, due to socio-cultural and religious factors. As a result, the ensuing reactions to expressions used to denote some groups, tribes, races, or members of certain religious sects reflects one group's inner feelings and perceptions of other groups. Nasr bin Sayyar perfectly described the implications of linguistic expressions in pre-Islamic Arab intra-tribal conflicts in a beautiful simile<sup>5</sup>: "The fire is caused to blaze by two pieces of wood, as the speech, coming out within two jaws, precedes the war."<sup>6</sup>

## Classifying Expressions of Intra-Muslim Conflicts

The various linguistic expressions can be classified as follows:

**INITIATING THE CONFLICT.** This group includes expressions designed to insult or make religious or political allegations against opposing groups. For example, one can mention the Shi`ah's curses or, according to the Sunnis, abusive remarks (viz., the *sabb al-Sahabah*) concerning certain Companions of the Prophet. Yusuf al-Qaradawi cites this as one of the obstacles to Sunni-Shi`ah reconciliation.<sup>7</sup> Classifying others as infidels (*takfir* or *tafsiq*), which appears mostly in literature related to various Sunni-Shi`ah conflicts and those between the Salafis and other groups, are also major sources of intra-Muslim conflict.

**FUELING THE CONFLICT.** This is reflected in expressions that discredit opposing groups, attribute abominations to them, qualify them with prejudicial adjectives, or are designed to provoke them. Some of these actions are described by opposing groups as *al-isa'ah* (disrespect or abuse), *tas'id al-mawqif* (escalating the situation), and *khiyanah `uzma* (highest treason), as in *wa asharu ila anna al-husula `ala hadha al-da`mi al-ajnabi innama yarqa ila al-khiyanah al-`uzma li al-waran* (They noted that obtaining this foreign support amounts to the highest treason to the country).<sup>8</sup>

In this phrase, `Arafah is commenting on the eligibility to contest for presidential election in Egypt and guidelines for political sponsorship for individuals and political parties, as viewed by members of the Egyptian Parliament, in a warning to opposition parties.

Another example is *al-bara'ah minhum* (disowning them) or *yutabarra'* (to disown), as when `Ali al-Khudayr is reported to have renounced the extremists' position and condemned the terrorist actions of some Islamist groups in Saudi Arabia, in the phrase: *muntaqidan fi al-waqtu nafsihi alladhina yahmiluna al-silaha wa i`tabarahum imma khawarija aw muta'awwilina yutabarra'u minhum wa min ijthadihim*. (At the same time, he criticized those who resort to violent clashes and considered them to be either Khawarij [those who revolt against legal rulers] or those who misinterpret texts. They should be disowned, and their efforts to derive rules from the texts should also be disowned).<sup>9</sup>

**MANAGING THE CONFLICT.** This is observed in expressions used when dealing with situations of intra-Muslim conflict in an effort to reduce tension, bring about closer relations, instill a culture of tolerance, and encourage

inter-group cooperation in order to meet the challenges posed by non-Muslims. This comes in expressions like *tajannub al-`istifzaz* (to avoid provocation), as used by al-Qaradawi in his writing on forging closer relations between Muslim sects, and advocating for avoiding provocation and for adopting frankness with wisdom: *wa min al-mabadi' al-muhimmah fi al-hiwar al-islami al-islami wa al-taqribi bayna al-madhahibi al-islamiyah tajannubu al-istifzaz min ahdi al-tarafayni li al-akhar* (Among the important principles in Muslim-Muslim dialogue and in bringing different Muslim schools of thought and belief closer is to eschew provocation by one side of the other).<sup>10</sup>

Other expressions include *`inqadh al-mawqif* (to save the situation), *al-tasamuh bayna al-mukhtalifina* (tolerance among disputing groups), and *al-ihtiram al-mutabadal* (mutual respect). It is important here to quote a popular wise saying attributed to Muhammad Rashid Rida on managing intra-Muslim conflicts: "We cooperate on what we agree upon, and every one of us will tolerate others on what we disagree upon." This was adopted by Hasan al-Banna and his al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun as well as al-Nadawi and his students.<sup>11</sup>

**RESOLVING THE CONFLICT.** This can be observed in the efforts to settle disagreements, end violence, foster cooperation, and maintain peaceful coexistence among Muslim groups. Some expressions employed to achieve reconciliation are *al-mufawadat* (negotiations), *al-hiwar al-sunni al-shi'i* (the Sunni-Shi'i dialogue), and *al-musarahah bi al-hikmah* (stating the fact in a wise way). Others are *qadaya al-wahdah wa al-taqrib* (issues of unity and closer relation) and *darurah al-talahum* (necessity of close relation). In addition, there is an assumption that disagreement among people is connected to names (words), but that agreement will prevail when they move to meanings. Al-Qaradawi uses *husnu al-zanni bayna al-tarafayni* (both groups' good mutual perception of each other) to qualify one of the needed measures to resolve intra-Muslim conflicts.<sup>12</sup>

## Factors in Utilizing Linguistic Representation

Issues related to politics, culture, ethnicity, and theological belief have a great impact on the use of linguistic representation in intra-Muslim conflicts. For example, in the case of political conflicts, rival groups, regardless of their religious affiliation, depend heavily upon appeals made to their followers, with linguistic expressions being the easiest means to convince them. In

order to achieve their objectives, groups intentionally use terms that represent their position clearly and discredit their opponents. In a Muslim setting, the term *`amil* (agent) and its plural *`umala'* are used to denote those opposition groups assumed to be agents of non-Muslims, such as *`umala' al-imbriyaliyah* (agents of imperialism) or *`umala' Isra'il* (agents of Israel). As such, they are by default *khawanah* (traitors) who pursue hidden agendas that are unfavorable to Muslims. Apparently, the aim is to discredit opponents and warn people against dealing with them or entrusting their affairs to them. Likewise, *al-khiyanah al-kubra* (the highest treason), which literally means “the greatest dishonesty,” is also adopted in Arabic discourse to denote actions that are against the state’s interests.

Deteriorating relations between two Muslim states may be described metaphorically as *tasaddu'un fi al-'alaqat bayna al-baladayni: al-Qahirah wa yihran* (a deterioration in relations between the two countries: Cairo [as the capital of Egypt] and Tehran [as the capital of Iran]), where *tasaddu`* means “cracking,” to indicate worsening diplomatic relations. When a political opponent who does not believe in religious people involving themselves in politics is referred to, modern Islamists describe him or her as an *ilhadi* (apostate). Any of the tactics used by the group’s political opponents to override its own efforts may be described as *khuyut al-ta'amuri al-siyasi* (threads of political conspiracy) to refer metaphorically to political maneuvers considered by some to be weaving the strands of a political conspiracy. This can be used to denote strategies of a particular country’s ruling class by passing measures that are not favorable to its political opponents.

Historical factors may be the driving force behind the use of linguistic expressions that refer to Islam’s roots, religious-political responsibility, and historical relations. In Algeria, for example, the term *al-khawarij* is used to refer to Muslim separatists who rebel against the government, while in Saudi Arabia it refers to Muslim extremists who carry out violent attacks against foreigners and government establishments. In reality, however, this term has a specific meaning: those Muslim groups that rejected the caliphate of Ali ibn Abi Talib (ra). *Al-Zahiriyyuna al-judud* designates modern Muslim phenomenalists who uphold the direct (i.e., surface) meaning of the texts, something that indicates the repletion of a historical trend that started in Andalusia with Dawud al-Zahiri, Ibn Hazm, and others. This term does not refer to a particular group, but rather indicates every individual and group that chooses to implement the direct meanings of the Qur’anic and prophetic texts.

Whenever conflicts involve historical and ethnic factors, such expressions as *al-`asabiyah al-jahiliyah* appear to refer to a feeling of racial discrimination and to compare a specific contemporary action with the pre-Islamic pagan practice of advocating and preferring one's tribal affiliation, as it is also represented in *al-tafriqah al-`unsuriyah* (apartheid discrimination). The term *al-shu`ubiyah* (ethnicity, apartheid, racism) is also employed to denote positions related to promoting national instead of religious identity and to compare this with non-Arab racist movements (mainly of Persian origin) in response to the `Umayyad preference for Arabs in government appointments. Modern Islamists have adopted this term to discredit modern Arab Muslim nationalist movements. As the historical and social contextual origins of such words and phrases can be disregarded when used within the context of intra-Muslim conflict, parties to such conflicts take advantage of the contemporary emotive quality of such words and phrases, all the while ignoring their proper historically based meaning. This results in the misuse or abuse of language.

The influence of religion and culture cannot be ignored in matters of alleged mixings of religion with traditional practices or of alleged misunderstandings or misinterpretations of texts and incorrect applications of religious codes. The term *munharifun* (misled people) refers metaphorically to those who are assumed to have strayed from the straight path of Islam, either through misinterpreting or misapplying Islamic injunctions. The Salafis use *al-dall* (one who has gone astray) to describe the Sufis, due to their assumption that the latter have mixed Islamic codes with cultural practices that the Salafis consider to be *bid`ah* (heresy, innovation). The two terms are unconnected to the following prophetic hadith: "You are warned of innovative issues in religion, because every innovation is heresy, and every heresy – in religion – is an act of going astray."<sup>13</sup>

Meanwhile, linguistic expressions are also found in situations of overt and covert conflicts connected with political and theological issues. During the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, the Arab Gulf media outlets referred to Iran as *al-`aduwwu al-Irani*, which means that Iran is an enemy and, as such, ought to be fought, despite the fact that it is a neighboring Muslim country. However, it is a non-Arab state that promotes Shi`i beliefs and practices that the Arab Gulf's Sunni-majority states view as dangerous. During the second Gulf war, Saddam Hussein was referred to as *al-Diktaturu al-Iraqi* to reflect a certain perception of the Iraqi president and his oppressive rule. This may have encouraged him to invade Kuwait.

Linguistic representation also plays a significant role in intra-Muslim conflict through its expressions of enmity and frustration. This may be rep-



resented in connotative nicknames and terms designed to provoke opponents who are aware of the intended meanings. For example, the Sunnis describe some Shi`i practices and claims as *nawk al-Shi`ah* (stupidity of the Shi`ah) and *shatat al-Shi`ah* (excess or deviation of the Shi`ah). In the same way, the Salafis refer to Sufi practices as *shatat al-Sufiyah* (deviation of the Sufis). Certain Shi`i groups are also called *ghulat al-Shi`ah* (extremist Shi`is) due to their “strange” beliefs and claims. On the other hand, some Shi`i groups are alleged to have adopted *al-ghuluw* or *al-tashaddud* (extremism), while other groups describe their position as *al-wasatiyah* (moderation), thereby indicating the adoption of a moderate perspective that rejects extremism and negligence. These groups adopt expressions like *al-wasatiyah manhaju hayah* (the moderate approach is a way of life) and *al-wasafiyah laysat mah-surah fi juz`iyah min al-juz`iyat* (The moderate approach is not restricted to a specific part).<sup>14</sup> Sabri used the latter expression to project a modern Islamic moderate approach as an alternative to an Islamic extremist approach, most especially in Arab countries.

## Strategies of Linguistic Representation

Investigations into the linguistic representation of intra-Muslim conflicts in Arabic reveal some strategies in how certain words and structures are used to deliver conventional and metaphorical meanings, most of which are original Arabic terms. The phrase *sinariyu al-muhakamah* (scenario of trial) and *al-mahkamah al-suriyah* (camouflaged court proceeding) are metaphorically used to discredit the trials conducted by the ruling group to deal with its opponents.

Intra-Muslim conflicts may be represented grammatically in the use of definite and indefinite particles, as reflected in an argument on adopting the Shari`ah as the source or a source of legislation in the interim Iraqi constitution: *al-Shari`ah masdar al-tashri`* or *al-Shari`ah masdar(un) li al-tashri`*. The phrase *masdar(un) li al-tashri`* implies that the Shari`ah is not the sole source of this constitution, but rather only one of the sources, and that some sections of Iraq’s legislation may be adopted from other sources.

Due to the variety and complexity of strategies, presenting examples based on intended facts will simplify the classification. These facts include descriptions of groups, actions, practices and perspectives, and praising or discrediting various groups. Some expressions describe a speaker’s own group or the opposing groups, as in the Salafis’ use of *‘aqidah al-salaf al-salih* (the belief of the righteous predecessors [in the early century of Islam]) to describe their beliefs, although they use *al-firaq al-dallah* (the

groups that have gone astray) for those Muslim groups they regard as following their own whims. On the other hand, the term *ghulat al-Shi`ah* (extremist Shi`is) describes certain Shi`ah groups. Isa bin Fatik, a Khariji poet, refuted an allegation leveled against his group and stated categorically: “You lie, that is not as you claim, but verily the Khawarij are believers in Allah. They are, as you know, ‘the small group’ that is empowered over ‘the large group’.”<sup>15</sup>

However, this strategy may indicate comparing one group with another, either directly or indirectly. Abd al-Qahir al-Baghdadi condemned the al-Rafidah Shi`ah for their rejection of basic Islamic faith and natural facts: “The members of *al-rafd* (the rejectionist) group, i.e., al-Rafidah, are people like the Christians. They are at a loss without a solution to their confusion.”<sup>16</sup> The actions, practices, and perspectives of a group may also be described in such expressions as *al-taqlid al-salafi* (Salafi imitation), *da`if al-`aqidah* (weak faith), or *al-inhiraf* (deviation).

Strategies of utilizing linguistic expressions in intra-Muslim conflicts can be based on factual, allusive, or metaphorical expressions. Factual expression is recognized in presenting various accounts of events, actions, or places, despite the fact that these accounts may be biased against opposing groups. For example, Adnan uses the following expression to describe the kind of strategies adopted in the literature of some Muslim groups in order to achieve their aims: *inna ba`da masadiri al-harakah al-Islamiyah qad istakhdamat al-quwah wa al-`unfa al-siyasi li tahqiq ma`ariba siyasiyah mukhtalifah* (Some sources of Muslim movements have used force and political violence to obtain certain political demands).<sup>17</sup> Factual expressions also may include descriptions of a certain group’s Islamic perspectives and practices by relating them to those factors that have influenced them, such as *al-Islam al-hadithi* (modernist Islam), *al-Islam al-librali* (liberal Islam), *al-Islam al-`almani* (secular Islam) and *al-Islam al-mutasallit* (authoritarian Islam). This is due to the influence of modern liberal perspectives or modern Islamist trends that seek to dominate others.

Allusive expressions about people, beliefs, or practices can serve both as a weapon to support one group and to abuse others. Examples of this are *al-isa`ah ila al-Sahabah*, which consists of some Shi`ahs’ abusive statements directed toward Abu Bakr, `Umar, `A`ishah, and other Companions. The expression *jama`ah al-takfir* (the [alleged] group of unbelief) denotes the extremists among Egypt’s Muslim activists, while *al-fitnah* (sedition, impiety, disgrace) refers to any actions assumed to be causing violent disturbances or stirring up relations among Muslims. The term *mutanatti`* (unman-nerly behaved, overly stringent) indicates rude behavior and attempts to

impose one group's perspective upon others, while *al-sahwah al-islamiyah* (Islamic awareness) and *al-ihya' al-islami* (Islamic revival) denote modern activities and trends that create awareness among Muslims and renew their belief in God.

Metaphorical expressions describe people and practices indirectly, such as *adhnab al-gharb* (tails of the West), *al-tashwih al-siyasi* (political distortion), *wahhabiyah* (the followers of Muhammad ibn `Abd al-Wahhab), *munharif* (leaned), and *mutatarrif* (one who stays on the edge, [i.e., extremist]). Other metaphorical expressions, such as *tasaddu`un fi al-`alaqat* and *khuyut al-ta`amur*, were referred to in earlier sections of the paper.

These strategies, however, are employed to serve varied purposes. The Sunnis and Shi`ah, due to their theological differences, also make use of provocative expressions and allegations of infidelity or impurity, something that usually hampers efforts of reconciliation and peaceful coexistence. Such intra-Muslim conflicts are described as *al-idtirabat al-ta`ifiyah* (sectarian disturbances), while efforts at reconciliation are tagged as *al-taqrib bayna al-Sunnah wa al-Shi`ah* (forging closer relations between the Sunnis and the Shi`ah). In the same context, the Sufis, Salafis, and Muslim modernists condemn each other in their literature on the grounds of theological differences and allegations of infidelity to and ignorance of Islam. Muslim modernists may refer to Salafi points of view in *al-ru'yah al-taqlidiyah* (the traditional perspective) or *al-taqlid al-Salafi*, which implies an imitation of the group's doctrines. However, the Salafis describe Sufi practices as *shatat* (deviation).

Egypt's Jama`ah al-Takfir wa al-Hijrah became popular, in part, due to its accusation that the entire global Muslim community has reverted to *jahiliyah* (a state of pre-Islamic Arab paganism and ignorance) due to, according to its own perspectives, its failure to enforce God's laws. On their side, members of al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun (the Muslim Brotherhood) are known for their perspective of total submission to God's governance and rejecting the prevailing common laws promulgated by men (*ru'yah al-hakimiyah*). Al-Qaeda does not separate Muslim conflicts with non-Muslims from conflicts between Muslims in utilizing linguistic representation. As a result, it frequently adopts terms used by the Salafis, the Ikhwan, and the Jama`ah al-Takfir. For example, it uses *islah* for reform of faith, thought, and society; however, others tag it as promoting *al-Islam al-mutatarrif* (extremist Islam).

In terms of politics, allegations directed toward non-Islamists of being a *shuyu`i* (communist), *ishtiraki* (socialist), or *ilhadi* and *`almani* (atheist) is not strange, as it is common to accuse one's opponents of being allies of one's enemies or occupiers, *al-`amil* (the agent) of others. But when oppo-

nents intend to discredit others, they raise doubt about their morality and use such phrases as *faqadu al-misdaqiyah* (they lost credibility).

In terms of intellectualism, it is common to accuse others of following the West. One such expression is *adhnab al-gharb* (tails of the West), which metaphorically means following from behind and obeying instructions. Muslim modernists may refer to Salafi or Sufi perspectives as traditionalist, but the group refers to its own perspective as *al-tajdid* (revival), a term that is viewed by others with skepticism because it is also used by the secularists. This feeling leads some modern Islamists to use *al-ta'sil al-islami* (returning to Islam's roots [when dealing with modern knowledge], a trend that is sometimes coded as *al-aslamah* [Islamization] and *al-islamiyah* [Islamification]). Racial affiliations may be attached to one's knowledge of religion, such as the term *`arabi* for one whom others may assume (wrongly) to be more knowledgeable of information presented in Arabic than non-Arabic, in contrast to the term *`ajami*, a person who might be assumed (wrongly) to have less knowledge of such information due to a language barrier. The term also implies being alien to a particular field of knowledge.

There are cases in which religious affiliation is mixed with ethnicity. In some Muslim countries, a person's ethnicity is considered synonymous with his or her religion. This can be a problem, especially for converts in that country who belong to other ethnic groups. For instance in Malaysia, where the Islamic credentials of a Malay person are undisputable, Chinese citizens are mainly Buddhist. If a Chinese man embraces Islam, he is referred to as *saudara baru* (new brother), probably because the Malays consider him a new brother in Islam. However, some of these Chinese Muslims might have been Muslim for decades and other Malaysian Chinese were born Muslim.

## Implications of Linguistic Representation

Islam recognizes the implications of a linguistic representation of conflict, urges polite speech when dealing with others, and encourages disputants to choose their words and styles of speech carefully. Abu Zayd produced a voluminous work on which terms are forbidden,<sup>18</sup> and other Muslim scholars have studied manners of speech.<sup>19</sup>

Qur'an 17:53 directs Muslims to select the best linguistic expressions when communicating with others so that good relations among members of the Muslim community can be maintained: "Say to My servants that they should (only) say those things that are best, for Satan sows dissension among them. Satan is an avowed enemy to humanity." Qur'an 49:11 discourages

insulting terms and offensive nicknames in an attempt to prevent individual and group conflicts. For example, the Qur'an condemns the word *ra'ina*, which degrades the addressee but was nevertheless adopted by the Jews (Qur'an 4:46) to get the Prophet's attention; Muslims were told not to use it when addressing him (Qur'an 2:104). Similar advice can be found in the prophetic traditions, such as the directive to control one's speech (hold your tongue) and discourage verbal abuse.

One poet was quoted as having warned of the danger of common humor: "The [real] wound is the one caused by the tongue, as you already know. And many sayings have caused bloodshed."<sup>20</sup> Arabic poetry fuels intra-Muslim conflicts by satirizing (*hija'*) opposing groups or individuals, complaining of their actions, warning of revenge, and over-praising one's own group. Al-Hadi Hammu gives a few accounts of how some Shi'i poets defended Shi'i perspectives and practices.<sup>21</sup> Abu al-Aswad al-Du'ali, the pioneer scholar of Arabic grammar, protested a case of mistreatment by replying to an allegation of joining the Shi'ah made by his Sunni wife's family members: "Banu Qushayr, the most useless of all people will say (in mockery) that you will never forget to desist to support (Imam) `Ali. I love Muhammad with a great love, and I love `Abbas, Hamzah, the one whom the caliphate was willed for (`Ali), the descendants of the uncle of the Prophet and his close family members, the most beloved people to me."<sup>22</sup>

In modern intra-Muslim conflicts, linguistic expressions carry intended and unintended social, psychological, theological, intellectual, and political implications that have profound effects upon intra-Muslim relations. However, it may be difficult to present a distinctive classification of them according to a particular implication, due to the interconnection of influencing factors. Adopted expressions may have connotations for either affiliated or opposing groups. For example, using *mutamarridun* (rebels) when referring to some political groups engaged in armed struggle gives a connotation that such a group is acting against a legitimate ruler. Linguistic expressions may be chosen to degrade opposing groups and lower their esteem in the eyes of others, as in the following case: using *al-khawanah* (the traitors) for those who are assumed to be working against a government. This implication also applies to *`umala' al-imbriyaliyah* (agents of imperialism), which states in no uncertain terms that the opposing group is working in the interests of imperialism, which is contrary to the interests of the people.

Some of these expressions reflect the perception of self or others, as is the case with *muhafizun* (conservatives), *taqlidiyun* (traditionalists), and *muqallidun* (imitators), as opposed to *islahiyun* (reformers) for those

Muslims who attempt to adjust to the modern prevailing political and cultural situations in order to serve their community. An example of this is the Saudi government's use of *al-khawarij* for those supposed "militants" who seek its overthrow through violent means, since this particular term is used to create and then maintain a group perception that the people it considers to be militants are acting against a legitimate ruler.

Such a reflection of how others are perceived also applies to *irhabi* (terrorist) in intra-Muslim conflicts in Algeria, Jordan, and the Arab Gulf countries. This term seeks to convey the perception that such a person acts to instill terror in others through violent means in order to attain one's personal objectives. This meaning is given to the term despite the fact that it has been borrowed from the linguistic representation of Muslim conflicts with non-Muslims. In the current conflict in Iraq, for instance, the term *irhabiyyun* enjoys a confused representation: officials of the interim government and the occupying forces use it to denote the indigenous or foreign-born organizers of any bombing or attack against the occupying and Iraqi government forces, whereas the Sunni opposition refers to such efforts as *muqawamah* (resistance to the occupation). Thus, the term itself has become a point of contention among various Iraqi political groups.

Among Thailand's Muslim population, *Islam wahabi* is employed to identify a particular Salafi trend among Muslims as opposed to *Islam modern*, which is used for modern Muslim trends. Both terms have some socio-religious implications: the country's Salafis, who are mainly from the South, are seen by other Muslims in the country as *wahabis*. This term implies that they are agents of the religious trends established by Imam Muhammad ibn `Abd al-Wahhab during the sixteenth century that call for extremist Islam and seek to eradicate conventional practices that they consider to be non-Islamic. On the other hand, *Islam modern* indicates modern trends of abiding by the teachings of Islam that are neither extremist nor in agreement with other traditional practices considered to be non-Islamic.

There are many other expressions with varied implications, among them *al-ta'sil al-Islami* (returning to the root of Islamic thought), *ahl al-ahwa'* (followers of whims) and *ta'til al-nass* (suspending or neglecting the text's content). These also are used to connote various theological implications. Socio-cultural and moral implications are present in *al-ghadr* (betrayal), *islah* (reform), and similar terms. The usage of such terms as *al-tasamuh* (tolerance), *al-tanattu'* (over-stringent) and *al-`uzlah al-siyasiyah* (political boycott) has psychological connotations, while *irhabiyyun* (terrorists), *irgham al-jumhur* (coercion of the public), and *al-tanwir al-islami*

(Islamic awareness) carry socio-psychological and political implications. Intellectual implications can be derived from *taqlid* (adoption of the traditional approach), *tajdid* (revival), *tahjim al-sahwah al-islamiyah* (curtailment of Islamic awareness), and similar terms.

Meanwhile, the implications of representing intra-Muslim conflicts in linguistic terms may become global by involving politics, religious beliefs and practices, as well as the total way of life. For example, the Islamic Party of Malaysia has criticized the term *Islam hadhari*, which the Malaysian government adopted to represent its approach to an indigenous Islamic revival that was to lead Muslims to progress in the social, political, economic, intellectual, and spiritual aspects of life.<sup>23</sup> The critics questioned the use of *hadhari* to qualify Islam on the grounds that this implies that other indigenous Islamic approaches or practices, including those of the Islamic party, are somehow not *hadhari*. This loan word (it originally comes from Arabic) is translated into English as “progressive”; however, in Arabic it means “civilized.” The Arabic-educated supporters of the Islamic party may believe that Islam has always been a civilized religion. Therefore, any approach to it cannot be described as *hadhari*. This argument appears to combine the meanings and connotations of two languages. However, experts from the Organization of Islamic Conference have accepted it as representing a program for Islamic reform rather than a new ideology.

However, phrases like *ma yusamma bi* (what is called) or *ma wasafahu bi* (what he described as) may be employed either to reflect a lack of conviction with a particular term’s meanings or connotations or to cast doubt upon its implications. Speakers might use them as common references to some groups or actions but may not necessarily agree with their meanings. Such expressions are also employed to reduce the tensions arising from intra-Muslim conflicts.

## Contribution to Conflict Resolution

Linguistic representation enables better conflict management and resolution, as it may help both parties avoid making their interpersonal and intra-group relations even worse. Qur’an 17:53 directs Muslims to communicate by using the best expressions possible in order to avoid dissention. Other verses contain guidance on the proper use of language, such as: “O believers, fear (and respect) Allah and make your words straightforward” and “Allah loves not the shouting of evil words in public speech, except by one who has been wronged” (Qur’an 4:148).

In order to maintain the community's unity, parties involved in intra-Muslim conflicts are advised to adhere to Islamic guidance on language usage and abide by the Islamic etiquette of disagreement when choosing the expressions that best describe their views and beliefs, as well as those of their opponents, who are actually their fellow Muslims. Allegations of *takfir* (infidelity to Islam's teachings), which some Muslim groups commonly adopt to classify their ideological opponents, not only convey negative implications of their opponents, but also have serious consequences for the users themselves. Ibn `Umar reported that the Prophet said: "If any person says to his fellow Muslim 'O you *kafir* (infidel),' one of them has certainly become one. The statement will either be true of his brother, or else it will be a true description of himself."<sup>24</sup>

Al-Qaradawi recommends that in order to forge closer relations among Muslim groups, all provocative expressions that can lead to hatred and enmity should be avoided, especially in cases of Shi`ah-Sunni conflict resolution.<sup>25</sup> The former should stop using expressions that are considered insulting to various Companions and such terms as *al-nasibah* (i.e., a Muslim sect that is said to be biased against `Ali ibn Abi Talib, the Prophet's family, and whoever supports them) to refer to the Sunnis; the latter should stop using such abusive expressions as *al-rafidah* (rejection), *nawk* (stupidity), or *shatat* (deviation) when referring to Shi`i beliefs.

It is not practicable in social interaction to enforce a set of guidelines for linguistic expression in cases of interpersonal or intra-group conflicts. In fact, such guidelines may not even be acceptable to the parties involved, for many expressions that help initiate and fuel intra-Muslim conflicts are used as nicknames or adjectives to abuse, degrade, or provoke one side or another. Therefore, it is advisable that each group in an intra-Muslim conflict avoid using expressions that are not acceptable to the other side; instead, they should concentrate on the issue that is causing the conflict in question. It is essential that Muslims, all of whom are brothers and sisters to each other, call those with whom they are in conflict by the name that they prefer: "Do not defame or be sarcastic with each other; do not call each other by (offensive) nicknames. Ill-seeming is a name connoting wickedness (to be used of one) after he has believed" (Qur'an 49:11).

On the other hand, being tolerant will contribute to choosing the most appropriate and accurate terms and expressions to represent the issue at stake, an undertaking that will help reduce the perceived negative implications of linguistic representation. The general advice on language usage may also guide individual choices of expression.



In order to minimize the negative implications of sensitive expressions in intra-Muslim conflicts and avoid provocation, alternative expressions should be adopted. The Shi`ah should add the phrase *radi Allahu `anhu/`anha* (may Allah be pleased with him/her) when referring to the Companions, without discrimination, and should stop using expressions that the Sunnis view as abusive. The Salafis may prefer using *ahl al-sunnah wa al-jama`ah* (the group that follow the traditions of the Prophet and consensus of the Muslims) to refer to themselves; however, they should realize that such terms as *al-firqah al-dallah* (the groups that have gone astray) for Sufis, as well as their allegations of *takfir* against all Muslim groups that do not defer to their chosen theological principles, only insult other Muslims and divide the global Muslim community.

## Conclusion

The paper investigated the linguistic representation of intra-Muslim conflicts by analyzing the features, factors, strategies, and implications of utilizing linguistic expressions. The discussion and analysis reveal the impact of how linguistic representation is designed and then used to initiate, manage, reduce, or resolve intra-Muslim conflicts.

The study confirms the role of linguistic representation in fostering good relations and mending worsening relations among Muslims, as well as in avoiding intra-Muslim conflicts and attaining a greater understanding of others. It also reveals the significance of studying the spoken and written discourses used in specific cases in order to examine the role of linguistic representation in certain stages of such conflicts.

Constraints in preparing an extensive project on this subject lie not only in data collection, due to the many language communities involved, but also in isolating expressions of interpersonal conflict and prejudice from actual linguistic representations of conflicts among different Muslim groups. Other constraints lie in the classification of terms according to their utilization and implications, as well as in the likely cultural impact of language upon the project.

I recommend that an extensive study of the linguistic representation of intra-Muslim conflicts be carried out in Arabic and other major Islamic languages via a textual pragmatic analysis that quotes and analyzes samples of common discourses representing major international and regional intra-Muslim conflicts. In addition, I recommend that a similar project be undertaken to study the linguistic representation of conflicts between Muslims and

non-Muslim religious groups. Such an analysis of facts could be enhanced by paying adequate attention to each group's beliefs, cultural practices, and ethnic and linguistic identities, while paying the necessary attention to how a specific expression's form and structure may support a more focused attention on pragmatic meaning.

### Endnotes

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