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THE CONTESTATION OF IRAN-ARAB SAUDI RELIGIOUS SOFT POWER: IMPLICATIONS FOR SHIAH-WAHABI/SALAFI SECTARIAN POLITICS IN INDONESIA

Ahmad Asrul Azwar Irfan[1*]
Universitas Islam Negeri Alauddin Makassar[1]

Abstrack

This study explores the competing influence of Iran and Saudi Arabia in propagating religious ideologies through education and diplomacy, and its impacts on sectarian polarization in Indonesia. Indonesia has turned into a battleground with educational institutions and religious networks as proxies for the export of Wahhabism backed by Riyadh and Shiism promoted by Tehran. The study uses a qualitative approach in which the literature review is employed to investigate the internalization of soft power (like financial assistance, scholarships and setting up educational institutions) by local actors at the grassroots level. The analysis demonstrates that the transnational narratives of both countries are not only reproduced but are institutionalized as tools to reinforce domestic political identities and interests, which affect social cohesion and national stability. The study also looks at how changes in the diplomatic architecture of the Middle East, such as the Vision 2030 initiative and the dynamics of confrontation and reconciliation between Riyadh and Tehran, continue to leave sectarian traces in Indonesia. The study aims to present a comprehensive framework on the Wahhabi/Salafi-Shia rivalry and to contribute to the mitigation of the risk of identity polarization.

Keywords: Religious Soft Power, Contestation, Sectarianization, Indonesia

Abstrak

Studi ini mengeksplorasi persaingan pengaruh Iran dan Arab Saudi dalam menyebarkan ideologi agama melalui pendidikan dan diplomasi, serta dampaknya terhadap polarisasi sektarian di Indonesia. Indonesia telah berubah menjadi medan pertempuran dengan institusi pendidikan dan jaringan keagamaan sebagai proxy ekspor Wahhabisme yang didukung oleh Riyadh dan Syiah yang dipromosikan oleh Teheran. Studi ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif yang menggunakan tinjauan

*Corresponding Author: Ahmad Asrul Azwar Irfan, Universitas Islam Negeri Alauddin Makassar

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literatur untuk menyelidiki internalisasi soft power (seperti bantuan keuangan, beasiswa, dan pendirian lembaga pendidikan) oleh aktor lokal di tingkat akar rumput. Analisis tersebut menunjukkan bahwa narasi transnasional kedua negara tidak hanya direproduksi tetapi juga dilembagakan sebagai alat untuk memperkuat identitas dan kepentingan politik dalam negeri, yang berdampak pada kohesi sosial dan stabilitas nasional. Studi ini juga melihat bagaimana perubahan dalam arsitektur diplomatik Timur Tengah, seperti inisiatif Visi 2030 dan dinamika konfrontasi dan rekonsiliasi antara Riyadh dan Teheran, terus meninggalkan jejak sektarian di Indonesia. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menyajikan kerangka komprehensif mengenai persaingan Wahhabi/Salafi-Syiah dan berkontribusi pada mitigasi risiko polarisasi identitas.

Kata kunci: Soft Power Keagamaan, Kontestasi, Sektarianisasi, Indonesia

Introduction

The geopolitical rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia to gain influence in the Islamic world has resulted in ideological polarization that has spilled over into the Indonesian public sphere (Hannase & Hamzah, 2025, p. 17). This phenomenon has turned Indonesia into a contested arena for the dissemination of theological influence, where Islamic educational institutions and communities become proxies in the rivalry between Riyadh-backed Wahhabism and Tehran-promoted Shiism (Arifianto, 2017, p. 256). This rivalry not only originates from theological narratives, but also manifests itself in the struggle for legitimacy as the leader of the Islamic world which extends to various regions in Asia (Mabon & Wastnidge, 2019, p. 595). Religious soft power is exercised through the massive funding of religious organizations, scholarships for studying in Riyadh or Teheran and the creation of educational institutions that systematically spread contradictory religious interpretations (Aydın & Ramadhan, 2025). Through educational pathways and organizational networks, the two countries not only promote their ideologies but also indirectly shape deep-rooted sectarian sentiments within the grassroots communities of Indonesia (Sandjaya & Siswanto, 2023). The geopolitical rivalry between

the two countries is no longer confined to Middle Eastern regional dynamics but has transformed into a tangible threat to social cohesion and domestic stability in Indonesia through systematic ideological penetration (Humaini, 2019, p. 161; Makhsum & Wafi, 2024), thus making this research significant.

The intricacies of these dynamics become even more complex when we consider the current changes in the structure of Middle Eastern diplomacy. Riyadh is transforming its religious ideologies through Vision 2030 and other initiatives (Sandjaya & Siswanto, 2023), while the Riyadh-Tehran rivalry is marked by alternating periods of confrontation and reconciliation that alter but do not eradicate sectarian elements in their foreign policies (Mabon & Wastnidge, 2019, p. 595). At the macro level, diplomatic transformation in this context still leaves sectarian traces that are instrumentalized by local actors in Indonesia, which requires a more contextual analysis framework to trace this foreign policy repositioning. While some studies have mapped the competition of Saudi Arabian and Iranian power at the global level or the impact of sectarianism in general, the research gap still exists regarding the specific mechanisms of soft power internalization in the form of diplomacy such as educational assistance, scholarships, and the funding for religious institutions at the grassroots level that trigger socio-political dynamics in Indonesia (Aydın & Ramadhan, 2025; Khairifa et al., 2023).

Updating this sectarian political map is very important to show how transnational narratives are not only reproduced, but also institutionalized by local actors as proxy instruments for domestic political interests and identity supremacy (Makhsum & Wafi, 2024; Syarif et al., 2017, p. 27). This study is expected to represent the reality of Wahabi/Salafi-Shia rivalry in a comprehensive analytical framework so that it can mitigate the impact of identity polarization that affects Indonesian pluralism (Arifianto, 2017, p. 256; Azca et al., 2019, p. 44).

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The rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia is one of the most influential dynamics in contemporary Muslim politics. This rivalry should not be reduced to an ancient Sunni-Shia theological conflict. It also reflects geopolitical competition, regime legitimacy, religious authority, and the struggle for leadership in the Muslim world. The 1979 Iranian Revolution became a major turning point because Iran began to promote revolutionary Islam, anti-imperialism, and resistance against Western domination. At the same time, Saudi Arabia strengthened its position as the defender of Sunni orthodoxy and the custodian of the two holy mosques (Mabon & Wastnidge, 2019; Turan & Hoang, 2019). Since then, both states have used religious institutions, educational networks, scholarships, clerical authority, cultural diplomacy, and publications to extend their influence beyond the Middle East.

The concept of soft power is useful for explaining this contestation. Nye (1990, 2004, 2017) defines soft power as the ability to influence others through attraction, values, culture, legitimacy, and persuasion rather than coercion. In this context, Iran and Saudi Arabia do not only use military, economic, or diplomatic instruments. They also use religion as a strategic resource. Mandaville and Hamid (2018) explain that religion can function as statecraft when governments use religious symbols, institutions, clerics, and educational networks to support foreign policy goals. Mandaville (2023) further argues that religious soft power enables states to build moral authority, ideological affinity, and transnational loyalty through religious narratives. This framework is relevant because the article focuses on how Iran and Saudi Arabia use education, scholarships, religious institutions, and local networks as channels of ideological influence in Indonesia .

Saudi Arabia's religious soft power in Indonesia has generally operated through Wahhabi/Salafi-oriented education, scholarship programs, Arabic language institutions, da'wah

networks, religious funding, and alumni formation. Institutions such as LIPIA in Jakarta are often discussed as important channels for the circulation of Saudi-oriented religious knowledge and the formation of local intellectual elites (Aydın & Ramadhan, 2025; Qurtuby, 2019). This strategy does not only transmit religious doctrine. It also produces networks of authority that can influence mosques, Islamic organizations, educational spaces, publishing activities, and public religious discourse. Through these channels, Saudi religious diplomacy contributes to the construction of Sunni orthodoxy and, in some contexts, strengthens anti-Shia narratives.

Iran's religious soft power follows a different ideological path. Tehran promotes Shia thought, Islamic philosophy, revolutionary memory, cultural diplomacy, and narratives of resistance against Western domination. This strategy appeals to specific intellectual, activist, and religious segments that are interested in anti-imperialism, social justice, and alternative Islamic political thought. In Indonesia, Iranian influence appears through cultural centers, academic exchange, scholarship networks, publishing activities, intellectual forums, and Shia-oriented institutions such as YAPI Bangil and IJABI (Hannase & Hamzah, 2025; Muhtarom, 2017). Iran therefore does not only operate as a Shia religious center. It also presents itself as a symbol of resistance against Western hegemony and Saudi religious dominance.

However, foreign religious influence does not enter Indonesia in a direct or mechanical way. Local actors play an important role in selecting, translating, adapting, or resisting these transnational narratives. Religious elites, alumni networks, Islamic organizations, activists, media actors, and political brokers may use Saudi-oriented or Iranian-oriented narratives according to local needs. This means that Indonesia is not merely a passive target of Middle Eastern rivalry. It is an active arena where global religious competition is localized into

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domestic debates over orthodoxy, pluralism, religious authority, and political legitimacy. Previous studies show that sectarian discourse in Indonesia often becomes politically significant when it is connected to narratives of threat, heresy, foreign infiltration, and religious purity (Arifianto, 2017; Azca et al., 2019; Kayane, 2020; Makhsum & Wafi, 2024; Syarif et al., 2017).

The literature on sectarianization strengthens this argument. Hashemi and Postel (2017) argue that sectarianism should not be treated as a fixed or inevitable result of doctrinal difference. It should be understood as a political process in which sectarian identities are constructed, intensified, and mobilized by actors under specific historical conditions. In Indonesia, this approach helps explain why Wahhabi/Salafi-Shia tension becomes stronger when theological difference is transformed into political boundaries. Anti-Shia discourse, for example, may be used to defend Sunni orthodoxy, mobilize conservative groups, delegitimize religious opponents, and strengthen claims of religious authenticity (Kayane, 2020; Makhsum & Wafi, 2024; Syarif et al., 2017). This shows that sectarian identity becomes powerful when it is activated as a political instrument.

Analytical Framework

This study uses three main theoretical concepts: soft power, religious soft power, and sectarianization. These concepts are used together to explain how Iran and Saudi Arabia project religious influence, how this influence enters Indonesian religious networks, and how local actors transform transnational narratives into domestic political resources. The first concept is soft power. Nye (1990, 2004, 2017) explains that power does not only work through coercion or payment. It can also work through attraction, legitimacy, values, culture, institutions, and persuasion. In this study, soft power is used to

understand how Iran and Saudi Arabia influence Muslim societies through religious education, ideological narratives, cultural diplomacy, and institutional networks.

The second concept is religious soft power. Mandaville and Hamid (2018) describe religious soft power as the use of religious symbols, institutions, clerical authority, educational systems, and theological narratives to support foreign policy objectives. Mandaville (2023) also shows that states often use religion to build moral legitimacy, cultivate transnational constituencies, and shape political imagination beyond their borders. In this study, Saudi Arabia's religious soft power is seen through Wahhabi/Salafi-oriented education, scholarship programs, da'wah networks, and religious funding. Iran's religious soft power is seen through Shia-oriented education, cultural diplomacy, intellectual exchange, publishing networks, and narratives of Islamic resistance (Aydın & Ramadhan, 2025; Hannase & Hamzah, 2025; Muhtarom, 2017; Qurtuby, 2019).

The third concept is sectarianization. Hashemi and Postel (2017) explain that sectarianization refers to the political construction and mobilization of sectarian identity. This concept rejects the view that Sunni-Shia conflict is simply the result of old theological hostility. Instead, sectarian tension becomes politically significant when actors use religious identity to organize loyalty, define enemies, and justify exclusion. In the Indonesian context, this concept is useful for explaining how Wahhabi/Salafi-Shia differences become politicized through narratives of orthodoxy, deviance, national loyalty, and foreign infiltration (Arifianto, 2017; Kayane, 2020; Makhsum & Wafi, 2024; Syarif et al., 2017).

Based on these concepts, this study argues that the Wahhabi/Salafi-Shia contestation in Indonesia is shaped by the interaction between external religious soft power and domestic political agency. Iran and Saudi Arabia provide ideological resources, institutional channels, educational pathways, and

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symbolic narratives. Indonesian actors then localize these resources according to their own social, religious, and political interests. Therefore, sectarian politics in Indonesia should not be understood as a direct importation of Middle Eastern conflict. It should be read as a localized political process in which global religious rivalry is translated into domestic struggles over authority, legitimacy, identity, and social cohesion.

This theoretical framework enables the study to move beyond a descriptive account of Iran-Saudi competition. It explains the mechanism through which religious diplomacy becomes embedded in Indonesian institutions, how educational and clerical networks produce ideological affinity, and why sectarian narratives can become politically useful in a plural democratic society. Through this framework, the study shows that sectarianization is not inevitable. It depends on how local actors manage, amplify, resist, or negotiate transnational religious influence within Indonesia's social and political context.

Method

This study uses a qualitative literature-based approach to examine the contestation of Iranian and Saudi Arabian religious soft power and its implications for Shia-Wahhabi/Salafi sectarian politics in Indonesia. This method is appropriate because the study focuses on interpreting existing scholarly debates, theoretical perspectives, and documented patterns of transnational religious influence (Snyder, 2019). The data were collected from peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, book chapters, and relevant scholarly publications related to soft power, religious diplomacy, Saudi-Iran rivalry, Shia-Wahhabi/Salafi relations, and sectarian politics in Indonesia. The data were analyzed through thematic analysis to identify key patterns related to educational diplomacy, scholarship networks, religious institutions, ideological narratives, and local

political agency. This approach helps explain how transnational religious narratives are reproduced, negotiated, and institutionalized by Indonesian actors within domestic sectarian politics.

Discussion

Iran-Saudi Arabia: Ideological Religious Contestation Through History

The ideological contestation between Iran and Saudi Arabia cannot be understood as a simple continuation of ancient Sunni-Shia hostility. It is a modern political rivalry shaped by religious authority, regime legitimacy, regional leadership, and competing visions of Islamic order. Saudi Arabia builds its religious legitimacy through the historical alliance between the Al Saud monarchy and Wahhabi religious doctrine, which connects state authority with Sunni orthodoxy, doctrinal purification, and custodianship of Mecca and Medina (Commins, 2006; Al-Rasheed, 2010). Iran, on the other hand, derives its ideological identity from Twelver Shiism and, after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, from the revolutionary doctrine of Islamic governance, anti-imperialism, and resistance against Western domination (Nasr, 2006; Mabon & Wastnidge, 2019). Thus, the rivalry reflects not only theological difference, but also two competing models of religious-political legitimacy.

The 1979 Iranian Revolution became the most important turning point in this rivalry. The revolution transformed Iran from a pro-Western monarchy into an Islamic Republic that claimed to represent a revolutionary alternative to monarchy, secular nationalism, and Western-backed regional order. For Tehran, the revolution offered a model of Islamic resistance and political emancipation. For Riyadh, it created a direct ideological challenge to monarchical legitimacy and to Saudi claims as the central authority of Sunni Islam. This explains why the rivalry developed as both geopolitical competition and symbolic

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struggle over who has the authority to define authentic Islamic leadership in the Muslim world (Gause, 2014; Nasr, 2006; Mabon & Wastnidge, 2019).

This ideological contestation became more intense during the Iran-Iraq War, the post-2003 Iraq transition, and the conflicts that followed the Arab uprisings. These events expanded the arena of Saudi-Iranian competition from state diplomacy into proxy networks, religious discourse, and transnational identity politics. Saudi Arabia often framed Iranian influence as revolutionary expansion and Shia political penetration, while Iran framed Saudi influence as conservative monarchy, Western dependency, and religious authoritarianism. In this process, sectarian identity became politically useful. Sectarianism should not be treated as an automatic product of Sunni-Shia difference, but as a political process in which religious identity is constructed, intensified, and mobilized under specific historical conditions (Hashemi & Postel, 2017; Matthiesen, 2013; Wehrey, 2018).

This historical rivalry also explains why religion became a strategic instrument of foreign policy for both states. Saudi Arabia and Iran did not rely only on military power, oil diplomacy, or formal alliances. They also developed religious outreach through education, scholarship programs, clerical networks, publications, cultural institutions, and transnational religious organizations. This pattern reflects the idea of religious soft power, in which states use religious symbols, institutions, clerical authority, and theological narratives to support foreign policy objectives and cultivate transnational constituencies (Mandaville & Hamid, 2018; Mandaville, 2023). Through this mechanism, religion becomes not only a source of identity, but also an instrument of statecraft and geopolitical influence.

Therefore, the history of Iran-Saudi ideological contestation provides the foundation for understanding their religious soft power in Indonesia. The rivalry is not merely

about exporting Sunni or Shia doctrine. It is about transforming religious legitimacy into geopolitical influence. Saudi Arabia projects itself through Sunni orthodoxy, custodianship, and Wahhabi/Salafi-oriented educational networks, while Iran projects itself through Shia intellectual traditions, revolutionary memory, anti-imperialist discourse, and narratives of resistance (Mandaville & Hamid, 2018; Mabon & Wastnidge, 2019; Hannase & Hamzah, 2025). These competing historical trajectories create the ideological background for the next section, which examines how Saudi and Iranian religious soft power operates in Indonesia through education, scholarships, institutions, and local religious networks (Aydın & Ramadhan, 2025; Muhtarom, 2017; Qurtuby, 2019).

Iran- Arab Saudi Religious Soft Power in Indonesia

Saudi and Iranian religious soft power in Indonesia should be understood as a long-term process of ideological projection, institutional networking, and local political translation. Both states use religion not merely as a theological resource, but as a diplomatic instrument to shape moral authority, transnational loyalty, and political imagination among Muslim communities. This pattern reflects Nye's concept of soft power, in which influence operates through attraction, legitimacy, values, and persuasion rather than coercion or direct domination (Nye, 1990, 2004, 2017). In this context, Saudi Arabia and Iran do not simply export religious doctrines. They build infrastructures of influence through education, scholarships, clerical networks, cultural diplomacy, publications, and religious institutions. These instruments allow both countries to extend their authority into Indonesia's Muslim public sphere while adapting their messages to local social and political conditions.

Saudi Arabia's religious soft power in Indonesia has generally developed through the promotion of Wahhabi/Salafi-oriented religious knowledge, Arabic language education,

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scholarship schemes, da'wah networks, mosque-based activism, and institutional support for Islamic learning. This strategy draws on Saudi Arabia's claim as the custodian of the two holy mosques and as a central reference point for Sunni religious authority. Through educational diplomacy, Riyadh seeks to cultivate Indonesian Muslim elites who possess theological affinity, Arabic literacy, and institutional links with Saudi religious establishments. Institutions such as LIPIA in Jakarta have often been identified as important channels for the circulation of Saudi-oriented Islamic thought and for the formation of local intellectual networks (Qurtuby, 2019; Aydın & Ramadhan, 2025). These networks do not only transmit doctrine. They also produce graduates, preachers, teachers, translators, and activists who can influence religious discourse in mosques, pesantren, universities, publishing houses, and Islamic organizations.

This Saudi strategy shows that religious soft power works through both material and symbolic mechanisms. Materially, scholarships, funding, institutional cooperation, books, and educational access create durable channels of influence. Symbolically, Saudi Arabia offers religious prestige, scriptural authority, and access to the perceived center of Sunni orthodoxy. These two dimensions reinforce each other. Educational access gives Saudi-oriented religious interpretations institutional legitimacy, while symbolic prestige strengthens the authority of alumni and affiliated actors in Indonesia. In some contexts, this process contributes to the consolidation of Sunni orthodoxy and the strengthening of anti-Shia narratives, especially when theological boundaries become linked to claims of purity, deviance, and religious authenticity (Arifianto, 2017; Syarif et al., 2017; Kayane, 2020). However, Saudi influence should not be viewed as a one-way process. Indonesian actors actively reinterpret and mobilize Saudi-

oriented ideas according to local organizational interests, political competition, and debates over religious authority.

Iranian religious soft power follows a different ideological trajectory. Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran has projected itself as a center of revolutionary Islam, anti-imperialist resistance, Islamic unity, and alternative Muslim political thought. Unlike Saudi Arabia, which often relies on the symbolic capital of Sunni orthodoxy and the holy cities, Iran builds its influence through Shia intellectual traditions, Islamic philosophy, cultural diplomacy, narratives of resistance, and criticism of Western domination and Saudi religious hegemony (Muhtarom, 2017; Hannase & Hamzah, 2025). In Indonesia, Iranian influence appears through cultural centers, scholarship networks, academic exchanges, publishing activities, intellectual forums, and Shia-oriented institutions such as YAPI Bangil and IJABI (Muhtarom, 2017; Hannase & Hamzah, 2025). These channels allow Iran to speak not only to Shia communities, but also to intellectuals, activists, students, and religious groups interested in social justice, Islamic political thought, and anti-hegemonic discourse.

Iranian religious soft power therefore operates through a combination of theology, ideology, and political imagination. Tehran does not merely promote Shia doctrine as a sectarian identity. It frames Shia thought within broader narratives of resistance, justice, martyrdom, anti-imperialism, and Muslim solidarity. This narrative has appeal among certain Indonesian intellectual and activist circles because it offers an alternative to Western liberal dominance and Saudi-backed religious conservatism. Through books, seminars, translations, scholarships, and cultural programs, Iranian-oriented networks help circulate concepts related to Islamic revolution, resistance to oppression, and the moral critique of global power structures. This form of influence fits Mandaville and Hamid's argument that states may use religious symbols, institutions, clerical

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authority, and theological narratives as instruments of foreign policy (Mandaville & Hamid, 2018). It also reflects Mandaville's later argument that religious soft power enables states to build moral legitimacy and transnational constituencies beyond formal diplomatic channels (Mandaville, 2023).

The central issue, however, is not only how Saudi Arabia and Iran project religious influence, but how Indonesian actors receive, translate, and instrumentalize that influence. Indonesia is not a passive arena into which Middle Eastern rivalry is simply imported. Local religious elites, alumni networks, Islamic organizations, activists, media actors, publishers, and political brokers play active roles in selecting and adapting transnational religious narratives. Saudi-oriented narratives may support claims of Sunni orthodoxy, doctrinal purification, and resistance to Shia expansion. Iranian-oriented narratives may support alternative Islamic intellectualism, Shia institutional visibility, and resistance-based political identity. In both cases, the meaning of foreign religious soft power depends on local mediation. Transnational ideas gain political relevance only when domestic actors connect them to Indonesian debates on orthodoxy, pluralism, religious authority, national loyalty, and political legitimacy (Arifianto, 2017; Azca et al., 2019; Kayane, 2020; Makhsum & Wafi, 2024).

This process shows the close link between religious soft power and sectarianization. Hashemi and Postel's concept of sectarianization helps explain why Sunni-Shia difference becomes politically significant under certain conditions. Sectarian identity does not automatically produce conflict. It becomes politically powerful when actors use it to define enemies, mobilize loyalty, discipline internal groups, and justify exclusion (Hashemi & Postel, 2017). In Indonesia, Saudi-Iranian rivalry provides ideological resources and symbolic frames that local actors may use to sharpen sectarian boundaries. Anti-Shia discourse, for instance, may function as a theological claim, but

it may also serve as a political tool to consolidate conservative constituencies, delegitimize opponents, and construct religious authenticity (Syarif et al., 2017; Kayane, 2020; Makhsum & Wafi, 2024). At the same time, pro-Iranian or Shia-oriented narratives may also strengthen identity consciousness among minority communities and create alternative networks of religious authority.

The interaction between Saudi and Iranian religious soft power therefore produces a layered form of contestation. At the transnational level, both states compete for religious leadership, ideological legitimacy, and influence in the Muslim world. At the institutional level, this competition appears through scholarships, educational networks, cultural centers, religious publications, and da'wah institutions. At the local level, Indonesian actors transform these resources into instruments for negotiating authority, identity, and political position. This layered process explains why sectarian politics in Indonesia cannot be reduced to theological disagreement between Sunni and Shia communities. It also cannot be explained solely as a foreign import from the Middle East. Rather, it emerges from the interaction between external religious soft power and domestic political agency.

In this sense, Saudi and Iranian religious soft power in Indonesia has ambivalent implications. On one hand, it expands religious knowledge, educational mobility, transnational exchange, and intellectual engagement within Indonesian Islam. It provides access to scholarships, books, academic networks, and global Islamic debates. On the other hand, it can intensify religious boundary-making when local actors use transnational narratives to mark certain groups as orthodox, deviant, loyal, foreign, authentic, or threatening. The risk becomes greater when theological disagreement enters electoral politics, organizational rivalry, media framing, and mass mobilization. Under these conditions, religious soft power no longer functions

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only as cultural diplomacy. It becomes a resource for sectarian politics, identity polarization, and struggles over who has the right to define legitimate Islam in Indonesia.

Thus, the contestation of Saudi and Iranian religious soft power in Indonesia should be read as a dynamic process of localization. Riyadh and Tehran provide ideological resources, symbolic capital, institutional pathways, and geopolitical narratives. Indonesian actors then translate these resources into local religious and political contexts. This finding strengthens the argument that sectarian politics in Indonesia is not an inevitable extension of Middle Eastern conflict. It is a locally mediated political process shaped by transnational influence, institutional networks, domestic agency, and competition over religious authority. Through this lens, Indonesia becomes not merely an object of Saudi-Iranian rivalry, but an active site where global religious contestation is negotiated, reproduced, and sometimes resisted within the framework of Indonesian plural democracy.

Contestation and Manifestation of Sectarian Politics in Indonesia

The contestation of sectarian politics in Indonesia should not be understood as a direct reproduction of Middle Eastern Sunni-Shia conflict. It is better understood as a localized political process in which transnational religious narratives are selectively received, adapted, and instrumentalized by Indonesian actors. This argument is consistent with the concept of sectarianization, which explains sectarianism not as an inevitable outcome of doctrinal difference, but as a political process through which religious identities are constructed, intensified, and mobilized for specific purposes (Hashemi & Postel, 2017). In the Indonesian context, Wahhabi/Salafi-Shia tensions become politically meaningful when theological difference is connected to questions of orthodoxy, religious

authority, national loyalty, foreign influence, and the legitimacy of public Islamic identity (Kayane, 2020; Syarif et al., 2017).

The main arena of this contestation is the struggle over religious authority. Saudi-oriented Wahhabi/Salafi networks and Iranian-oriented Shia networks do not merely compete at the level of doctrine. They also compete over who has the authority to define authentic Islam in Indonesia. Wahhabi/Salafi-oriented actors often frame their religious position through purification, textual authority, and the defense of Sunni orthodoxy. Shia-oriented actors, on the other hand, often frame their position through Islamic intellectual tradition, minority recognition, inter-sectarian dialogue, and resistance-based religious identity (Muhtarom, 2017; Qurtuby, 2019; Hannase & Hamzah, 2025). This contestation shows that religious soft power becomes significant only when it is mediated by local institutions, religious teachers, alumni networks, publishers, campus forums, and da'wah communities.

One important manifestation of sectarian politics is the production of anti-Shia discourse. In several Indonesian contexts, Shia identity has been framed not only as a theological difference, but also as a threat to Sunni orthodoxy, social harmony, and national stability. This framing transforms religious difference into a political problem. Anti-Shia narratives often use categories such as deviance, foreign infiltration, doctrinal danger, and communal threat to create moral boundaries between the Sunni majority and Shia minority (Syarif et al., 2017; Kayane, 2020). This process reflects the logic of securitization, where a religious group is represented as a threat that must be monitored, restricted, or excluded. In this sense, sectarian discourse operates not only as religious argument, but also as a mechanism of social control and political exclusion.

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This manifestation can also be seen in local conflicts and communal tensions. The Sunni-Shia conflict in Sampang, Madura, for example, shows how theological difference may become entangled with local authority, communal identity, social resentment, and institutional failure. Ida and Dyson (2015) show that the conflict affected intra-religious communication and weakened social relations within the local Muslim community. The Sampang case indicates that sectarian conflict does not emerge only because of external Iranian or Saudi influence. It develops through the interaction between transnational discourse and local social conditions. Local elites, religious leaders, community organizations, and state institutions can either reduce or intensify sectarian tensions depending on how they respond to religious difference.

Sectarian politics also appears through institutional and organizational rivalry. In post-Suharto Indonesia, democratization opened wider space for Islamic groups to compete in public life. This political openness allowed various religious actors to build organizations, schools, media networks, publishing houses, and advocacy platforms. In this context, sectarian narratives can become useful instruments for mobilizing followers and delegitimizing rivals. Arifianto (2017) shows that even pluralist Islamic organizations may contain internal contradictions when local actors use anti-minority narratives to strengthen their own religious authority. Azca et al. (2019) also demonstrate that Islamist intolerance in local contexts is often shaped by narratives, organizational networks, and competition over public religious space. These studies show that sectarian politics in Indonesia is not merely a theological dispute. It is also a struggle over institutional influence and public legitimacy.

Another manifestation is the politicization of sectarian identity in democratic competition. Sectarian narratives can be used to build alliances among conservative groups, discipline

internal communities, and construct political boundaries between "true" and "deviant" Muslims. Makhsum and Wafi (2024) argue that the anti-Shia movement in Indonesia cannot be separated from international and national geopolitical dynamics. However, its political force depends on domestic actors who use global sectarian narratives for local purposes. This confirms that Saudi-Iranian rivalry functions as an external source of ideological framing, while Indonesian actors determine how far that framing becomes politically effective. Therefore, sectarian politics in Indonesia is shaped by the convergence of transnational ideological resources and domestic political interests.

Digital media further strengthens the manifestation of sectarian politics. Religious lectures, translated texts, online fatwas, YouTube sermons, WhatsApp messages, and social media campaigns help circulate sectarian narratives beyond formal religious institutions. These digital platforms simplify complex geopolitical conflicts into accessible moral binaries, such as Sunni versus Shia, orthodoxy versus deviance, resistance versus domination, or purity versus corruption. This process increases the speed and emotional intensity of sectarian mobilization. It also allows religious entrepreneurs to reach audiences who may not be directly connected to formal Saudi-oriented or Iranian-oriented institutions. As a result, sectarian politics becomes part of everyday religious communication, not only elite-level geopolitical discourse (Kayane, 2020; Makhsum & Wafi, 2024).

However, sectarian politics in Indonesia is not total or uncontested. Many Indonesian Muslim actors resist rigid sectarian boundaries by emphasizing pluralism, religious moderation, national unity, and local Islamic traditions. Traditionalist, modernist, and moderate Islamic groups often reject the direct importation of Middle Eastern sectarian conflict into Indonesia. This resistance is important because it shows

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that Indonesian Islam is not a passive recipient of Saudi or Iranian influence. Local actors can reproduce sectarian narratives, but they can also negotiate, soften, or resist them. This confirms the theoretical argument that religious soft power does not automatically produce sectarian conflict. Its impact depends on local mediation, institutional response, political opportunity, and the capacity of civil society to defend inclusive religious life (Mabon & Wastnidge, 2019; Mandaville & Hamid, 2018; Kayane, 2020).

Thus, the contestation and manifestation of sectarian politics in Indonesia reflects a layered process. At the transnational level, Saudi Arabia and Iran provide ideological resources, symbolic legitimacy, and institutional networks. At the domestic level, Indonesian actors translate those resources into debates over orthodoxy, deviance, authority, and national belonging. At the societal level, these debates may appear in education, da'wah, media, organizational rivalry, local conflict, and political mobilization. This shows that Wahhabi/Salafi-Shia sectarian politics in Indonesia is not a direct extension of Middle Eastern rivalry. It is a locally mediated process in which religious soft power becomes meaningful through Indonesian institutions, actors, and political conditions. Therefore, the challenge for Indonesia is not only to prevent foreign ideological penetration, but also to strengthen local mechanisms that protect pluralism, manage religious difference, and prevent the political exploitation of sectarian identity.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the sectarian contestation between Wahhabi/Salafi and Shia groups in Indonesia cannot be understood merely as a theological conflict. It is shaped by the interaction between Saudi and Iranian religious soft power, transnational ideological networks, and the agency of local Indonesian actors. Saudi Arabia projects its influence through

Sunni orthodoxy, Wahhabi/Salafi-oriented education, scholarships, and da'wah networks, while Iran promotes Shia intellectual traditions, revolutionary memory, cultural diplomacy, and narratives of resistance (Mandaville & Hamid, 2018; Mabon & Wastnidge, 2019; Aydın & Ramadhan, 2025; Hannase & Hamzah, 2025). These external influences become politically significant when Indonesian actors translate them into local struggles over religious authority, orthodoxy, identity, and legitimacy (Arifianto, 2017; Kayane, 2020; Makhsum & Wafi, 2024).

The strength of this study lies in its ability to connect Middle Eastern geopolitical rivalry with Indonesian sectarian politics through the concepts of soft power, religious soft power, and sectarianization. This framework helps explain that religious influence does not operate only through coercion or material power, but also through attraction, legitimacy, values, institutions, and religious narratives (Nye, 2004; Mandaville, 2023). The study also shows that Indonesia is not a passive recipient of Saudi-Iranian rivalry, but an active arena where transnational religious narratives are adapted, contested, and sometimes instrumentalized by local actors (Syarif et al., 2017; Qurtuby, 2019; Kayane, 2020). However, this study has limitations. Since it relies on literature-based analysis, it does not directly capture grassroots responses, everyday inter-sectarian relations, or the lived experiences of communities affected by sectarian narratives.

Future research should address these limitations through fieldwork, interviews, ethnographic observation, or digital discourse analysis. Further studies may examine how local Muslim communities accept, reject, or negotiate Saudi and Iranian religious narratives in different Indonesian regions. Comparative research across pesantren, universities, da'wah communities, digital platforms, and minority religious institutions would also help explain why sectarianization

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becomes stronger in some contexts but remains weak or contested in others. This direction can provide a more empirical understanding of how Indonesia manages transnational religious influence while preserving pluralism and social cohesion (Hashemi & Postel, 2017; Mabon & Wastnidge, 2019; Makhsum & Wafi, 2024).

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