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Framing a Mosque Project as a Sunni–Shia Conflict: A Case Study on the Discursive Construction of News Frames

TEEMU PAUHA

Abstract

In January 2015, the City of Helsinki received a proposal for the construction of 'a grand mosque'. In December 2017, the Urban Environment committee rejected the proposal. In the interim, the proposed mosque was the subject of intense public debate. A key point of dispute was whether the mosque would increase tensions between Sunni and Shia Muslims in Finland. This article explores the ways in which the mosque project became framed as a Sunni–Shia conflict. Special focus is put on a newspaper article published in the *Helsingin Sanomat* in July 2015 and the framing devices used therein.

Keywords: Conflict; Finland; mosque; news frames; discourse analysis; Sunni–Shia relations

Introduction

In January 2015, a conglomeration of two Muslim organisations and an interfaith dialogue group made an application for land to construct 'a grand mosque' and a cultural centre in Helsinki. The initial funding for the project was provided by the

Kingdom of Bahrain, which also pledged to coordinate the collection of the remaining sum, estimated to be in the range of €110 million to €140 million (Pauha, 2018: 238). In December 2017, after requesting reports from several ministries and the Finnish Institute of Migration, the Urban Environment Division of the City of Helsinki proposed that the application be accepted, along with the reservation of a plot for the mosque complex, albeit with several conditions.¹ Only a few days later, however, the Urban Environment committee decided against the proposal and unanimously rejected the application. The committee considered the application to be untenable because 'the scope of the project and the still open questions and uncertainty factors, above all the origin of the funding and the possible effects of the funding sources, do not provide a sustainable foundation for this solution to be realised'. The final say rested with the board of the City of Helsinki, but after the rejection by the Urban Environment committee the applicants decided to withdraw their application (Pauha and Konttori, 2019: 235).

The proposed mosque was heavily debated in the media and by politicians. This in itself is not remarkable, as similar debates have occurred in many European countries.² In addition, the arguments used in the Finnish debate were, for the most part, familiar from other national contexts. According to Stefano Allievi (2009: 60; n.d.), the arguments against mosques can be roughly divided into two categories:

¹ The applicants were required, for example, to organise an international architecture competition for the design of the mosque and to secure enough funding to cover not only the building costs but also operating costs for 15 years. All financial transactions were to be handled through a Finnish bank.

² On European mosque conflicts, see Allievi (2009; n.d.).

first, opposition to mosques may stem from the potential for a decline in property values, increased noise and traffic levels, and other types of concrete harm that they are expected to cause; second, opposition may arise because mosques are perceived as a threat to European culture and its values. Both kinds of arguments were prevalent in the Finnish debate. For example, Finnish politicians argued against the mosque on the grounds of 'noise and traffic problems', as well as the mosque not fitting with 'the Finnish culture and way of life'.³

However, the Finnish mosque debate also featured one argument that is rather unique. Early on, a key issue was whether the mosque would deepen the rift between Sunni and Shia Muslims in Finland. In this article, I investigate how this issue was discussed in the news media and how the mosque project was framed in terms of a Sunni–Shia conflict. I concentrate especially on a newspaper article published in the *Helsingin Sanomat* at the end of July 2015, as it played a particularly significant role in bringing the issue into the public consciousness.

Muslims and mosques in Finland

The precise number of Muslims in Finland is unknown, but it is estimated to be around 110,000–120,000. Of these, perhaps as many as a quarter are Shia. The Finnish Muslim population consists primarily of first-generation immigrants who have arrived in the country since the early 1990s as refugees or through family reunion. In terms of

³ Responses were given by municipal election candidates to the voting advice application maintained by the *Helsingin Sanomat*. Available from the author by request.

ethnic and national background, Muslims in Finland are a markedly diverse population. The largest groups include Arabs, Somalis, Kurds, Turks, Bosniaks, Afghans, Iranians and Kosovo Albanians. Also worth mentioning is the small but historically and socially significant Tatar community. Tatars have lived in Finland since the 1870s, and currently they number about 550. The majority of the Muslim population is concentrated in the capital region or other major cities (Konttori and Pauha, forthcoming).

There are currently only two purpose-built mosques in Finland. These were built in the 1940s and 1960s, respectively, and belong to the Tatar community. A far greater number of mosques and prayer houses, approximately 80, are located in former warehouses, industrial buildings and business premises. The largest Shia community, the Resalat Islamic Society, maintains a large and relatively well-known mosque and cultural centre in eastern Helsinki (Pauha and Martikainen, 2017: 6; Konttori and Pauha, forthcoming).

Currently, there are approximately 160 registered Muslim organisations in Finland. The majority of these are small, with only a few dozen or hundreds of members. Only a handful of organisations have a membership of thousands. Over the years, Finnish Muslims have founded several umbrella organisations to bridge the diversity of individual mosque associations. None of these umbrella organisations, however, has managed to gain the support of the majority of Muslims in Finland (Konttori and Pauha, forthcoming).

The conflicts in the Middle East have had repercussions for the Finnish Muslim community, and a concern over Shia–Sunni relations is not completely unwarranted. According to situational overviews by the Finnish Ministry of the Interior, 'Writings that reflect the tensions [between the Sunni and Shia] are constantly published on Internet discussion forums' (Ministry of the Interior, 2017: 25). The overviews also report on recurring assaults between the Shia and Sunnis in Finland. At the same time, the overviews note that only some hostilities come to the attention of the police (Ministry of the Interior, 2018).

In the context of the whole Muslim population in Finland, the two Muslim groups behind the Helsinki mosque project are relatively minor actors (Pauha and Martikainen, 2017: 14). *Suomen Muslimiliitto* (Finnish Muslim Union) is a Sunni advocacy group that provides training for both public authorities and Muslim communities (Suomen Muslimiliitto, 2014). *Suomen Musliminaiset ry* (Finnish Muslim Women), in turn, organises training, meetings and support groups with the purpose of furthering the integration and employment of Sunni women (Uskonnot Suomessa, 2018).

The third organisation involved in the mosque project was Forum for Culture and Religion FOKUS, a non-denominational and ecumenical association dedicated to interfaith and intercultural dialogue (FOKUS ry, n.d.). However, despite the application for land being made in the name of the three aforementioned organisations, the mosque was very much a personal project of three people: Ilari Rantakari (the chairperson of FOKUS), Pia Jardi (the chairperson of *Suomen Muslimiliitto* and

Suomen Musliminaiset), and Abdessalam Jardi (Pia Jardi's husband) (Pauha and Martikainen, 2017: 14). Indeed, the mosque project was not unanimously accepted even within the applicant organisations, and four of ten FOKUS board members resigned because of their association's involvement in the project (Huttunen, 2016).

Survey studies have demonstrated that the average Finnish attitude towards Islam and Muslims is relatively negative (see, for example, Ketola, 2010; Pauha and Ketola, 2015). According to a Pew report from 2018, approximately 60% of the Finnish population perceives Islam to be 'fundamentally incompatible with [their] country's culture and values' (Pew Research Center, 2018: 21). In the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) study from the same year, 57% of the population reported that they had at least a somewhat negative attitude towards Muslims (ISSP and Melin, 2019). Kimmo Ketola (2010: 47–8) suggests three reasons that may contribute to the general animosity towards Islam. First, the Finnish media tends to set Islam in a negative light, portraying it as antithetical to the Western ideals of progress and democracy. Second, attitude surveys show that Finns have a general suspicion of public displays of religiosity. Accordingly, Islam and Muslims may be shunned in part because of *hijab*, fasting, or other visible signs of religion. Third, despite the long presence of Muslims in Finland, Islam is often perceived as a foreign religion, and Islamophobia is therefore related to more general xenophobia.

Studying media frames

The term 'framing' is used in disciplines ranging from media studies and linguistics to economics and psychology (Entman, 1993: 51; Van Gorp, 2007: 60–1; Borah, 2011: 246). Different traditions often attribute differing meanings to the term. Here, framing is understood as a 'process whereby communicators act – consciously or not – to construct a particular point of view that encourages the facts of a given situation to be viewed in a particular manner, with some facts made more or less noticeable (even ignored) than others' (Kuypers, 2009: 182). A frame, in turn, is 'a central organizing idea for making sense of relevant events and suggesting what is at issue' (Gamson, 1989: 157). Journalists and news reporters use frames to give meaning to an (otherwise meaningless) set of events. A frame organises the events into a coherent narrative, emphasising those aspects that fit the overall story and downplaying the aspects that do not (Gamson, 1989: 157; Kuypers, 2009: 181). Framing as such does not imply an outright distortion of facts but rather produces a selective interpretation of events; the same events would be perceived differently if a different frame were applied (Van Gorp, 2007: 62–3).

Zhongdang Pan and Gerald M. Kosicki (1993: 58–9) use 'frame' as a synonym for 'theme', that is, for 'an idea that connects different semantic elements of a story [...] into a coherent whole'. A frame does not reside within the text but is constructed in the interaction between the news story and its audience. A frame can nevertheless be analysed by identifying within the text 'signifying elements that might be used by

audience members' (ibid.). Pan and Kosicki (ibid.) refer to such elements as 'framing devices'.

As emphasised by William A. Gamson (1989: 157), reported facts do not hold any intrinsic meaning, and therefore they also do not necessitate the use of any specific frame. The same set of events could be framed in a number of ways, and thus used to tell a variety of different stories. A particularly dominant frame in the Western media is the conflict frame (Mitchell, 2007: 126). According to the definition proposed by Holli A. Semetko and Patti M. Valkenburg (2000: 95), a conflict frame 'emphasizes conflict between individuals, groups, or institutions as a means of capturing audience interest'. It has been demonstrated that journalists actively construct conflict frames – a tendency that is further reinforced by general routines of news production (Bartholomé, Lecheler, and de Vreese, 2015: 438–57). The customary use of conflict frames may stem, for example, from the emphasis that journalists put on objectivity; in order to provide a balanced view of an issue, journalists regularly bring forward competing viewpoints, which may inadvertently strengthen the impression that there is a conflict (Bartholomé, Lecheler, and de Vreese, 2018: 1690).

Media and communication researchers have traditionally approached framing with quantitative methods. During the past decade or so, however, quantitative studies have been supplemented with qualitative – and especially discursive and rhetorical – analyses. In this article, I adopt the qualitative approach to analyse newspaper coverage of the mosque project, using the discursive approach formulated by Pan and Kosicki (1993). As in discourse analysis more generally, I do not

attempt to go 'beyond the text' and make claims regarding what happened in any extra-discursive reality. In other words, my goal is neither to prove nor to disprove the allegations put forward in the data, but to analyse their discursive formation. The key question is not whether there really was a Sunni–Shia conflict; the question is how the media made it appear that there was one.

Scholars of religion and media have extensively studied the portrayal of Islam and Muslims in media (for a meta-analysis, see Ahmed and Matthes, 2016; for Finnish studies, see Creutz-Kämpfi, 2008; Maasilta, Rahkonen, and Raittila, 2008; Raittila and Maasilta, 2008; Hokka et al., 2013; Taira, 2008, 2014; Sumiala et al., 2017). In contrast, news frame analysis has been little used by scholars of religion, either in Finland or elsewhere (but see Mitchell, 2007). Media representations and framings of Sunni–Shia relations, in particular, have been almost completely neglected in research (Douai and Lauricella, 2014).

In contrast to scholars of religion, political scientists and communication researchers have been more active in studying news framing, including the framing of Islamic terrorism (see, for example, Norris, Kern, and Just, 2003). There are several framing studies that concentrate on the news coverage of major terrorist attacks, but little attention has been paid to the news framing of alleged terrorist plots and the general threat of radicalisation (Matthews, 2015: 266).

Data collection and analysis

The research for this study was conducted in several distinct phases. First, I traced the emergence of the Sunni–Shia conflict frame in the news by going through Finnish news articles written about the mosque plans in 2015. The articles were located by making Google searches with different combinations of the search terms ‘Shia’, ‘grand mosque’, ‘mosque’, ‘Helsinki’, and their derivatives. Second, I investigated the appearance of the frame in public discussion by making keyword searches in the archives of Finland’s largest online discussion forum, *Suomi24*.⁴ In any given month, approximately 50% of all Finnish Internet users visit *Suomi24* (FIAM, n.d.), and the messages posted on the forum can therefore be seen as a rough indicator of the degree to which a subject is in public discussion. In order to gain a general sense of the public discussion involving the Sunni–Shia conflict frame, I searched for the word ‘Shia’ and its derivatives in messages that also contained the word ‘grand mosque’.

When the publication dates of the news articles were compared with each other and with the frequency of related messages on *Suomi24*, a rather clear picture emerged: despite some earlier articles touching upon the issue, it is an article published in the *Helsingin Sanomat* at the end of July 2015 that appears to be largely responsible for introducing the Sunni–Shia conflict frame to both other news media and the public discussion more generally. In the third phase of the analysis, I focused on this particular article and examined the framing devices employed in it. The

⁴ The Language Bank of Finland maintains a searchable database (Aller Media Oy, 2019), which contains all the messages posted on *Suomi24* from 2001 to 2017.

framing devices were identified by using the approach proposed by Pan and Kosicki (1993), who distinguish between four types of framing devices that can be discerned in news discourse. The analysis of (1) syntactical structures involves examining the ways in which certain pieces of information are foregrounded by being attributed to esteemed sources or placed in a central position within the text (for example, a heading). In turn, (2) script structures include the storytelling aspects of news reporting. Script structures are especially typical of event-oriented stories, whereas so-called issue stories tend to be dominated by (3) thematic structures. Pan and Kosicki (ibid.: 61) characterise thematic structures as the 'hypothesis-testing (or research finding) aspect of news discourse'; thus, a news story typically contains a set of propositions and a conclusion that is drawn from them. Finally, Pan and Kosicki introduce the category of (4) rhetorical structures, which include various stylistic devices, such as 'metaphors, exemplars, catchphrases, depictions, and visual images' (ibid.: 61–2).

First appearances of the frame

The issue of Sunni–Shia relations was brought into the mosque debate in the summer of 2015. On 12 June, the newspaper of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Helsinki, *Kirkko ja kaupunki*, published an article with the title 'The funding of the Grand Mosque causes worries' (Huttunen, 2015). According to the article, some Finnish Muslims were concerned about the Bahraini involvement in the mosque funding and

about the fact that the project was being run by only a few people. Shiism is mentioned in a single paragraph:

[T]he Sunni elite ruling [Bahrain] has given a hard time to the Shia opposition. Human Rights Watch, among others, has reported about the human rights violations of the Sunni government. [...] If the funding were to materialise, the tensions between Sunni and Shia would reach us, too, the informant suspects. (Ibid.)

The next to take up the topic was the tabloid *Ilta-lehti* in an article titled 'This is the kind of Grand Mosque that is being planned in Helsinki' (Egutkina, 2015), published on 25 June. The article is mostly based on an interview with Pia Jardi, one of the activists behind the mosque proposal, and focuses on explaining the rationale and details of the mosque plan. However, there is also one short remark on Sunni–Shia tensions:

The Grand Mosque project has been criticised for potentially aggravating the conflict between Shia and Sunni. According to Jardi, the claim is strange. – In my view, there is no need to import Sunni–Shia conflicts here into the Finnish democracy where everyone can freely express their opinion and practise their religion according to their own conviction. (Ibid.)

In turn, the main national newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* first touched upon the topic in an article titled 'The funding of the Helsinki Grand Mosque perplexes: Money coming even from Bahrain' (Jokinen, 2015), published on 18 July. Three-quarters of the article is dedicated to an interview with Ilari Rantakari, another one of the activists

behind the mosque proposal. The article makes reference to the earlier article in *Kirkko ja kaupunki* as well as to the Bahraini uprising in 2011. The interviewer also mentions tensions between Bahrain and Iran, asking Rantakari: 'Could Iran be among the funders for the project?' To which Rantakari answers: 'It is not out of the question if they want to be involved.' Finally, the article gives voice to Paula Kemell, the chairperson of the Shiite Resalat Islamic Society; she 'cautiously comments on the new centre', stating, for example, that the Shia may pray at the proposed mosque, 'depending on whether its doors are open to them' (ibid.).

These initial articles mentioned Sunni–Shia tensions only in passing and did not generate much public discussion. As can be seen in Figure 1, before the end of July 2015, only a few messages on the *Suomi24* forum mentioned the Shia in connection with the planned mosque. At the turn of July and August, however, the frequency of messages containing both the words 'grand mosque' and 'Shia' (or its derivatives) peaked. The peak coincided with the publication of another article in the *Helsingin Sanomat*.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Breakthrough

On 31 July 2015, the *Helsingin Sanomat* published an article with the title: 'Helsinki Grand Mosque and its Arab funding strain relations between Muslims' (Kuokkanen, 2015; hereafter, HS 31-07-15). According to Pan and Kosicki (1993: 59–60), the title and the lead paragraph are the two most powerful framing devices of the syntactic type. They are typically the first parts of the text to be read; therefore, they activate a

certain perspective through which the reader interprets the remainder of the story. In this case, the title links the mosque to increasing tensions between Muslims, thus activating a conflict frame. In the subheading, the conflict frame is further accentuated and elaborated: 'Mosque funding from Arab states of the Persian Gulf frightens some Muslim leaders in Helsinki. Occasional bursts of rage have already taken place in between Sunni and Shia.' The subheading thus makes a link between the project and reported hostilities between Finnish Muslims. However, it is worth noting that there is no evident connection between the two sentences of the subheading. Equally worth noting is the word 'already' in the second sentence, as it implies that the earlier 'bursts of rage' are just the beginning, and there will be more to come.

All in all, despite discussing disagreements around the Helsinki Grand Mosque and related to Sunni–Shia violence, the article provides sparse concrete links between the two. A good example is seen in the first three paragraphs of the body of the article, which begin with the sentence: 'The Grand Mosque that is being prepared in Helsinki causes confusion and worry in the Muslim communities in the capital region.' In the very next sentence, one reads: 'Some Muslims are scared that the coming of the Grand Mosque might increase extremist thinking in Finland.' Here, the mosque project and extremism are explicitly linked. The sentence is elaborated by noting: 'The question is about a conflict between Sunni and Shia Muslims, which seems to have intensified also in Finland because of the war in Syria and the actions of the extremist organisation ISIS.' It continues: 'Most suspicions are caused by secrecy about the funding of the over one-hundred-million-euro mosque and conference centre, and

by the preparations made by only a few people.' The article thus associates the mosque project with extremist thinking and even with ISIS, but the mechanisms leading from the mosque to extremism are not explicated in any way. Instead, the article plays on vague notions of 'confusion', 'worry', and 'suspicion'.

After these opening paragraphs, the article gives voice to Welat Nehri of the Finnish Kurdish Federation. According to Nehri, 'a mosque funded by the Arab states does not represent all Muslims', but the 'Islam represented by a mosque always reflects the views of the funding states'. A little further on in the article, it is explained that funding from Bahrain particularly worries the Shia because it has 'political connections with Saudi Arabia and therefore with Salafism'. In turn, it is noted that Salafism 'gives rise to Sunni extremist Islam'. And to further drive the point home, the article notes that 'ISIS is a Sunni extremist organisation'. The point is elaborated by a quotation from another Muslim leader critical of the mosque project, Madjid Bahmanpour of the Shiite Resalat Islamic Society. In the article, Bahmanpour is quoted as making a somewhat contradictory statement: 'This is not about relations between the Sunni and Shia, but about a power struggle in which Salafists are trying to lure the Sunni in with them.'

The only concrete evidence of sectarian violence in Finland comes from Inspector Jarmo Heinonen of the Helsinki Police Department. Interestingly, his statements quoted in the article do not link the violence with the mosque project. According to Heinonen, the police have received reports of 'isolated cases in which Sunnis have acted aggressively towards Shias' and 'perceived Shias as heretics'.

Heinonen further comments that the police have identified 'extremist thinking that at worst may cause harmful actions'. However, the article offers nothing to connect the incidents mentioned by Heinonen with the mosque project.

Despite not providing any direct evidence linking the mosque project with anti-Shia extremism, the article constructs an implicit connection between the two. The argument is constructed in pieces (see Figure 2). First, the article quotes Welat Nehri, who argues that mosques follow the views of their funders. Second, it notes that the main funder, Bahrain, has connections with Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia in turn is linked to Salafism, which is then linked to 'Sunni extremist Islam', which is linked to ISIS. And as we are told, 'the actions of ISIS' have already intensified the 'conflict between Sunni and Shia Muslims' in Finland as well, the implication is that the project may lead to anti-Shia extremism.

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

The article does not give the views of anyone from the project group behind the mosque plan or anyone else explicitly in favour of it. The closest one gets is Anas Hajjar, the then-chairperson of the Islamic Council of Finland. In the article, Hajjar is also referred to as 'the leader of the Sunni community in the capital region'. This title does not make any sense, because there is no unified, cohesive Sunni community in the capital region, let alone any leader of one. Yet, the title does serve the main argument of the article by constructing the Sunnis as a single homogeneous unit that may be in conflict with the Shia.

In the article, Hajjar is quoted as denying that the Sunni mosques are in favour of ISIS or extremism more generally. However, he does not challenge the overall framing, or if he did, he is not quoted as doing so. In other words, Hajjar in no way argues against the idea that Sunni–Shia relations are a meaningful lens through which to examine the mosque project.

The clear divide between Sunnis and Shia is further accentuated by the choice of illustrations. The article has two pictures, the smaller of which is a photograph of the Kurdish leader Welat Nehri smiling and holding a child. The larger picture at the top of the article, in contrast depicts Madjid Bahmanpour of the Shiite Resalat community and 'Sunni chairperson' Mohammed Hussein Omer. The caption under the picture explains that the two 'could not have been brought into the same photograph' and 'they are therefore photographed separately'. Why exactly the two could not be photographed together is not explained. Perhaps, and quite probably, they were simply interviewed on separate occasions. However, because the article is framed in terms of a Sunni–Shia conflict, one can easily interpret the caption in terms of a disagreement between them.

Why choose this kind of a caption, then – especially as it is left rather vague? After all, if several people are interviewed for an article, they are regularly portrayed separately. Being separate is hardly something that requires an explanation. Whether deliberately or not, the caption supports the conflict frame by drawing attention to the separateness.

As previously noted, frames work by emphasising certain aspects of the issue under consideration while at the same time suppressing other aspects. In the frame typology introduced by Aziz Douai and Sharon Lauricella (2014: 14–15), the framing of HS 31-07-15 clearly belongs to the category of 'terrorism frames', in that the article discusses Sunni–Shia relations first and foremost in terms of the activities of non-state extremist actors in the Middle Eastern conflict. According to Douai and Lauricella (*ibid.*), alternative ways to approach Sunni–Shia relations include 'religious frames', which focus on the theological distinctions between the sects, and 'geopolitical frames', which emphasise the role of state actors such as Saudi Arabia and Iran. The *Helsingin Sanomat* article mentions the theological and historical background of the Sunni–Shia divide only very cursorily and vaguely in an accompanying fact box: 'The division between the Sunni and Shia is based on a historical religious difference of views.' State actors, in turn, are acknowledged only insofar as they support extremist ideologies or organisations.

In the terminology used by Pan and Kosicki (1993: 60–1), HS 31-07-15 belongs quite clearly to the category of issue stories. Rather than concentrating on a specific event, the article focuses on a more general issue, reporting several events and statements related to it. A typical characteristic of issue stories is that they contain 'hypothesis-testing features' – that is, they formulate a central claim and then present evidence to support it. The central claim or hypothesis is usually summarised in the headline, lead paragraph or conclusion, and the rest of the article is used to build evidence in favour of it. In the case of HS 31-07-15, the hypothesis to be defended is

that the building of a grand mosque could import anti-Shia extremism into Finland. In defence of this hypothesis, the article presents two key pieces of evidence. First, by quoting several different Muslim leaders, the article demonstrates a disagreement between them regarding the mosque project. Second, the article reports concerns that the police have about increasing tensions between the Sunni and Shia. These two points are summarised in the headline and subheading and further elaborated in the rest of the article – but, as previously noted, the article offers little to connect them.

The story spreads

The *Helsingin Sanomat* article of 31 July was quickly picked up by other news media. On the very same day, Finland's major tabloid, *Ilta-Sanomat* (2015), published an article entitled 'HS: The Grand Mosque causes conflicts between Finnish Muslims'. The online magazine of the centre-right National Coalition Party, *Verkkouutiset*, followed suit with the article 'HS: Helsinki Grand Mosque and its Arab funding strain relations between Muslims' (Ahtokivi, 2015). A free local newspaper, *Helsingin Uutiset* (2015), ran with an even more eye-catching or sensationalistic headline: "'Extremist thinking in mosques and violence in Helsinki" – HS: The Grand Mosque frightens Shia Muslims'.

All three articles are essentially summaries of HS 31-07-15, and for the most part they offer no new information about the issue. One exception is the article in *Helsingin Uutiset*, which in one sentence hints at the significance of the Bahraini uprising in 2011: 'It raises fears that Bahrain, which is sought to fund the mosque, has

a bad international reputation because of violently suppressing demonstrations during Arab Spring.' However, none of the articles challenge the framing constructed by the *Helsingin Sanomat*. By following it, they perpetuate the notion of the mosque project as leading to a possible Sunni–Shia conflict.

A fourth article, which appeared on 31 July, was published on the news and blog site *Kotimaa24*, which is maintained by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. Titled 'The Grand Mosque project looks suspicious to Finnish Muslims' (Raudaskoski and Seppälä, 2015), it summarises HS 31-07-15 but also includes an interview with the imam Abbas Bahmanpour from the Resalat community. In the interview, Bahmanpour voices a concern that the amount of money involved could only come from Saudi Arabia and with a Saudi agenda. Bahmanpour also notes that the organisations behind the mosque project are relatively minor actors on the Finnish Muslim scene: '[The Finnish Muslim Union, Finnish Muslim Women, and Forum for Culture and Religion FOKUS] sound like big names, but they represent only a few people.' By pointing out that the Sunnis themselves are divided on the issue, Bahmanpour implicitly deconstructs the view of the mosque project as strictly representing a Sunni–Shia conflict. This is not reflected in the rest of the article, however. The only subheading in the article, for example, declares that there is 'an opposition between the Sunni and the Shia'.

Over the following two years, the topic of a Sunni–Shia conflict was consistently brought up whenever the mosque project was discussed in the media. The framing was reproduced in a number of news articles (see, for example, Karvala, 2017;

Salminen, 2015; Vuorikoski and Korpela, 2015; Vaalisto, 2017) but it was also developed further. Notably, a recurring demand in these later discussions was that the mosque proposal, in order to be acceptable, should be undertaken jointly by both Sunnis and Shia (see, for example, Kurki-Suonio, 2017).

But why was the *Helsingin Sanomat* article of 31 July picked up by other news media and the general public when the previous articles were not? Some reasons for this, however hypothetical, may be deduced from their differences. First, the articles preceding HS 31-07-15 all rely heavily on interviews with the group behind the mosque proposal, thus giving space to arguments in favour of the project. More importantly, the project group is given a chance to challenge the Sunni–Shia conflict frame, such as when Pia Jardi is quoted as saying that the claim of increasing tensions is 'strange' (Egutkina, 2015). As previously noted, HS 31-07-15 does not quote anyone who is explicitly in support of the mosque or critical of the Sunni–Shia conflict frame. By ignoring alternative views, HS 31-07-15 makes the Sunni–Shia conflict appear more 'real' and thus a more imminent threat to national security.

Second, in terms of the frame typology of Douai and Lauricella (2014: 14–15), HS 31-07-15 is the first article to discuss the mosque project and Sunni–Shia relations through a terrorism frame. The previous articles cover the same topic, but primarily apply a geopolitical frame to explain Sunni–Shia tensions in terms of Arab Spring protests and their suppression by the Bahraini government. Furthermore, there is no mention of ISIS or other big names associated with international terrorism, which may make Sunni–Shia tensions seem more like an issue internal to Bahrain or, at most, a

regional issue of the Middle East. This may make these tensions less of a concern for the average Finnish reader.

Effects on politics

It is, of course, difficult to estimate exactly the overall influence of media frames. In general, it has been demonstrated that the news frames applied in terrorism coverage have an effect on both policy and public opinion (Matthews, 2015: 271). More specifically, several researchers have noted that the ubiquity of the terrorism frame in media portrayals of Islam has sustained an atmosphere of fear and suspicion (Powell, 2011: 107; Matthews, 2015: 270). With its framing, HS 31-07-15 has arguably contributed to similar perceptions in the Finnish context. A study on the views of local politicians about the Helsinki mosque project found that the most typical stance was one of 'detached suspicion'; that is, politicians thought that they did not have enough information about the project, but nevertheless felt suspicious about it (Pauha and Konttori, 2020). Presumed tensions between Sunnis and Shia were one of the factors contributing to the suspicions.

The influence of HS 31-07-15 is perhaps clearest in a written question submitted by MP Päivi Räsänen (Christian Democrats).⁵ In March 2017, Räsänen (2017) issued 'A written question on the background and funding of the Helsinki Grand Mosque

⁵ In order to gain information on a certain topic, a Finnish MP may present a written question to the relevant minister. Minister of the Interior Paula Risikko responded to Räsänen's question, stating that the City of Helsinki had consulted the Ministry of the Interior about the mosque project and that the ministry had noted the risks involved in foreign funding.

project', in which she inquired as to whether the Finnish government was sufficiently aware of the background and funding of the project and how far security aspects were being taken into account. The written question echoes the concerns raised in the aforementioned articles, whose influence is obvious in the excerpts in Table 1 below.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

The news frames thus had an effect on political discourse, and – at least with regard to Räsänen's written question – this effect can be demonstrated by a close parallel reading of political and media texts. Whether the media frames caused some politicians to shift from being in favour of the mosque plan to being against it, however, is more difficult to demonstrate.⁶

A common-sense approach is to conceive of the influence of frames as an ability to change people's attitudes, with attitudes understood here in the cognitivist sense as individual mental dispositions towards the issue at hand (see Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Billig, 1996). Yet, this is not all there is to it. For instance, Räsänen had voiced opposition to the Muslim presence in Finland well before the publication of HS 31-07-15. Thus, the *Helsingin Sanomat* article does not mark a major turning point in her comments regarding Islam, as her critical stance towards the mosque is consistent with views that she has expressed on similar issues over the years (see, for example, Manner, 2010). To a large extent, frames influence by lending arguments to a debate. In this case, the *Helsingin Sanomat* article provided a novel justification for opposing

⁶ On the effects of news frames on political discourse, see Vliegenthart and Roggeband, 2007; Armoudian, 2016.

mosques in Finland. Without the Sunni–Shia conflict frame, the stance of the opponents to the mosque would probably have been the same but different arguments would have been used.

Origins of the frame

The conflict that is suggested in the news pieces analysed here is very much of a transnational nature: the mosque project is framed as one battle in a global fight between the Sunnis and the Shia. However, as demonstrated by an expert report based on discussions with Muslim communities, Muslim views regarding the mosque project have not always stemmed from the situation in the Middle East (Pauha and Martikainen, 2017: 18, 20). According to the report, for example, some Muslims did not agree with the central role that a Christian interfaith organisation and its chairperson played in the planning of the mosque. Others questioned the size of the proposed mosque and the associated cultural centre. It is also likely that status competitions between local Muslim communities or their leaders played a role in the debate. However, all of these diverse motives are overshadowed by the overarching frame of a global conflict between Sunnis and Shia. By focusing on the transnational and the global, the *Helsingin Sanomat* all but ignores local sources of conflict.

Furthermore, support for or resistance to the mosque project was determined by more than just being a Sunni or a Shia. Sunni leaders, for instance, were far from uniform in their views regarding the proposed mosque, and HS 31-07-15 itself acknowledges this division, albeit only indirectly. The article quotes several Sunni

leaders who voice reservations about the project under consideration. For example, Arshe Said is quoted as saying, 'It would be good to have a mosque in Helsinki. However, it requires a lot of finances and cannot be planned by only a few people.' Yet, the article identifies Said only as the 'chairperson of the Somali League', thus downplaying his sectarian affiliation. It is unlikely that the average reader would know, without being explicitly told, how to associate Muslim organisations, such as the Finnish Somali League, with a specific branch of Islam. In this way, disagreements within sects can be implicitly acknowledged but without compromising the overall Sunni–Shia conflict frame.

Thus, sectarian tensions were not the only reason for Muslims to be divided over the mosque issue. There were also concerns about finance, the general credibility of the project group, and so forth. However, the framing that was applied suppressed the diversity of opinions held by local Muslims and forced it into a dichotomous framework of Sunni–Shia opposition. But why is disagreement in the Muslim community interpreted in terms of potential anti-Shia extremism? A cynical answer would be that this kind of framing attracts readers and thus 'sells papers'. Without any link to global terrorism, the disagreement could easily be dismissed as an internal affair of the Muslim community. As a sign of potential radicalisation, however, it becomes a national security issue and, therefore, a matter of great public interest.

An alternative answer could be based on the availability of different frames. Recognising local sources of conflict, such as tensions between individual Muslim organisations or their leaders, would require a considerable degree of insider

knowledge or in-depth fieldwork, which is seldom possible for professional journalists. For this reason, journalists may be prone to adopt framings that are readily available from previous reporting on the subject. As studies on media coverage of Islam have shown, Finnish newspapers tend to associate Islam and Muslims primarily with terrorism and political violence (Maasilta, Rahkonen, and Raittila, 2008: 34; Taira, 2014: 15). Furthermore, Douai and Lauricella (2014: 17) have demonstrated that at least the North American press by and large covers Sunni–Shia relations through a terrorism frame.

It is worth noting that journalists are not alone in constructing the frames employed in the news media. In this case, it is difficult to estimate the extent to which the Sunni–Shia conflict frame was adopted from the Muslim leaders interviewed for the article. The final frame of the article can perhaps best be perceived as a product of collaboration between the journalist choosing the interviewees and writing the story, on the one hand, and the individual interviewees on the other.⁷ The interviewees, in turn, may have had their own motives in the debate, but may still have chosen to embrace the Sunni–Shia conflict frame for 'tactical purposes'; regardless of the actual reasons for opposing the mosque, invoking a terrorism frame may have been an effective means to increase public resistance to it. The role played by interviewees in the construction of news frames is a topic worthy of further research.

⁷ In a broader context, frames can be conceptualised as a product of cultural forces independent of any single individual. See Van Gorp (2007: 62–3).

I would argue that the framing of Islam adheres to the Foucauldian view of knowledge production. It is an ongoing exercise of power that involves different actors seeking to determine 'the truth' about Muslim identity. As argued by Kevin M. Carragee and Wim Roefs (2004: 214–33), power is a concept that deserves more attention in framing research. However, in contrast to Carragee and Roefs, who follow Antonio Gramsci in their conception of power, I find the Foucauldian approach particularly useful. Compared with the Gramscian view of hegemony as an attempt by the ruling elite to maintain the political status quo, power in a Foucauldian perspective is more diffuse and less localised (Schulzke, 2009). Power is not held by the elite (or anyone else for that matter) but is continually constructed in interaction.

Related to the question of power is the question of who benefitted from the mosque project being framed as involving a Sunni–Shia conflict. It is hard to imagine how such a framing might have benefitted either the Sunnis or the Shia. Instead, the primary beneficiaries may have been those like MP Päivi Räsänen, for whom the Sunni–Shia conflict frame provided a politically correct way to voice opposition to the building of mosques in Finland.

Concluding thoughts

In this article, my aim has been to answer the question, 'How was the Helsinki mosque project framed as a Sunni–Shia conflict?' I have argued that one key factor was an article published in the main national newspaper, the *Helsingin Sanomat*, at the end of July 2015. The article notes the Bahraini funding of the project as well as evidence

of sectarian violence spreading from the Middle East to Finland. However, the links between these two are left implicit. Instead of explicitly demonstrating that the mosque planners or their funders had an anti-Shia agenda, the article plays on worries and suspicions. The article quotes a police officer commenting on violent incidents between Sunnis and Shia, a Kurdish leader on foreign influence in mosques, and a Shiite activist on the threat of Salafism. All these loose ends are then woven into the central thread of the article: the mosque project is deemed suspicious because it is funded by Bahrain, which in turn has connections to Saudi Arabia, which in turn has connections to Salafism, which in turn gives rise to Sunni extremism (as seen in groups like ISIS), which in turn is linked to anti-Shia violence.

At the very least, the argument is oversimplified in terms of the political and religious situation in the Middle East. That said, references to ISIS and other extremists do make the argument emotionally evocative. ISIS was the closest there was to pure evil in the media at the time. Moreover, an incomplete chain of evidence does not stop an argument from arousing suspicion, because suspicion does not depend on the presence or absence of conclusive proof. This is especially the case in the current political climate, in which Muslims are presumed to be a security risk until proven otherwise (Mythen, Walklate, and Khan, 2012).

Furthermore, it can be hypothesised that the Sunni–Shia conflict frame is a reflection – or, to use Goffmanian terminology, a transformation (Goffman, 1986: 560) – of a more fundamental concern, namely, that of a foreign threat to the Finnish nation. As is clear from the analysis, HS 31-07-15 portrays radicalisation and extremism

as phenomena that are imported to Finland from abroad, and the possibility of violent extremism developing endogenously within the Finnish Muslim community is not really taken into account. The association between radicalisation and foreigners is conveyed indirectly, such as when concerns over extremist thinking at the mosque are implicitly justified by references to the transnational links of Finnish Muslims: 'The concern is not without warrant, says Inspector Jarmo Heinonen of the Helsinki Police. According to him, Islam in Finland is tightly linked with international actors' (HS 31-07-15). The association is also evident in the resulting discussions, such as the statements of municipal election candidates analysed by Pauha and Konttori (2020). One of the news articles published in the aftermath of HS 31-07-15 even explicitly refers to sectarian strife as 'goods imported from abroad' (*Helsingin Uutiset*, 2015).

That extremism is perceived as a threat from abroad is perhaps an example of the 'neo-Orientalism' that Douai and Lauricella (2014) see as underlying the media framing of Sunni–Shia relations. In the neo-Orientalist discourse, Islam as a whole is associated with violence and made to serve as an Other, or opposite, to 'the West'. As the name suggests, neo-Orientalism is part of a long Orientalist legacy in European culture.⁸ Accordingly, the popularity of the Sunni–Shia conflict frame in the news media and public discussion does not necessarily reflect a concern for Shia Muslims, but rather a more fundamental concern over the encroachment of a foreign religion on Finnish soil. Despite at first appearing to be a relatively unique feature of the

⁸ On Orientalism, see Said (1978).

Finnish mosque debate, the theme of a Sunni–Shia conflict may in actuality be a manifestation of the two main discourses outlined by Allievi (2009: 60; n.d.). It is not about Sunni versus Shia; it is about 'us versus them'.

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