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The Council (*Shūrā*) in Sunni Thought, with an Emphasis on Iranian Sunnis

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Abstract

This research aims to examine and elucidate the place of the concept of "shūrā" (counsel) in Sunni political thought and to analyze how it is reflected and formulated among Iranian Sunnis. As one of the fundamental concepts in Islamic sources, *shūrā* has always been regarded in Muslim political thought as a mechanism for consultation, participation in decision-making, and the management of public affairs, and throughout various historical periods, diverse interpretations and models of it have been presented. Given this background, the main question of this research is: how does the political rationality of Iran's Sunnis understand and explain the concept of *shūrā* in connection with the intellectual tradition of Sunnism in the broader Islamic world, and what configurations has this concept assumed within the framework of Iran's social and political conditions? This research has been conducted using a qualitative approach and employing the method of content analysis of written sources, and alongside this, some field observations have also been used to supplement the data. Within this framework, the views of Sunni scholars regarding *shūrā* in classical and contemporary texts have been examined, and subsequently, the manner in which these views are reflected among Iranian Sunnis has been analyzed. The research findings indicate that *shūrā* in Sunni political thought is regarded as a concept grounded in religious teachings and as a mechanism for harnessing collective wisdom in the administration of community affairs. In contemporary Sunni literature, this concept has likewise been formulated largely within two general frameworks: "general/public *shūrā*" and "elite *shūrā*." An examination of the views and experiences of Iran's Sunnis shows that this concept, in interaction with the intellectual tradition of the broader Islamic world and while taking into account the social and institutional requirements of the country, has been

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re-examined and interpreted in forms appropriate to the local context. Accordingly, it can be said that Iranian Sunni thought, in continuity with the intellectual tradition of Sunnism in the broader Islamic world, has regarded the concept of *shūrā* as a mechanism for consultation and participation in the management of public affairs, and has sought to interpret and apply it within the framework of Iran's social and institutional conditions.

Keywords

Shūrā, Islamic Political Thought, Sunni Political Thought, Iranian Sunnis, Islamic Governance, Political Participation.

1. Introduction

Shūrā (counsel) is a foundational concept in Islamic political thought, rooted in religious texts, and has been regarded in the intellectual tradition of Muslims as a mechanism for harnessing collective wisdom in the management of public affairs. In the literature of Sunni political thought, *shūrā* has likewise held a significant place in discussions concerning the administration of society, the relationship between the ruler and the community, and methods of decision-making in public matters, and throughout various historical periods, diverse interpretations and models of it have been presented. In the contemporary era, alongside the emergence of discussions on governance and participation in Islamic societies, this concept has once again attracted the attention of scholars, and efforts have been made to reassess its potentials in the context of new social conditions. Despite this theoretical standing, historical experience shows that in many periods, the function of *shūrā* has been limited in practice and has often been reduced to a superficial level of consultation, rarely materializing as an effective mechanism in actual decision-making and governance processes. Hence, examining the conceptual evolution of *shūrā* and the manner of its reflection in various social and intellectual contexts across the Islamic world holds particular importance. In this regard, Iranian Sunnis—as part of the country's Muslim community—have, in interaction with the intellectual tradition of Sunnism in the broader Islamic world and within the framework of Iran's social and institutional conditions, put forward interpretations of the concept of *shūrā*, the study of which can contribute to a more precise understanding of the functions of this concept in diverse Islamic contexts. However, the relationship between the concept of *shūrā* in the broader Sunni literature and its reflection among Iranian Sunnis has rarely been examined in a coherent manner. Linguistically, *shūrā* has been understood to mean assistance and cooperation in arriving at a correct opinion (Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, n.d., p. 277), and it derives from the root "mushāwara," meaning examination and the search for truth through dialogue and exchange of views (Ṭurayḥī, 1988, vol. 2, p. 559). In some sources, *shūrā* is also defined as "the extraction of the correct opinion through consultation and mutual exchange among individuals" (Ibn Manẓūr, 1988, vol. 7, p. 233), and it refers to a process in which various perspectives on an issue are weighed in order to reach the most appropriate decision (Abū Fāris, 1987, p. 10). In Persian, *shūrā* likewise denotes a council or assembly in which people consult one another on matters under consideration (Nafīsī, n.d., vol. 3, p. 2094; Dehkhoda, 1993, vol. 2, p. 1848). In its terminological usage, *shūrā*

refers to a process in which diverse views and experiences concerning a particular issue are gathered and evaluated, so that, taking into account its various dimensions, a well-considered decision may be reached. In this sense, *shūrā* can be regarded both as a method for arriving at the superior opinion and as a mechanism for participation in public decision-making (Ghazizadeh, 1995, p. 23; Ibn Manẓūr, 1988, vol. 5, p. 426). Accordingly, the main research question is: what place does the concept of *shūrā* occupy in Sunni thought, and how have Iranian Sunnis understood and interpreted this concept within the framework of their own social and intellectual conditions? The central question of the research is: what image of *shūrā* does the political rationality of Iran's Sunnis present in conjunction with the thought on *shūrā* in the broader Islamic world? The research hypothesis is based on the premise that Iranian Sunnis, in continuity with the intellectual tradition of Sunnism in the broader Islamic world, have accepted the concept of *shūrā* as a mechanism for consultation and the management of public affairs, while simultaneously reinterpreting it in accordance with Iran's social and institutional conditions. This research has been conducted using a qualitative approach and employing the method of content analysis of written sources, along with some field data. Within this framework, the place of *shūrā* in the literature of Sunni political thought is first examined, and then the manner in which this concept is reflected and interpreted among Iranian Sunnis is analyzed. Subsequently, after elucidating certain theoretical readings of *shūrā*, the views and experiences of Iranian Sunnis in this regard are examined.

1.1. Research Background

A review of previous studies shows that although research has been conducted on the concept of *shūrā* in Islamic political thought, the direct focus on the relationship between *shūrā* in Sunni thought and its reflection among Iranian Sunnis remains limited and requires more coherent examination. Anbarmoo and Tavasoli Roknabadi (2025), in their article "An Analytical Examination of the Place of *Shūrā* and *Shūrācracy* (consultocracy) in the Thought of Contemporary Iranian Sunnis," have sought to present a picture of the nature of *shūrā* in the views of political and religious currents and figures among Iranian Sunnis, and to analyze the grounds for the connection and correspondence of theories of *shūrā* in this field with the theoretical foundations of the general theory of *shūrā*. This research is significant in terms of its focus on the contemporary views of Iranian Sunnis, although its scope is largely directed toward the conceptual analysis of "shūrācracy." Feirahi, in his

article "The Foundations of Sunni Political Thought" (1996), has categorized the evolution of Sunni political thought into three periods: Companion (Sahaba) Textualism, The Formation of *Fiqh al-Khilāfa* (Jurisprudence of the Caliphate), and the Contemporary Era. Taking into account the influence of new civilizational developments as well as the Islamic jurisprudential heritage, he has analyzed the process of the formation of modern political thought among Sunnis and has examined the contexts for the transformation of concepts such as the caliphate and *shūrā* within their historical framework. Miraḥmadi (2014), in his book *Islam and Consultative Democracy*, employing a hermeneutic approach, has examined the relationship between *shūrā* and democracy from an Islamic perspective and has put forward the concept of "Islamic *shūrācracy*." He has also, in his article "The Concept of *Shūrā* in the Iranian Experience" (2015), analyzed the role of *shūrā* in two important junctures of Iran's political history—namely the Constitutional Revolution and the Islamic Revolution—and examined the historical reflections of this concept. Despite the importance of these works, a systematic examination of the relationship between the theoretical foundations of *shūrā* in Sunni thought and its reflection and reinterpretation among Iranian Sunnis—particularly within the framework of contemporary social and institutional conditions—has still rarely been undertaken in an independent and focused manner; this is the gap that the present research seeks to address.

1.2. Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

This research, employing a qualitative approach and using thematic analysis (theme analysis), examines the intellectual framework of Iranian Sunnis in relation to the concept of *shūrā*. Thematic analysis is a common method in qualitative studies for identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within data, and it enables the researcher to extract and explain the concepts and themes embedded in texts and empirical data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). This method is based on an iterative process of moving back and forth between data and analysis, during which the collected data are progressively coded, categorized, and organized in the form of conceptual themes. Within the framework of thematic analysis, the research process involves the initial coding of data, the extraction of conceptual themes, and ultimately their integration into more abstract conceptual structures (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 4). In the first step, written sources related to the concept of *shūrā* in Islamic political thought—particularly the works and views of thinkers from the broader Islamic world, as well as the ideas put forward among Iranian

Sunnis—were collected and examined. In addition to written sources, part of the research data was obtained through field observations and in-depth interviews with some experts and intellectual activists in this field. To analyze the data from the interviews and to organize the conceptual codes, the software MAXQDA was used for the qualitative analysis, and SPSS software was used for the statistical sections related to the field data. At the theoretical level, the present research is based on the assumption that the discourse on *shūrā* among contemporary Iranian Sunnis has formed in close connection with political and social developments, and, much like many intellectual currents in the Islamic world, it is understandable within the horizon of moving beyond authoritarian models of governance, reforming power structures, and strengthening political participation in Islamic society. Hence, in the first part of the theoretical analysis, the place and function of *shūrā* among certain thinkers of the broader Islamic world are examined, and then the reflection of this concept in the thought of Iranian Sunni thinkers—particularly in the views of Ahmad Moftizadeh—is considered. Among these, the theory of "General Shūrā" (*al-shūrā al-ʿāmma*) by Tawfīq Muḥammad al-Shāwī, the Egyptian reformist thinker, stands as an important theoretical framework for understanding the function of *shūrā* in contemporary Islamic political thought. In his theory, al-Shāwī regards *shūrā* not only as the basis for the realization of freedom and justice in Islamic society but also as a natural and universal right that the Noble Quran has recognized for the organization of the various affairs of Islamic society (al-Shāwī, 1992, p. 11). In his view, *shūrā* is not merely a limited consultative process but rather a foundation for the production of subsidiary rules, a mechanism for policymaking, and a symbol of the social maturity of Islamic society—a concept that, from this perspective, can even have a horizon beyond modern democracy (Mirmousavi, 1999, p. 2). Al-Shāwī divides *shūrā*-based government into two types: complete *shūrā*-based government and incomplete *shūrā*-based government. In the first type, *shūrā* is the primary basis for decision-making and the regulation of public affairs, while in the second type, *shūrā* is largely advisory and limited in scope. In his view, the Noble Quran presents *shūrā* as one of the fundamental foundations of legislation in Islamic society and emphasizes its necessity in organizing social affairs. From this perspective, *shūrā* is a religious, human, and ethical institution that possesses the capacity to shape a coherent political system and can offer a model for the political future organization of Islamic societies (al-Shāwī, 1993, p. 20). On the other hand, al-Shāwī draws a distinction between the concepts of *shūrā* (consultation), *tashāwur* (mutual

consultation), and *istishāra* (seeking counsel), and, by citing numerous verses from the Noble Quran—including relevant verses from Surah al-Shūrā, Āl-ʿImrān, al-Tawbah, and Luqmān—he elucidates the Quranic foundations of *shūrā*. He regards *shūrā* as a fundamental mechanism for the realization of *al-amr bi al-maʿrūf wa al-nahy ʿan al-munkar* (enjoining good and forbidding evil) at the social level, and considers it the legitimate pathway for community participation in the organization of public affairs (al-Shāwī, 1992, pp. 53–72).

2. Part One: *Shūrā* in the Thought of Sunnism in the Broader Islamic World

The concept of *shūrā* is one of the foundational concepts in Sunni political thought, having been raised in connection with the question of regulating political power and community participation in the management of public affairs. Rooted in religious texts, this concept has, throughout the history of Islam, acquired various interpretations in accordance with the political and social conditions of Islamic societies, and has been regarded at levels ranging from a mere ethical recommendation for consultation to a model for organizing political power. In the contemporary era, alongside the emergence of discussions such as reforming governance structures, limiting power, and strengthening political participation in the Islamic world, *shūrā* has once again come to the forefront of attention among Sunni thinkers. Within this framework, many scholars have sought, through a re-reading of Islamic sources and the jurisprudential heritage, to elucidate the potentials of *shūrā* for regulating the relationship between sovereignty and society. The discourse on *shūrā* among Iranian Sunnis has likewise taken shape in connection with these very intellectual developments. Therefore, in order to gain a more precise understanding of the views put forward among Iranian Sunnis, it is first necessary to examine the place and interpretation of *shūrā* in the thought of Sunni thinkers from the broader Islamic world.

2.1. Rashīd Riḍā; The Council of *Ahl al-Ḥall wa-l-ʿAqd*

Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā adopts an elitist approach to the question of *shūrā*—under the Islamic Caliphate—through the mechanism of the council of *Ahl al-Ḥall wa al-ʿAqd* (the people who loose and bind). Indeed, the emphasis on *shūrā* and a consultative political system for the purpose of reforming the structure of the Islamic system is a fundamental assumption in his thought, and he seeks to demonstrate the compatibility of Islamic government with democracy (Mirahmadi, 2014, p. 141). In his view, if the government applies

the principle of *shūrā* between the rulers and the ruled, and if the jurists determine the standards and conditions for the right of resistance against tyranny, then democracy would be secured for Muslims (Enayat, 2005, p. 209). According to Rashīd Riḍā, traditional theories of Islamic government are ineffective in contemporary societies, and the Quranic theory of *shūrā* is the most suitable framework for Islamic governance. As a prominent representative of Sunni *shūrā*-oriented thought, he endeavored to revive the Ottoman Caliphate. By appealing to the Quran, he proposes a consultative government to distance the Caliph from despotism and to harmonize the Caliphate with democracy (Rashīd Riḍā, 2005, p. 186). From Rashīd Riḍā's perspective, the conditions under which *shūrā* becomes relevant include matters for which there is no explicit textual ruling (*naṣṣ*) from God or the Sunnah of the Prophet, for which there is no sound consensus, and which involve non-definitive interpretive texts (*ijtihādī*). Hence, *shūrā* is obligatory upon the ruler, and acting on individual opinion without consulting the Muslims is not permissible (Mirahmadi, 2014, p. 307). He regards following the majority opinion as being in the interest of the future of Muslims and evaluates the danger of entrusting affairs to a single individual as greater than entrusting them to a council. In his view, *shūrā* has no fixed form and can be adapted to any time: "The Prophet used to hold it in the mosque, and today it can be held in more modern assemblies" (Feirahi, 2005, p. 150). Rashīd Riḍā maintained that governance in Islam belongs to the community (*ummah*), which takes shape through *shūrā*. Regarding the practical implementation of *shūrā*, he believes that since convening a council with the participation of all members of the community is impossible, a group must act as their representatives in establishing *shūrā*. Since the opinion of this group arises from awareness of the community's interests, their view is considered equivalent to the opinion of all individuals. In modern terms, this is a form of "indirect democracy" (Feirahi, 2009, p. 198). In a note titled "*Shūrā* in the Lands of Persia" published in the journal *al-Manār* (al-Mashwara section), Rashīd Riḍā writes: "God Almighty has placed the affairs of the Muslims in consultation (*shūrā*), and on this basis, the rule of an individual established upon the principle of despotism is not permissible. Therefore, it is not permissible to regard an autocratic government as an Islamic government. If the rule of *shūrā* in the lands of Persia remains as it is currently established, then it is incumbent upon us to say that on the face of the earth, no true Islamic government exists other than the constitutional government of Iran. It is incumbent upon us to affirm and support it so that the command of God may not vanish from the earth" (Rashīd Riḍā, 1922).

2.2. Ḥasan al-Turabi; *Shūrā* as a Public Affair (*al-Amr al-ʿĀmm*)

Ḥasan al-Turabi (1932–2016) was a politician and Islamist thinker, and the founder of the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood. The theoretical development of his discussions on *shūrā* has been published in three books: *The Islamic State* (1983), *Shūrā and Democracy* (1984), *Dialogues on Islam, Democracy, the State, and the West* (1995), and *Reflections on Political Jurisprudence* (1999). The subject of *shūrā* in the Sudanese Islamist movement—much like Islamic government, political Islam, and related concepts—stands in an effective intellectual connection with this concept as found in the doctrines of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. The concept of *shūrā* in al-Turabi's thought is fundamentally linked to two concepts: sovereignty and consensus (*ijmāʿ*). In his view, ultimate and absolute sovereignty belongs to God, and *shūrā* is likewise based on the principle of God's sovereignty and the supremacy of Shariah in Muslim society. The supreme authority in Islamic government is the divine texts—the Quran and the Sunnah—and then the people. Accordingly, *shūrā* is also one of God's commands, issued from absolute sovereignty and binding upon all Muslims. In response to the question of why the decision-making method for the community is characterized as *shūrā*, al-Turabi maintains that their affairs are managed through mutual consultation among themselves (al-Turabi, 1983, p. 242). With regard to consensus, al-Turabi believes that it should not be adopted merely as a decision-making procedure for resolving public issues, but rather should be applied to other activities within Islamic society as well. He thus divides consensus into three main types: (1) the consensus of the community, which pertains to matters concerning the fundamentals of religion, such as prayer and fasting; (2) political consultative consensus, which aims to preserve the political unity of the community, decide on legitimacy, and resolve political disputes. Al-Turabi states that this second type has two main forms: (a) direct—holding a referendum on the constitution or on an issue that affects the destiny of the nation; and (b) indirect—a legislative body for certain decisions; and (3) jurisprudential consensus, which is conducted by jurists recognized as "leading jurists," addressing new jurisprudential issues that arise, with the aim of determining which new opinions should be considered legally valid (al-Turabi, 1983, pp. 47–48). In his view, *shūrā* has a close relationship with political participation and is equivalent to it. The main purpose of *shūrā* is to promote political participation in Muslim society, and the concept of political participation signifies justice and fosters a sense of cooperation among individuals and groups. Accordingly, al-Turabi presents *shūrā* at three levels

for Islamic society: gatherings, assemblies, and councils (*shūrā*) (al-Turabi, 1989, p. 168).

2.3. Rached Ghannouchi

Rached Ghannouchi, a pragmatic Islamist figure and leader of the *Ḥarakat al-Ittijāh al-Islāmī* / *Ḥarakat al-Nahḍah* (Ennahda Movement) of Tunisia, is among the *shūrā*-oriented thinkers of the Islamic Maghrib. While asserting that Islam has a theory of government, he maintains that nearly all Islamic scholars, despite their differences of opinion, agree on the composite nature of Islam as both a religion and a comprehensive system for life, as well as on the convergence of these two qualities in the person of the Prophet Muhammad: the quality of prophethood as a messenger from God—like other prophets—and the quality of political leader of the community that believed in him, or that, without accepting his religion, wished to join his covenant [and live under his protection] (Ghannouchi, 2006). Although the Prophet's mission in Mecca was confined to religious proclamation, in Medina his previous role was supplemented by the function of heading an independent state with a constitution, assuming the same duties as other states—such as adjudication, concluding treaties, regulating military affairs, and providing social welfare. Upon the Prophet's death and the conclusion of his prophetic mission, the Companions decided to continue and perpetuate his second function—the leadership of the state—through the appointment of a caliph. They chose the Prophet's successor (caliph) through *shūrā*, and this function has continued in various forms down to the modern era. In al- Ghannouchi's view, *ijtihād* alongside *shūrā* constitutes the source of movement and dynamism in Islamic societies, and the mechanism for the exercise of human vicegerency (*khilāfa*) from God, as well as for religious, intellectual, and political freedom: "By virtue of these freedoms, a host of debates and schools of thought—religious, intellectual, and literary—have emerged in Islamic history. Now the question arises: in matters concerning the organization of Islamic society and Islamic government, which require legislative systems, how can a specific model be arrived at amidst all these debates, schools, and diverse interpretations? It is here that the concept of consensus (*ijmāʿ*) becomes prominent. According to this principle, theories that represent public opinion—whether by unanimous agreement or majority—serve as the basis for action. This principle is the source of authority, meaning that apart from the authority of God, there is no authority higher than the authority of the community (*ummah*)" (Ghannouchi, 2006).

2.4. Hassan al-Banna

Hassan al-Banna's political thought, the organization of the political system and the Islamic state rests upon three fundamental principles: the Quran as the constitution; a consultative system (*shūrā*); and the ruler's commitment to Islamic teachings and the will of the people (al-Banna, 1991, p. 231). A government based on these principles will be just and strong, in harmony with the customs of society, and will realize the public interest. Acting in accordance with Sharia and Islamic laws is essential and obligatory for the Islamic state. The ruler must be Muslim, male, adult, sane, sound of mind, healthy, knowledgeable in Islamic jurisprudence, just, pious, and capable of management. Unlike the thinking of traditional Sunni scholars, the ruler does not need to be of Qurayshī lineage. Furthermore, adherence to *shūrā* is a binding obligation and a fundamental basis of the Islamic state. The conditions for membership in the *shūrā* council, in al-Banna's view, are restricted to three groups: jurists and legal scholars; experienced leaders; and influential figures (individuals who hold a kind of leadership and influence within their communities) (Ibid., p. 246).

2.5. Abul A'la Maududi

In Maududi's view, *shūrā* is one of the fundamental principles of Islamic government, in which the system of governance must proceed through consultation (Maududi, 1985, p. 64). In his view, the Rightly Guided Caliphs (*al-Khulafāʾ al-Rāshidūn*) did not conduct matters of organization and legislation without consulting those who possessed the right to deliberate. By centering his analysis on *shūrā*, he examines the concepts of judgment (*qaḍāʾ*), caliphate (*khilāfa*), and kingship (*mulūkiyya*), and holds that the basis of the caliphate is *shūrā*, whereas kingship and monarchy are based on force and inheritance. Hence, *shūrā* and general vicegerency (*khilāfa*) constitute a locus for Islamic government that manifests true democracy. Maududi writes: "All matters of government—from its establishment and formation, to the election of the head of state and those in authority (*ulū al-amr*), to legislative and regulatory affairs—shall be carried out on the basis of consultation among the people of faith, irrespective of whether this consultation is direct or through elected representatives" (Maududi, 1985, p. 29).

2.6. Sayyid Qutb

The third foundation of Islamic government, in Sayyid Quṭb's view, is consultation and deliberation (*shūrā*). This foundation, while important, also

possesses a particular complexity, because—given that the ruler's duty has already been defined, and then the duties of individuals toward the ruler have been enumerated—the question now arises: what is the place of *shūrā*? If the Islamic ruler is a manager, knowledgeable, just, and so on, then why should he consult with the people? First, it should be noted that this Islamic ruler cites two Quranic verses: one, "[O Messenger,] consult them in affairs" (Quran 3:159); and the other, from the attributes of the believers, that "their affairs are [conducted] by consultation among themselves" (Quran 42:38). In his exegesis, under the verse "and their affairs are by consultation among themselves," Qutb points out that the command for *shūrā* is not specific to government and the state alone, but rather encompasses all stages of an individual's life (Alikhani & et al., 2011, vol. 14, pp. 381–382).

2.7. Yusuf al-Qaradawi

Islam has made the principle of *shūrā* one of the fundamental pillars of Islamic society, obligated Muslim rulers to consult and give counsel, and made enjoining good and forbidding evil a duty upon the people—to the extent that it has called the entirety of religion "advice" (*naṣīḥa*) and made it obligatory to advise the leaders of the Muslims, that is, the rulers and governors. It has also made enjoining good and forbidding evil an absolute obligation, and established the best form of *jihād* as speaking the truth before tyrannical rulers. This is because, in God's view, resistance against internal corruption and despotism is far stronger than confronting colonialism and external aggression, for it is despotism that provides the ground for the infiltration and expansion of colonialism and foreign domination (Qaradawi, 2002, p. 172). In response to the question of whether the resolutions of the *shūrā* council are binding or merely ceremonial, he believes that some scholars—even to this day—hold that the decisions of the *shūrā* are advisory and instructive in nature, not binding and executive; that is, while they are obligated to consult with the people of *shūrā*, they are not obligated to follow and adhere to the opinion of the *Ahl al-Ḥall wa al-ʿAqd*. Elsewhere, he has spoken about the incorrectness of this view and explained that if rulers and leaders consult with the people of *shūrā* and then act according to whatever they themselves deem expedient or whatever is suggested to them by their associates, and disregard the resolution and decision of the *shūrā* as if it never existed, such a *shūrā* would be futile and meaningless. And how, based on their own historical culture, can we call the members of such a council *Ahl al-Ḥall wa al-ʿAqd* when they neither resolve any problem nor are able to implement any

agreement or decision concerning matters? (Qaradawi, 2002, p. 189).

2.8. Muhammad Said Al-Bouti

Al-Bouti has discussed shūrā extensively in his works, which include the following: 1. Al-Shūrā fī al-Lugha wa-l-Iṣṭilāḥ (Shūrā in Language and Terminology); 2. Khaṣāʾiṣ al-Shūrā (Characteristics of Shūrā); 3. Ahl al-Shūrā (The People of Shūrā); 4. Aḥkām al-Shūrā (The Rulings of Shūrā); 5. Ahammiyyat al-Shūrā wa Mazāyāhā (The Importance and Advantages of Shūrā); 6. Shumūliyyat al-Shūrā fī al-Islām (The Comprehensiveness of Shūrā in Islam); 7. Al-Shūrā fī ʿAhd al-Khulafāʾ al-Rāshidīn (Shūrā in the Era of the Rightly Guided Caliphs); 8. Al-Shūrā fī al-Islām (Shūrā in Islam). In his view, shūrā means the recourse of the leader (imām), judge (qāḍī), or any individually obligated person (mukallaf) to consultation in a matter for which there is no clear ruling in the Quran, Sunnah, or consensus. Furthermore, the characteristics of shūrā include the establishment of an authentic part of the methodology of mutual assistance and cooperation to which God has commanded us, in the path of establishing a human society in which the reality of servitude to God may be manifested. Shūrā has no right to yield before any limitation of any kind or form (al-Bouti, 2017, p. 23).

The importance of *shūrā* and its advantages, in al- Bouti's view, include the following:

- **Moral advantages:** a great factor for connection and the creation of love and affection between society and its leaders.
- **Social advantages:** *shūrā* serves as a reminder of the firm bond between the ruler and the ruled, or the *imām* and the community, under the auspices of Shariah.
- **Scholarly advantages:** a means of benefiting from the knowledge of scholars and experts in specialized fields.
- **Legal advantages:** rulers have no right to interfere in the rights of the people without consulting them.
- **Political advantages:** it is a principle of sound statecraft that the *imām* is fully aware of the interests, aspirations, and sufferings of his people, and the best way to discover these is through consultative assemblies and dialogue. (al- Bouti, 2017, pp. 18–19).

2.9. Muḥammad al-Ṭaḥḥān

Regarding the meanings and importance of *shūrā*, Ṭaḥḥān holds that *shūrā* is a managerial mechanism for decision-making and decision-taking, and since it

necessitates the presentation of various opinions and ideas before the final decision is made, it stands in opposition to despotism. Thus, *shūrā* is a principle that is incompatible with despotism as well as with hasty and ill-considered decisions (Ṭaḥḥān, 2009, p. 11). Numerous experiences have shown that the locus of ailment in the body of this community (*ummah*) lies in its leadership, and the community will not awaken and become active except through the vigilance and warning of its leaders. Hence, monitoring the performance of the leadership is necessary and obligatory in order to ensure the soundness of its course (Ṭaḥḥān, 2009, p. 12). In his view, the verses on *shūrā* (Quran 42:38 and 3:159) indicate the extent of the Noble Quran's concern for establishing and consolidating the principle of *shūrā*. As they show, the Quran, from the very beginning of the call in Mecca, made *shūrā* obligatory upon Muslims as a mechanism for building Islamic society and as the foundation of Islam's social system; and after Muslims attained government in Medina, it again emphasized the necessity and importance of this principle and introduced it as the basis of the political system or the legal system (Ṭaḥḥān, 2009, p. 10). In personal life as well, Islam guides the Muslim individual that in important matters where the correctness or usefulness of which is uncertain and subject to various interpretations, and where the individual faces conflict and doubt, to seek help from two approaches to reach a more correct decision: first, the linguistic approach, or *istikhara*, which consists of performing two units of prayer (*rakʿatān*) and then supplicating to God with the content that God may grant him that aspect of the matter which secures his worldly and otherworldly interests; second, the human approach, or *istishāra*, meaning consultation with individuals whose wisdom, goodwill, and sincerity he trusts. In this way, he combines *istikhara* from the Creator and *istishāra* from the created. Muslims also recall this wise saying from their heritage: "He who seeks divine guidance (*istikhara*) will not be disappointed, and he who consults will not regret" (Ṭaḥḥān, 2009, p. 14). In Ṭaḥḥān's view, the people of *shūrā* include the following individuals:

- **Experienced experts** who were specialists in highly technical matters.
- **Those qualified for *shūrā*** who were specialists in matters of general legislative significance.
- **The general public**, whose opinions and views were the basis for decision-making on broader public matters—such as declarations of war and peace, treaties, the election of the caliph, and other issues requiring a referendum (Ṭaḥḥān, 2009, pp. 24–25).

Overall, the examination of the views of Sunni thinkers from the broader

Islamic world shows that the concept of *shūrā* in the contemporary political thought of this intellectual tradition has moved beyond being a mere ethical recommendation or a limited consultative mechanism, and has gradually come to be regarded as one of the foundations for organizing political power and social participation. Many of these approaches have sought, through a re-reading of Islamic sources, to explain *shūrā* as a mechanism for strengthening collective rationality, overseeing power, and reforming governance structures. In such a context, understanding the interpretations of *shūrā* among Iranian Sunnis can also be analyzed in line with these very intellectual developments, although these interpretations have taken on their own specific formulations in accordance with Iran's social and political conditions.

3. Part Two: *Shūrā* in the Thought of Iranian Sunnism

Iranian Sunni political thought cannot be regarded as a single, unified system; rather, this intellectual domain encompasses a collection of diverse perspectives and readings that have taken shape across different historical, social, and intellectual contexts (Anbarmoo, 2020, p. 156). Nevertheless, among these views, the concept of *shūrā* is considered one of the central concepts in discussions on the organization of power and participation in public affairs. Hence, in this section, an attempt will be made—by focusing on some prominent perspectives, particularly the theory of "the council of *Ulū al-Amr*" in the thought of Ahmad Moftizadeh—to examine the place and function of *shūrā* in Iranian Sunni thought and to analyze its relationship with the prevailing readings among Sunni thinkers of the broader Islamic world.

3.1. Theory of the Council of *Ulū al-Amr*

The theory of the council of *Ulū al-Amr*—also known as the "Supreme Council of Islamic Scholars" and the "Supreme Islamic Council"—is an instance of the general theory of *shūrā* and embodies a maximalist approach to *shūrā* in political affairs. In this theory, the leadership of the community is entrusted, through a hierarchical council system, to a "caliph appointed by and under the supervision of the council" (Moftizadeh, 1980, p. 3). In this regard, Moftizadeh, by dividing Islamic society into different stages, considers *shūrā* in its narrow sense in the stage following the death of the Prophet. In any case, the important and critical stage of administering society is the one following the death of the Prophet; a new phase of social life begins, in which no single individual possesses that level of decision-making competence, and now the stage of "and their affairs are by consultation among themselves," Quran

42:38) arrives (Moftizadeh, 1978, p. 24).

3.2. The Nature of *Shūrā*

But what is the ultimate meaning of *shūrā*—what model of council is intended? Can one, under the name of *shūrā*, pursue a different objective? What Moftizadeh had in view regarding *shūrā* was a democratic council, not an elitist council. In this case, not only has the council fallen from an elitist degree, but this authentic principle has at times, as a tool in the hands of a profit-seeking group, even acted against the very principle of *shūrā* itself. The purpose of a consultative government—that is, the council of the community and the natural epitome of the community's authority—recognizes a council that has emerged from within the community and has advanced along with it, and knows that the members of the council are truthful, trustworthy individuals who embody the crystallized will and confidence of the community. The intended meaning of *shūrā* is the governance of a body of individuals who, consciously and deliberately, and with attention to their responsibility and role in shaping their own history, come together under the name of the community—the sum of whom is gathered under the name of the council members or *Ulū al-Amr*—to administer society (Moftizadeh, 1978, p. 107).

3.3. The Hierarchy of *Shūrā*

Ahmad Moftizadeh, drawing inspiration from the era of the Quran's revelation, has presented a multi-stage model for the development of religiosity based on *shūrā*. Moftizadeh believes that at each stage, in accordance with the temporal, spatial, and audience conditions, an appropriate approach to *shūrā* must be adopted. In other words, he has outlined different stages for achieving a *shūrā*-based Islamic society. He holds that transformation in a traditional society—particularly one from over a thousand years ago—was not only a common occurrence but also exceedingly difficult and arduous, and the Prophet (peace be upon him) was tasked with guiding and leading a deeply traditional society of the pre-Islamic era of ignorance (*jāhiliyya*). In that ordinary life, people were deeply entangled in the elementary issues of their tribal society, and in response to a truthful call for transformation—even if the entire society heard that voice—not all would necessarily show willingness (Moftizadeh, 1978, p. 22). Moftizadeh believed that the initiation of any new movement, particularly one founded on *shūrā* and popular participation, is accompanied by many obstacles and difficulties. He described the first stage of developing

shūrā-based religiosity as very difficult and fraught with ups and downs, and considered its audience to be limited. For this reason, he emphasized the necessity of enduring hardships along this path. To explain the various stages of developing *shūrā*-based religiosity, he paid attention to the chronological order of the revelation of verses related to *shūrā* in the Noble Quran. By analyzing the role of these verses in guiding the early Muslim community, he outlines a path that begins with awakening and consciousness-raising and reaches its peak with the formation of a precise and scholarly council. Along this path, consultation and popular participation in decision-making hold particular importance (Moftizadeh, 1978, p. 21).

- The first stage: the call of the Prophet (peace be upon him) for the transformation and development of society (Moftizadeh, 1978, p. 23).
- In the initial stage of guiding a society, the duty of a leader is continuous and unceasing effort and striving, so that he may guide and direct them from the existing state of affairs toward the desired state, based on wisdom and reason (Moftizadeh, 1978, p. 22).
- In the next stage, with the emergence of novice followers, they are gradually taught the way of administering a new society, so that in the not-too-distant future they may experience, in practice, the heavy burden of a more important stage (Moftizadeh, 1978, p. 23).

At this stage, Moftizadeh regards all members of society, regardless of their background, as equal with respect to the administration of society, and considers all equal before the law, without the least consideration or flexibility (Moftizadeh, 1978, p. 23). He strongly emphasizes that a mere majority cannot serve as the criterion for accepting an opinion. Even if an opinion is in the minority, but is consistent with the Quran and Sunnah and possesses logical reasoning, it must be accepted. This is a very important point that is often neglected in many discussions concerning collective decision-making (Moftizadeh, 1978, p. 26).

3.4. The Functions and Advantages of *Shūrā*

In the thought of Ahmad Moftizadeh, *shūrā* is not merely a consultative mechanism, but rather a Quranic approach and a structural solution for preventing discord and rationally organizing collective life. He holds that even if a society is homogeneous in terms of belief and social composition, the absence of a *shūrā* mechanism in resolving issues exposes it to disagreement and fragmentation. From this perspective, *shūrā* guarantees the internal cohesion of Islamic society and prevents the formation of enduring political

and social divisions (Moftizadeh, 1978). Moftizadeh, by citing the place of *shūrā* in the Noble Quran—including the naming of a Surah as "Al-Shūrā" and its being placed alongside fundamental pillars such as prayer and charity—emphasizes the foundational importance of this concept in regulating the social, economic, and political life of Islamic society. In his view, *shūrā* is a mechanism for raising public awareness, developing social insight, and strengthening collective responsibility, and if properly realized, it can guide society from a state of fragmentation toward unity. At the institutional level, he formulates *shūrā* in the form of a Supreme Islamic Council, which plays a pivotal role in guiding the structure of power. This council, while determining major policies, overseeing the public economy, and playing a role in legislation and execution, delegates executive functions to the "government (the Caliphate government)," financial affairs to the "Treasury Authority," adjudication of disputes to the "Judicial Authority," and defense and extraterritorial missions to the "Defense Authority." Meanwhile, education occupies a status beyond that of a mere administrative body and is placed directly under the supervision of the council (Moftizadeh, 1978). Thus, in his thought, *shūrā* is not only the basis of legitimacy and political cohesion but also the axis of the institutional organization of power in Islamic society.

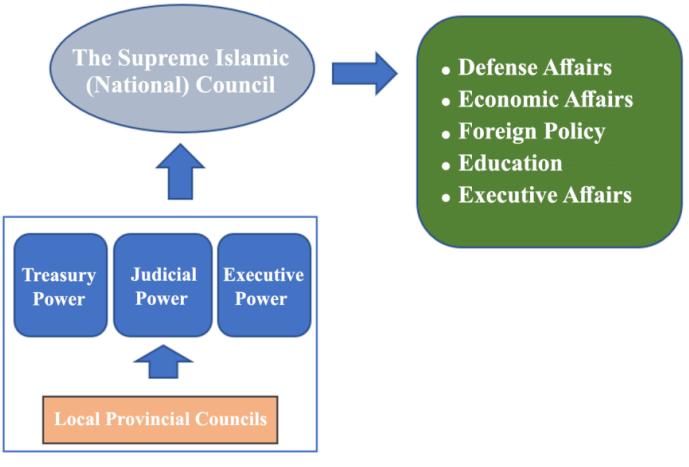

Figure 1. The Administrative Structure of the Theory of the Council of *Ulū al-Amr*

4. Part Three: Strategic Analysis

A historical review of the place of *shūrā* in Islamic political thought shows that this concept has been formulated more as a normative principle for regulating public affairs in Islamic society than as a pre-defined institutional

model. Some studies also indicate that Islam, in its encounter with existing social traditions in Arab society—including the consultative practices prevalent in tribal structures—adopted a reformative and guiding approach, and by affirming the principle of consultation, redefined it within the framework of religious values and norms (Al Sulami, 2002, p. 76). From this perspective, Islamic sources, rather than providing a specific institutional model for organizing political power, emphasize the principle of consultation in public decision-making, and have left its institutional realization to a significant extent to the historical and social conditions of Muslim societies. An examination of the historical experience of Islamic societies shows that the concept of *shūrā* has in practice been accompanied by two distinct readings or applications. In one interpretation, *shūrā* has been understood as a mechanism for participation in political decision-making and for regulating the relationship between the ruler and society—an interpretation for which manifestations can also be observed in the experience of the early Islamic community and in certain periods of the early Caliphate. In the second interpretation, *shūrā* has been employed largely in the form of limited consultations with elites or influential figures—such as religious scholars or community elders—and its function has remained primarily at the level of advice and counsel to the ruler. Subsequent historical developments have likewise influenced the manner in which *shūrā* has been understood and applied. In many periods of Islamic history, the predominance of jurisprudential approaches to organizing political affairs, along with historical circumstances and power structures, caused *shūrā* to be understood largely within limited and non-institutional interpretations. In contrast, in certain intellectual currents of the Islamic world—particularly in the contemporary period and in light of expanding communications and engagement with new models of governance—efforts have been made to re-read the concept of *shūrā* and redefine its functions within new frameworks. In this process, thinkers such as Tawfīq Muḥammad al-Shāwī have sought to explain *shūrā* as a basis for formulating a political order grounded in participation and collective rationality. In this context, the re-emergence of the question of *shūrā* in the contemporary political thought of the Islamic world has often been raised in connection with concerns such as reforming governance structures, strengthening public participation, and rethinking the relationship between Islamic tradition and new models of societal administration. These discussions have also been reflected in the domain of Iranian Sunni thought, and alongside theoretical debates, have manifested themselves in the form of certain structures and social and religious

institutions. The formation of councils such as religious councils, educational councils, or councils related to religious and social affairs among some Iranian Sunni communities can be analyzed within this very framework. From this perspective, the question of *shūrā* among Iranian Sunnis—in line with the intellectual developments of the Islamic world—is not merely a theoretical discussion in the domain of political thought, but is also significant and noteworthy from a social and institutional standpoint.

5. Conclusion

The present research was conducted with the aim of elucidating the dimensions of conceptual and intellectual continuity of "shūrā" from the literature of Sunni political thought in the broader Islamic world to its reflection among Iranian Sunnis. The examination of theoretical sources showed that *shūrā* in contemporary Sunni political thought—particularly in the works of some reformist thinkers—has gradually moved beyond being a mere ethical recommendation for consultation and has come to be regarded as one of the foundations for organizing collective rationality, social participation, and regulating the relationship between sovereignty and society. Within this framework, theories such as the "general theory of *shūrā*" have sought to explain *shūrā* as a guiding principle for decision-making in public affairs and as a context for the realization of social cohesion in Islamic societies. At the level of Iranian Sunni thought, this concept has likewise been re-read in connection with these very intellectual developments. An examination of Ahmad Moftizadeh's views shows that he, by distinguishing between the two concepts of "religion" and "sect/madhab," has sought to explain the roots of unity and disagreement among Muslims. In his view, "religion"—as a set of common Islamic principles—can serve as the basis for solidarity and convergence of the Islamic community (*ummah*), while "sect"—as different interpretations and readings of religion—can, in the absence of dialogue and consensus mechanisms, lead to the formation of disagreements. Within this framework, Moftizadeh regards *shūrā* as a mechanism for managing disagreements, strengthening scholarly dialogue, and achieving a kind of intellectual convergence among Muslims (Moftizadeh, 1978). From his perspective, the revival of the institution of *shūrā* in the form of consultative and jurisprudential assemblies, the strengthening of interaction among Islamic scholars, and the adoption of a gradual approach to resolving religious differences can help reduce intra-Islamic divisions. Although this view, like many normative theories in the domain of political thought, faces challenges

arising from the historical, cultural, and political complexities of Islamic societies, it nevertheless offers potentials for strengthening intra-Islamic dialogue and the rational management of religious differences. In the social context of Iran, some institutional manifestations of this approach can also be observed in the formation of religious, educational, and social councils among Sunni communities. These experiences show that the concept of *shūrā* among Iranian Sunnis is not merely a theoretical discussion in the domain of political thought, but has also been reflected at social and institutional levels. Within this framework, strengthening dialogue institutions and jurisprudential consultation among Islamic schools of thought—including through capacities such as the World Forum for Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thought (*Majmaʿ al-ʿĀlamī li al-Taqrīb bayn al-Madhāhib al-Islāmiyya*)—can contribute to deepening scholarly interactions and reinforcing religious convergence in Iranian society. Overall, the results of this research show that the concept of *shūrā* in Iranian Sunni thought, in line with the broader discourse on *shūrā* in the Islamic world, emphasizes above all the strengthening of collective rationality, scholarly dialogue, and social participation. Within such a framework, *shūrā* can function as one of the mechanisms for reinforcing social cohesion and constructive cooperation within the framework of the existing political order, and can provide the ground for more active participation of religious and social elites in the intellectual and social processes of society.

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