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# Sectarianism in the Middle East

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Over the last decades sectarianism has become one of the key aspects of politics and society in the Middle East and beyond. The prominence of religious conflict is astonishing on several levels: First of all, it contradicts secularisation and modernisation theories (not that they are necessarily very prominent in academia, but they do remain influential in politics and public discourse). The rise of sectarianism is in part related to the

resurgence of religion and new religious movements across the globe.

In addition, it forces us to reconsider the nature of state building and state-society relations in the Middle East. States that were in the past seen as "strong", "nationalist" and governed by officially secular regimes, such as Iraq and Syria, fractured along ethnic and sectarian lines. Others are on the brink of doing so, or have seen an upsurge in sectarian violence and polemics.

The rise of sectarianism can not be explained without understanding the historical political sociology of the developments of sects. In the Middle East,



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there is broadly speaking, a division between urban centers, where states established their capitals and power bases (largely dominated by Sunni Islam with its acceptance of unjust rulers that are seen to be better than anarchy) and peripheral regions, where various sects managed to establish themselves and institutionalise communal systems of social, moral and at times political control.

This holds true for the Levant where Alawis were mainly to be found on the coast and the mountains, Shia in Jabal Amil, and Druze in Mount Druze. But it is also true in the Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula (where we find Twelver Shia on the shores of the Gulf, Zaidis in the mountains of Yemen, Ibadis on the coast of Oman, and Sufis in the Hijaz). The interior of Arabia, on the other hand, became the heartland of Wahhabi Islam since the middle of the 18th century.

When making these broad overviews and generalisations, we need to be aware that we do not fall into the trap of Orientalism or imperial design. Until fairly recently, the view of the Middle East as a mosaic of religions and ethnicities, many of whom are eternally at war with each other, dominated much of the academic and political debate about "the Orient". At the same time, authoritarian rulers, and colonial powers (including the Ottomans), used the notion of perpetual conflict between Sunni and Shia to make the case for the need of an external arbiter, a power broker. Today, Arab dictators and kings still use these same tactics to justify their rule.

And we should also not use "sectarianism" as a catchall explanation for very different kinds of processes. Quite often we hear that something is "sectarian" and it is assumed that we understand what it means, but we often do not, or understand different things.

But not talking about cultural difference is a mistake as well. Throughout much of the Middle East and the Islamic world, talking about sectarianism was largely a taboo.

Since the 20th century, a number of "sects" have attained political power, in parts because of help from Western countries. The French institutionalisation of sectarianism in the political systems of the Levant did much to ensure that by and large politics would be organised through the socio-political structures of "sects".

France helped bring about an Alawite state, which lasted from 1920 to 1936.

The French also recruited many Alawites and members of other minorities into special branches of the army, which ensured that after independence these minorities were in a powerful position.

In Egypt, there were similar processes under way. Christians, Circassians, Jews and others were vital in business and politics under the Ottomans, Muhammad Ali, and then under the British and the monarchy. But the nationalist upsurge and Nasser's nationalisation policies largely pushed them out of the centres of power. Only the Copts remained a significant part of the Egyptian social fabric.

Shia Islamists came to power in Iran in 1979 through their own making, and vis-a-vis strong resistance by the West. But in Iraq, it was the US-led intervention that brought Shia Islamist parties to power.

### **Key Factors for the Rise of Sectarianism**

So several underlying developments contributed to the salience of sectarian identities in the Middle East (for there were large parts of history when they were not salient, even though personal religious beliefs might have led to animosities between individual members of different sects)

- The rise of Islamism amongst both Sunnis and Shia
- The politicisation of Shia Islam and the empowerment of the Shia in the last decades and the Iranian revolution
- The mix of sectarianism and geo-politics in foreign and security policies, particularly in Saudi Arabia and Iran, but increasingly also in other states such as Iraq, Syria and Bahrain

Indeed one can argue that since 2011 sectarianism has played a stronger role in the self-perception of states, in the ways they have portrayed power abroad, and in the ways they have viewed their citizens. Sectarianism in International Relations is a zero-sum game, and in this zero-sum game the Shia are the losers overall, but have a lot of influence in key strategic areas, including in the Gulf, Iraq, and the Levant.

The main development that we have to grasp with analytically is the transformation of religious group-identities into politically salient ethno-sectarian identities in the 20th century.

Many sectarian groups in the region have undergone processes that are similar to the rise of nationalism

“Sectarianism in International Relations is a zero-sum game...”

and modern political ideologies. This partly happened in response to the failure of these ideologies and/or because certain groups felt excluded from it. So, for example, Christians were paramount in the foundation of Arab nationalism, and particularly in one of its main incarnations, the Baath party. They wanted to overcome their minority status and be integrated into a larger "body politic", an imagined community of equals. The very notion that such a community could or should exist was introduced by the Ottoman Tanzimat reforms (itself a response to European nationalism) and direct contacts with various forms of European nationalism and empire. In most cases the nationalism that was appropriated by Arab, Turkish and Iranian intellectuals was the Herderian notion of ethnic nationalism, associated with the German version of ethno-politics, and less the civic nationalism of the British.

And so the boundaries that came to define the nationalisms were ethnic and exclusive, which caused tensions at the fault lines of these ethnic boundaries. This was particularly so on the borders between Iran and Iraq, and in the Gulf, in particular Kuwait, where Arab nationalism was very anti-Persian, and by default rather anti-Shia.

In the case of Shia identity politics, this is similar. Left out of nation-building and nationalist historiography, the Arab Shia created distinct historical narratives and socio-political structures.

So implicitly, many sectarian groups have transformed into small nationalist groups, which do have a transnational component insofar as they do feel solidarity with co-religionists elsewhere, partly because their spiritual leaders reside elsewhere. But their main claims are local, and related to territory and history.

In the case of the Shia of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain sectarian identities have become almost like a marker of ethnicity. Indeed, the sectarian conflict there has taken on many forms of ethnic conflict. So it is important to remember that it is not just about "religious" beliefs, although for example in Saudi Arabia, religious hatred against non-Wahhabis is an important factor. It is rather religion in its social context that matters.

The Shia of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain share common historical memories and narratives that are being written down, published and re-enacted by local historians and identity entrepreneurs. They very much relate to territory, and to the imagined community that once was "Ancient Bahrain".

While these historical narratives are only partly re-enacted in public, Ashura and Muharram rituals serve to annually reinforce general narratives of oppression, resistance and victimhood that are associated with Shiism.

Ashura is the tenth day of the month of *Muharram* and Shia Muslims commemorate on that day the martyrdom of Hussayn, Muhammad's grandson and third Imam in Shia Islam, in 680. One could even argue that these are counter-mobilisations, creating alternative publics to the state-sponsored nationalist historiography and re-enactments that glorify Arab, Sunni and tribal identities.

They also share a dialect, which in the Bahraini case is quite distinct from the dialect most Sunni Bahrainis speak. So after a few sentences a local would usually be able to tell who is a Sunni or a Shia. Shia are also recognisable to a certain extent by their last (and by their first names), which facilitates institutional discrimination.

In reaction to this discrimination, Gulf Shia founded communal Islamist movements, which seek to both change the status of the community and enforce public morality and Islamic politics. This rise of communal movements, at times Islamist, was also key in exacerbating sectarian strife in other countries: In Lebanon and Iraq, Yemen and to a lesser extent in Kuwait.

## **Conclusion**

The general failure of Arab nationalism, the fall of the Soviet Union and the corruption and brutality of secular regimes in the region, together with the charge of blasphemy that the leftists, particularly the Communists, could never really shake off, have all undermined secular political movements that sought to bridge sectarian divides. This is significant as up to the 1970s, Shia and other religious minorities constituted the bulk of leftist movements in the region. This was particularly so with the Communist movements in the Levant, in Iraq and the Gulf.

In addition, the changing relationship between Islam and Politics, the rise of Gulf states as financial and political actors, and the Iranian Revolution all contributed to the development of contemporary sectarianism. The empowerment of Shia movements across the region has led to fears amongst the old Sunni elites, who in turn supported a sectarian backlash. Political sectarianism is distinctively modern, related to political economy and geopolitics, with similar functions and logics as ethnic nationalism and related to processes of *post-modernity*. Sectarianism is also a fundamentalist phenomenon, trying to ascribe fixed categories and identities where these are often in flux or even eroding, and becoming more fluid and hybrid, be it through massive socio-economic changes, political disruptions, new technologies, or changes in social control and public morality.