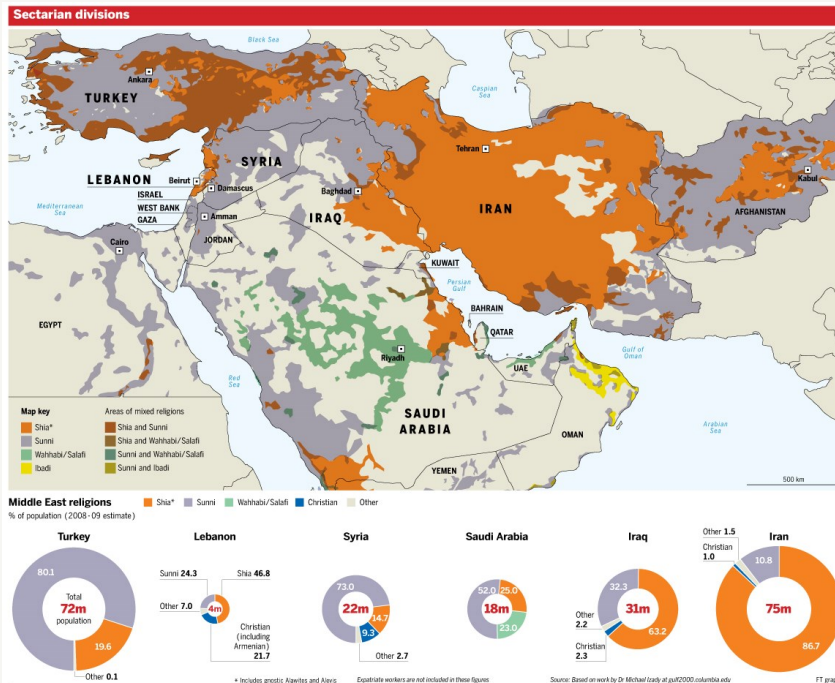


Sectarianism in the Middle East

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[Image Source: Financial Times](#)

Executive Summary

Sectarianism is frequently applied as a framework to understand developments across the Middle East, particularly in the tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia that play out across the region. This briefing provides an overview of the academic discussions on the emergence and utilization of sectarian identities, and how it impacts politics and day to day lives. It notes that such sectarian identities and beliefs are not fixed in stone and do not necessarily drive tensions, recent protests in the region show how people can move beyond them. However, it makes the case that such beliefs and identities matter to people and that the political and religious elite are able to exploit them.

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In his final state of the union address as President of the United States in February 2016, Barack Obama explained tensions across the Middle East as a “transformation that will play out for a generation, rooted in conflicts that date back millennia”. Obama’s reductionist re-reading of history, offers a skewed analysis of modern politics, reducing contemporary issues to tensions found in the 7th century, where questions over the leadership of the Muslim community after the Prophet Mohammad first emerged. While not alone in holding such views, Obama’s comments are representative of a view that reduces politics in the Middle East to religious difference, ignoring an array of other political, social, economic and cultural forces.

For some, Obama’s comments feed into Orientalist attitudes of the Middle East prevalent amongst many in the West, yet it has also become doubly problematic with some across the region uncritically internalising this deeply troubling discourse, deepening schisms across societies often with devastating repercussions for local and regional politics. As a consequence of these serious issues, more critical reflection on the concept of sectarianism is needed. In recent years, sectarianism has become a catch phrase used to describe political life across the Middle East. Media outlets, the academy and policy discussions have all spent a great deal of time working through questions about sectarianism and the impact of sect based difference on political life. This impact ranges from theological debate to violence along identity lines, albeit conditioned by a range of factors.

Within Islam, schisms emerged after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 amidst debate over who was to lead the umma (community) and while theological differences have emerged in the years that followed, they were initially political. For some, Abu Bakr, the Prophet’s trusted advisor and friend, should rule, yet for others, Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad should rule. Followers of Ali became known as Shi’a. While there are over 1.57 billion Muslims in the world representing around 23% of the global population, the vast majority are Sunnis. A 2009 Pew survey suggested that 87-90% of Muslims are Sunni leaving 10-13% Shi’a, who predominantly reside in Iran, Pakistan, India and Iraq. Only about 20% of the world’s Muslim population live in the Middle East, while more Muslims live in India and Pakistan (around 350 million combined) than across the Middle East-North Africa region (320 million). In spite of this, much of the focus on sectarianism within Islam has focussed on events in the Middle East, typically focussing on divided societies, those states with two or more different sects or faiths.

Unsurprisingly, there is a vast literature on sectarian politics that increased after particular events, notably the 1979 revolution in Iran, the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq and the Arab Uprisings. Across this literature, scholars from different disciplines explored theological schisms within Islam and the political, social, economic, communal and geopolitical dimensions that shape - and are shaped by - difference between sects. In spite of this focus, there is no singular definition of sectarianism which prohibits analytic clarity. Reflecting on sectarianism, one is forced to confront questions about what sectarianism includes and excludes or, put another way, where the divisions between identities are.

For example, should sectarianism be viewed as inter religious or intra religious? Is it about divisions between the religious and secular or over ethnicity? Reflecting on this across the Middle East, it is easy to see examples of these different forms. Academic work on the topic typically begins by expressing the complexity and ambiguity of the concept. As Morten Valbjorn is keen to stress, sectarianism should be understood as an “essentially contested concept”, one that is shaped by a range of different forces and interpreted in different ways contingent upon time and space. Myriad questions quickly emerge when beginning to explore sectarianism, including: Is sectarianism fundamentally religious? Is it about ethnicity? Where does sectarianism fit in political life? What type of identities are included in discussions of sectarianism? Can we view it as a distinction between religious and secular? Is it tensions between different religions? How do we engage with sectarianism? How do we measure it? What conditions are a necessary feature of sectarian difference? When, where and how does sectarian difference take on violent characteristics? What impact do regional currents have on domestic issues?

How one answers these questions shapes the understanding of sectarianism and the forces that shape difference between communal groups. I do not propose a definition in this short piece, but rather aim to map out the ways in which sectarianism can be understood and the potential pitfalls of these approaches. Typically, literature on sectarianism is grouped into two main approaches: understanding sect-based difference, and the ways in which sect-based difference is performed.

Sectarianism and Identity Politics

In the years after the Arab Uprisings, sectarianism has become central to academic, media and policy efforts to understand events across the Middle East. While difficult to define, as we shall see, the definition presented by Aziz Al-Azmeh offers a good starting point, as the deification of religious difference, followed by the politicisation of this difference and the ensuing solidification of internal membership and the barriers between the groups. This process of ‘othering’ – framing members of the other group in a negative manner – then serves as the marker of difference between the different communities.

While Al-Azmeh’s definition presents the key features of sectarianism - religious difference, politicisation, and the cultivation of in-group/out-group distinctions – there is more at play. A great deal of literature on sectarianism draws on sociological approaches to identity politics. The first approach to understanding sectarianism is *primordialism*, a position which views sect based difference as a consequence of ‘ancient hatreds’ dating back to the Battle of Karbala. It views identities as immutable and fixed and tensions between the different groups is a consequence of a long-standing enmity from the early years of Islam. Primordialists hold that identities have little capacity for change and contextual factors have little impact, often ignoring other forces such as class, influence, geopolitics, culture, national identity and regime survival. Although few scholars accept the primordialist position, rejecting such a static view of identity, it is still used by those – such as Barack Obama – who seek to reduce (often violent) tensions to a consequence of long-standing enmity.

The second position is the Constructivist or Instrumentalist position, which argues that identities are malleable, epiphenomenal and as a consequence, are products of their environment. Here, identities are manipulated by elites or ‘sectarian entrepreneurs’ who have cultivated sectarian difference in pursuit of their own ends. After the Arab Uprisings - also known as the Arab Spring, Revolutions or Awakening - elites across the region sought to ensure their survival by playing the sectarian card, framing the other in a way that drew support from other members of society. This approach suggests that sectarian difference is more about *politics* than *piety*. Much like the Primordialist, Constructivists/Instrumentalists are also criticised, in this case for ignoring the resonance of sectarian identities and, thus, unable to explain why these identities find support amongst communities.

Academic debate on sectarianism tends to present both approaches as fundamentally flawed, requiring a ‘third way’ that can offer a more appropriate way of understanding the emergence of sect based antagonism. These approaches, sagaciously explored by Morten Valbjørn, who suggests that within these ‘third ways’ are a number of clusters advocating different types of approaches. One calls for the complete abandonment of existing approaches to sectarianism. Another warns of the dangers of throwing out the ‘baby with the bath water’, urging conceptual restraint. A third calls for a more eclectic approach to analysing sectarian difference.

Whilst these approaches have their strengths – and weaknesses – more is needed to address the ways in which sectarian identities play out across political projects. Again, there are different approaches to this question, including identifying typologies of sectarianism, exploring the ways in which sectarian identities are located in governance structures, and reflecting on the geopolitical repercussions of increasing sectarian tensions.

The Impact of Sectarianism

While understanding the emergence of sectarianism is undeniably important, other scholars have explored the ways in which sect-based difference manifests in contemporary life. One such approach, put forward by Fanar Haddad, is to categorise *typologies* of sectarianism, including: 1) everyday or banal sectarianism, 2) instrumental sectarianism, 3) radical sectarianism. This approach is less concerned with the roots of the difference but instead helps to understand the ways in which tensions between different communities play out in every day life.

Moreover, as intimated above, sectarian identities can also have a role to play in the organisation of life across political projects, which requires a different type of exploration. Reflecting on the history of political life across the Middle East after the First World War reveals a great deal about the role of sectarian identities in states. The resonance – and ‘stickiness’ – of sectarian identities allows elites to use them as a tool in efforts to retain power, yet this same stickiness also means that sectarian identities can be viewed as a threat due to their capacity to speak to large numbers of people. In the formative stages of the Iraqi state, British officials expressed concern that Shi’a groups across the south of the country posed a threat to its very survival due to their perceived links with co-sectarian kin in neighbouring Persia. A similar fear punctured the following decades, as Sunni rulers across the Middle East expressed concerns that their Shi’a populations possessed stronger affinity to Iran than to their host country.

More recently, similar concerns have resulted in the *sectarianization* of political life. This process argues that the prevalence of authoritarian rule and concerns about the regulation of life, ruling elites across the region have sought to manipulate sectarian difference within societies in an effort to retain power. Facing popular protests from groups with cross-sectarian support, elites sought to frame protests along sectarian lines, dividing the protest movement in two in an effort to stabilize their support base. While powerful, the role of sectarian identities in political projects goes beyond concern about 5th columnists. In Lebanon and Iraq, two societies divided along sectarian lines, constitutional documents have created power sharing agreements allowing each sect (and others) a voice in the running of the country. Yet this influence isn’t restricted to the political realm, with power sharing agreements based on sectarian identities impacting on social and economic aspects of life, often resulting in corruption, and clientalism which can reinforce sectarian identities. Membership of these communities can provide access to resources, opportunities and benefits that are only open to those who express loyalty to their respective elites. This way of ordering life can create great vast wealth for elites but it also brings with it the possibility of rampant corruption and widespread anger at bureaucratic and economic inertia which has fed into protests that broke out across Iraq and Lebanon across the latter stages of 2019.

The Geopolitics of Sectarianism

Identities are products of their environment as much as they shape their surroundings. As a consequence, political and geopolitical events have repercussions on sectarian identities while sectarian tensions can have geopolitical repercussions. A feature of this is the impact of geopolitical forces on local politics, stemming from the ways in which the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has played a prominent role in the shaping of the contemporary Middle East, playing out across the region since 1979. After revolution in Iran during 1979, there was a surge in literature about sectarianism and the geopolitical repercussions of such difference, particularly in light of the outbreak of war between Iran and Iraq. Yet the nature of the debate has evolved over time, notably in 2003 following the US led invasion of Iraq, and in 2011, after the Arab Uprisings. Following the US-led invasion of Iraq and the toppling of Saddam Hussein and the process of de-ba’athification that followed created a new set of political dynamics, reversing the long-standing marginalisation of Shi’a groups. The establishment of the *Muhassasa* system of government, a process of power-sharing that gave all major groups in Iraq a say in the running of the country. While understood as a system of sectarian identities, it divided power between Sunni, Shi’a and Kurd, moving beyond traditional delineation of sectarian identities.

The rising influence of Iran in Iraq, facilitated in part through the establishment of a new political structure, was a source of grave concern to Sunni Arab rulers, particularly across the Gulf. King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia was vocal in his concerns about this rising Iranian influence, calling on the US to “cut off the head of the snake”. In the years that followed, Saudi Arabia and Iran became increasingly concerned about the actions of the other, with Riyadh and Tehran seeking to exert influence across the Middle East, capitalising, in particular, on sectarian affinity as a means of achieving this influence. This geopolitical dimension is important when taken alongside comments from King Abdullah II of Jordan, who referred to the existence of a ‘Shi’a Crescent’ when appearing on an American news show. Over the course of the interview, Abdullah articulated a concern about rising Iranian – and by extension Shi’a – influence stretching from the west coast of Iran across the Middle East to the west coast of Syria. Shortly after Abdullah’s remarks, violence erupted across Iraq largely, although not exclusively, along sectarian lines, amidst the often violent re-imagining of political life across Iraq. For many across the Middle East, events across Iraq were a consequence of Iranian manipulation, expanding their influence across Shi’a communities and exacerbating difference. This burgeoning Iranian influence was viewed as a threat to regional stability and provided the context for a number of regimes to frame their indigenous Shi’a communities as 5th columnists, doing the bidding of Iran.

This rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran which pits two major powers across both the Persian Gulf and Muslim world against one another created a precarious environment across the Middle East which impacted on sectarian dynamics in a number of states with divided societies which gave both Riyadh and Tehran the (perceived) opportunity to exert influence through sectarian affiliations while reducing the influence of the other. This rivalry played out across divided societies in the Middle East after the Iranian revolution, in Lebanon and Bahrain, but increased following the toppling of Saddam Hussein. Moreover, as protests broke out across the Middle East in late 2010 and early 2011 – in what became known as the Arab Uprisings – Saudi Arabia and Iran both sensed opportunities to increase their influence across the region, supporting their sectarian kin in an attempt to reduce the influence of the other. The aftermath of the Arab Uprisings called into question the relationship between rulers and ruled across the Middle East, in a number of cases constructing along sect based lines. Regimes across the region sought to capitalise on this atmosphere by locating their struggle for survival within the context of broader geopolitical and sectarian tensions.

Perhaps the best example of this is in Bahrain, where in 2011, representatives from all parts of society took to the streets, proclaiming that there was “No Sunni, No Shi’a, just Bahraini”. The delicate sectarian balance across the island - with an estimated 60-70% of the population Shi’a, being ruled by a Sunni minority ruling family - caused a great deal of consternation amongst the Al Khalifa who had long expressed concerns about the loyalty of Shi’a groups. In the months that followed the uprisings, the Al Khalifa sought to frame the protesters as Shi’a doing the bidding of Iran, ensuring the support of Saudi Arabia in the process, while further marginalising Shi’a groups across the island.

Conversely, in Syria, President Bashar Al Assad sought to frame protesters as violent Sunni extremists with links to Al Qa’ida or, later, Da’ish. This was achieved by releasing prisoners with links to violent groups from jails to support the narrative that the Assad regime was fighting a war against terrorism, rather than engaging in a struggle against a popular protest movement. This then took on international dimensions as Saudi Arabia (and others) sensed an opportunity to weaken Iranian influence across the Levant and provided arms to rebel groups, while Iran doubled down in its support for the Assad regime. When the US and Russia became involved, a complex web of relations was forged out of the embers of a conflict that was shaped by the parabolic forces of sectarianism, authoritarianism, calls for democracy, and geopolitical aspirations.

Conclusion

Sectarian identities should not be viewed as fixed or immutable, but nor should they be viewed as transient identities to be moulded at the whim of elites or entrepreneurs. Instead, there is something more at play, requiring an acknowledgement of the importance of *piety* and *politics*. The resonance of sectarianism means that the way in which elites interact with and regulate these identities can have serious repercussions for political life, which requires an exploration of not only the roots of such identities, but also the ways in which political elites seek to regulate them, either through co-opting sectarian groups or by locating them within governance strategies of the state.

Yet the role of religion within society is not fixed. Across recent months, protesters across Iraq and Lebanon have expressed frustration at the dominance of sectarian identities in political projects. These protest movements demonstrate the complexity of the topic, raising questions about the role of religion in political life, the salience of religious identities, the interaction of religious identities with socio-economic and cultural forces, the behaviour of particular groups, and the regulation of life more broadly.

Key Reading

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