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APPROACHING SECTARIAN IDENTITY POLITICS AND MIDDLE EAST INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN THE FIRST POST-ARAB UPRISINGS DECADE — A STOCKTAKING

ARTICLE

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While sectarian politics may not figure at the top of the current Middle East agenda, it is difficult to refute that sectarianism has been a prominent theme over the last decade. The surge in the interest in sectarian politics in the Middle East has been evident not only in headlines of newspapers and front covers of foreign affairs magazines but has also been reflected in many academic journal articles and books. This raises the question of what we have learned during the last decade's discussion about sectarian politics. In the following, I will mainly focus on the narrower discussion about how to approach sectarian identity politics in Middle East international relations during the first post-Arab uprisings decade. One of the lessons from this discussion is that Middle East international relations in that era cannot be reduced to sectarian politics but, at the same time, one should also not ignore the sectarian factor. Instead of adopting an either/or approach, it appears more useful to inquire into *how, for whom, where* and *when* sectarian politics holds relevance. Another lesson concerns how it is possible to find useful analytical tools not only in the rich and sophisticated general scholarship on sectarianism, but also in some of the broader and classic debates on the study of (Middle East) international relations, religion and identity politics.

A new sectarian/ized Middle East: a contested and confusing catchphrase

The surge in the interest in sectarian politics can be perceived as part of a larger debate on the causes and consequences of the Arab uprisings. Initially, the Arab uprisings triggered a debate among observers on the nature, expressions and causes of the protests, but focus soon turned to their broader consequences for the future Middle East. This part of the debate questioned whether the protests would pave the way for a "new Middle East" and, if so, what this would look like. Some envisioned a region defined by a Shia/Sunni divide and predicted a "rebirth of the Shia/Sunni divide", an emergence of a "new sectarianism", or the "sectarianization" of regional politics.[1] This depiction has always been controversial and imbued with considerable confusion, not only regarding how to conceptualize, grasp and explain sectarianism but also when it comes to its importance and influence in regional politics.

During the past decade, numerous observers have referred to a "sectarian wave" and stated that sectarianism has become "a real factor", a "dominant ideological trend", or a "central mobilizing

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[1] Abdo, Geneive (2017). *The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide*. New York: Oxford University Press; Hashemi, Nader A. & Danny Postel (eds.) (2017). Sectarianization: *Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*. London: Hurst Publishers.

factor".[2] Several indications suggest that sectarianism represents a dimension that cannot be disregarded when analyzing regional politics of that era. By scrutinizing regime strategies, in locations such as Syria, Bahrain or Yemen, it becomes apparent that a form of "sectarianization" was taking place. At the regional level, it is also possible to identify a sectarian dimension among some of the (non-) state actors when it comes to alliance structures, conflict patterns, and how opponents have been framed and actions legitimized. Regarding the broader public, surveys have pointed to a considerable concern about sectarianism, and some revealed various sect-specific divides, e.g., on whether Shias should be considered true Muslims or the views on Hizballah, Saudi Arabia or Iran and their role in the region.

At the same time, other observers have argued that "the sectarian narrative obscures rather than reveals the most important lines of conflict."[3] Thus, it is well-known that the uprisings in Syria, Bahrain and Yemen initially were not sectarian in nature. Many of the protests were organized across sects and carried anti-sectarian slogans such as "Neither Shia, nor Sunni, we are Bahrainis". More recently, Lebanon and Iraq, places often associated with sectarianism, did in 2019 witness large protests against the sectarian political system. Rather than a genuine concern about sectarian divides, a highly sectarianized rhetoric can moreover be part of a regime survival strategy or geopolitical rivalries. Regimes such as the Saudi Arabian have more recently replaced past sectarian rhetoric with a "hyper-nationalist" narrative. At a regional level, cleavages have also not always followed a neat Shia/Sunni divide. Thus, the last decade has witnessed intense intra-Sunni rivalries, including Saudi Arabia and the UAE's blockade of their "Sunni fellow" Qatar, the division between an anti/pro-Muslim Brotherhood camp (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt vs. Qatar and Turkey), and in a place like Syria, Sunni Jihadists have been occupied by internal infighting. Within the "Shia camp", Shia Islamists in Iraq have similarly been internally divided between pro-Iranian and Iraqi nationalist currents. Public opinion is also complex. In some of the regional surveys, sectarianism now figures less prominently, and, in Iraqi politics, sect-specific identities seem to have lost some of their past mobilizing capacity.[4]

Rather than reducing Middle East politics to sectarianism or completely ignoring the role of the sectarian factor during the first post-Arab uprisings decade, a more balanced perspective is needed. This is also recognized within the field of what one might call "sectarianism studies".[5] While the study of sectarianism is still imbued in much controversy, many scholars have moved beyond the "either/or" dichotomy. Instead, they are now engaged in sophisticated and nuanced discussions about how to conceptualize and disaggregate sectarianism; how to observe and map sectarianism without seeing too much/little; how to account for the (re)emergence of sectarianism in a manner that moves beyond the pitfalls of primordialism and instrumentalism,

[2] Gause, F. Gregory (2013). "Sectarianism and the Politics of the New Middle East". *Brookings Upfront Blog*, June 8; Byman, Daniel (2014). "Sectarianism Afflicts the New Middle East". *Survival,* vol. 56, no. 1; Abdo (2020); Hashemi & Postel (2017).

[3] Lynch, Marc (2013). "The War for the Arab World". *Marc Lynch's Blog at Foreign Policy,* May 23. Available at: http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/05/23/war_for_the_arab_world_sunn i_shia_hatred

[4] Haddad, Fanar (2020). "From Existential Struggle to Political Banality: The Politics of Sect in Post-2003 Iraq". *The Review of Faith & International Affairs,* vol. 18, no. 1; Gengler, Justin (2020). "Sectarianism from the Top Down or Bottom Up? Explaining the Middle East's Unlikely De-sectarianization after the Arab Spring". *The Review of Faith & International Affairs,* vol. 18, no. 1.

[5] Valbjørn, Morten (2021). "Observing (the debate on) sectarianism: On conceptualizing, grasping and explaining sectarian politics in a new Middle East". *Mediterranean Politics,* vol. 26, no. 5, pp. 612-634.

and how to understand the impact of sectarianism on various aspects of regional and domestic politics. In answering these questions, there has, furthermore, been a growing interest in examining whether and how analytical tools and theoretical approaches from other fields and related topics can be useful in studying sectarian politics.

Middle East international relations and sectarian identity politics in the decade after the Arab uprisings

The study of Middle East international relations has famously has been described as "dripping with identity politics", and some observers have argued that "no student of Middle East international politics can begin to understand the region without taking into account the ebb and flow of identity politics".[6] Against this background, it is hardly surprising that the question about whether the last decade has given rise to a "new sectarian Middle East" has also figured prominently in discussion about how to grasp international relations in this region.

This part of the sectarianism debate has at times also been framed in "either/or" terms. In the more journalistic or policy-oriented debate, regional politics has sometimes been reduced to an ancient sectarian Shia/Sunni divide or to brute and mechanical geopolitics, where the sectarian dimension is explained away. Part of the scholarly debate, however, has not only rejected such reductionism but also tried to move beyond the banal statement that both geopolitics and sectarian identity politics matter. Instead, scholars have turned their attention to answering more specific questions about *how, for whom, when* and *where* sectarian identity politics has played a significant role in Middle East international relations. When addressing these questions, analytical tools not only from the broader and increasingly sophisticated sectarian debate but also from the more general discussions on (Middle East) international relations, identity politics and religion have turned out to be useful.

The "how" question

The disagreement about whether Middle East international relations can be said to have become sectarianized after the Arab uprisings can, partly, be attributed to a confusion about what it actually means that "sectarianism matters".

A similar confusion can be found in the broader debate on identity politics in (Middle East) international relations. While (some) post-structuralists, mainstream constructivists, liberal or realist rationalists may agree that ideas and identities "somehow" matter, this has not translated into a consensus on *how* identity matters. Simplified, one can distinguish between two broad approaches. The *first* and most far-ranging takes its point of departure in the view that identities and ideas form actors' worldviews and give meaning to their realities and understanding of their interests. Identities are therefore considered crucial for how actors conceive of the international and answer fundamental questions such as "What is a threat?" and "Who is threatening and against whom?", which again influence what is considered (un)thinkable and (im)possible. For the *second* approach, the influence of identities is more narrowly restricted to behaviour and how actors pursue their interests — regardless of where these come from. Thus, a specific

[6] Telhami, Shibley & Michael Barnett (eds.) (2002). *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

identity can impose costs on certain forms of behaviour, making an actor hesitate to or even refrain from following their material interest, or they can enable actors to pursue these interests in ways not otherwise possible.

Instead of asking whether or not sect-specific identities matter as such, this basic distinction makes it more intriguing to examine how sectarianism might exert varying levels of influence in the "causal equation". In discussions about the Iranian and Saudi Arabian role in regional politics, this raises the question of whether sectarianism in a fundamental way has impacted the worldviews, threat perceptions, notions of interests or ways of identifying friends/enemies. Or has the sectarianization of regional politics primarily impacted the ways through which these countries pursue interests that are informed by more general geopolitical or regime survival concerns? For instance, should the stronger links that Iran has established during the last decade with various Shia militias around the region reflect a distinct "Shia worldview", or should it rather be attributed to how, due to the regional sectarianization, it has become more difficult for Iran to access actors in the "Sunni Arab camp" compared to the pre-2011 era?

A different approach to the "how" question is provided by the literature on the (international) politics/religion nexus and (in)distinctiveness of religious identities. Here, Brubaker has proposed a distinction between "diacritical" or "normative ordering" understanding of religious identities, where the former views identities as "culturally empty", while the latter regards the "content" of identities as significant.[7] The Sheikh has similarly discussed whether religious identities hold distinct qualities compared to other kinds of identity politics in international relations and introduces a distinction between regarding religion as a belief community, as power, or as speech act.[8]

Religion and sectarianism are not identical, yet this literature can still be relevant. It raises the basic question about whether all identities, including sect-specific, should be considered as "empty" so their influence on international relations basically will be the same; or whether attention should be given to their distinctive "content". For instance, if Iran considers and presents itself as Persian, Iranian, Islamic or Shiite, or Saudi Arabia as Arab, Islamic, Sunni, Khaleeji or Saudi nationalist, does this make a difference for their worldviews, notions of interest and forms of behavior? This basic question prompts a number of puzzles. For instance, are trans-state dynamics related to a Shia identity different from their Sunni counterpart and if so, why? It is possible to identify transnational networks of state and non-state actors of both kinds, but do they work in the same way? If not, is this due to distinct identity features or should it rather be attributed a difference in "polarity structures" in the sense that the "Sunni scene" is more "multipolar" than the Shia equivalent, where Iran is the only large state actor? Another related puzzle concerns whether it matters if rivalries involving identity politics occur among actors associated with the same or different sect-specific identities. This question does, for instance, carry implications for whether and how it makes sense drawing parallels between

[7] Brubaker, Rogers (2015). "Religious Dimensions of Political Conflict and Violence". *Sociological Theory,* vol. 33, no. 1.

[8] Sheikh, Mona, Morten Valbjørn & Dino Krause (2023). "What is Exceptional about Religion? Major Debates in International Relations, Islamism Studies and Peace and Conflict Research". In Jeff Haynes (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Politics.* London: Routledge.

regional politics after 2011 and the "classic" Arab cold war of the 1950-60s, which took place among actors, who all subscribed to the same Arab trans-state identity, but disagreed about the normative implications of being Arab. This analogy has been used frequently in analysis of the recent Iran-Saudi rivalry, but maybe it would be more fitting for the "intra-Sunni" rivalry between Qatar, Turkey vs. Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt.[9] The issue about the "content" of identities does also speak into current discussions about the role of identity politics in proxy warfare. It is generally agreed that trans-state identities have played some kind of role in the relationship between external and local actors in the regionalized civil wars in Syria, Yemen and Iraq, where various actors have utilized different kinds of (religious, sectarian, ethnic, and nationalist) identity cleavages. However, it is less clear whether the content of these identities makes a difference to how the interplay between local and external actors has worked.[10]

The "who" question

When it comes to determining which actors are most important to consider when examining sectarian identity politics in Middle East international relations, the broader (Middle East) international relations debate does again offer some useful insights and distinctions to consider. While realists often view states as "unitary actors" and focus narrowly on the "statesman", the liberal international relations tradition has been more attentive to the "society level", and some perceived the state as an arena for various domestic actors. Among Middle East scholars, the perspective has been somewhat different as they have not only been attentive to multiple actors, but also to how they may hold different supra/sub/state identities and how changes in the distribution of these among different groups may affect regional politics.

These various approaches can be useful for reflections on potentially relevant actors when studying sectarian politics. Sometimes this question has been framed as being about whether one should adopt a "top-down" or "bottom-up" perspective. The former approach focuses on elite actors, while the latter emphasizes sect-specific identities among the broader public and non-state actors.[11] However, there is growing recognition of the usefulness of combining both perspectives. A top-down perspective can reveal how elite actors may employ the "sectarian card" to ensure regime survival or advance geopolitical interests but, in order to comprehend the efficacy of this strategy, it is crucial to also gauge whether it resonates with the broader public.[12] Region-wide surveys made some years into the Syrian conflict indicate that a regime-led framing of Hizballah as "Hizb al-Shaytan" – Satan rather than God's party – had widespread appeal among the Sunni Arab public. However, this was not the case during the 2006 Summer War, when Nasrallah was popular among Sunni Arabs, despite various regimes framing the group as part of a threatening "Shia crescent". This illustrates the importance of paying attention to both the elite and popular levels. Furthermore, examining the "who" questions can highlight

[9] Valbjørn, Morten (2019). "Dialogues in new Middle Eastern politics – on (the limits of) making historical analogies to the classic Arab Cold War in a sectarianized new Middle East". In Lorenzo Kamel (ed.), The Middle East: Thinking About and Beyond Security and Stability. Bern: Peter Lang.

[10] Phillips, Christopher & Morten Valbjørn (2018). "'What is in a Name?': The Role of (Different) Identities in the Multiple Proxy Wars in Syria". Small Wars & Insurgencies, vol. 29, no. 3; Gause, F. Gregory (2020). "Saudi Arabia and Sectarianism in Middle East International Relations". POMEPS Studies, vol. 38: Sectarianism and International Relations.

[11] Gengler (2020); Abdo (2020).

[12] Gause (2020).

how the role and significance of sectarianism vary among different actors. For some, it may be an instrumental tool, while for others it may be deeply felt or be internalized and take on a life of its own.

"Where" and "when"

In addition to highlighting the value of paying attention to different kinds of actors, at elite and society levels, insights from international relations and Middle East scholarship can also enhance our understanding of the varying significance of sectarian identity politics across time and space. Thus, Middle East scholars have a long tradition of examining how and why the relative importance of different (supra/sub/state) identities varies. Instead of asking whether it makes sense to speak about a "new sectarian Middle East" per se, it seems more fruitful to conceive of "sectarianization" as a process that, over the last decade, has exhibited temporal and spatial variation.

This raises the question of "when" and "where" sectarian politics has been most pronounced and significant in regional politics. Regarding the location, demographics are often highlighted as a factor, but additional – and more important – factors have been introduced. One strand has focused on the nature of regime threat perceptions. If a regime is primarily concerned with domestic threats, it is more likely to deploy a "sectarian card" as part of a strategy of ruling and dividing. Conversely, if a regime is more concerned with external threats, it may play the "nationalist card" to rally the public around the flag.[13] For example, during the early days of the Arab uprisings, Saudi Arabia, which feared domestic uprisings, employed a strong sectarian rhetoric, accusing local Shia protesters of being part of a larger regional "Shia conspiracy". However, following the attacks on Saudi oil facilities in 2019, which were suspected to have been orchestrated by Iran, the Saudi monarchy shifted to a "hyper-nationalist" rhetoric.

Another strand has combined the broader literature on the international politics of ethnic conflicts with scholarship on the permeability of the post-colonial Arab state in a regional "sound chamber" in which information, ideas, and opinions resonate across state boundaries.[14] Together, these literatures bring attention to an outside-in/inside-out logic that can explain why the salience of trans-state identities often corresponds with levels of state(de)formation, and how the presence of weak states and strong trans-state identities provides amble opportunities for "inter-mestic" rivalries involving external powers and local (non-)state actors. Thus, rival regional powers can use trans-state identities to interfere and support opposing groups in local conflicts in weak states with permeable borders (outside-in logic). Meanwhile, in countries where the state is unable or unwilling to provide basic security to its citizens, local actors may organize around communal groups and turn to trans-state identities as a way of addressing the "ethnic security dilemma" and attracting support and protection from the outside (inside-out logic). Given these dynamics of inter-mestic rivalries and a regional sectarianization, sectarian politics

[13] Gengler (2020).

[14] Salloukh, Bassel F. (2017). "Overlapping Contests and Middle East International Relations: The Return of the Weak Arab State". *PS: Political Science & Politics*, vol. 50, no. 3; Gause, F. Gregory. (2014). "Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War". *Brookings Doha Center - Analysis Paper* no. 11; Hinnebusch, Raymond (2016). "The Sectarian Revolution in the Middle East". *R/evolutions: Global Trends & Regional Issues*, vol. 4, no. 1.

is from this perspective expected to be most pronounced in areas with weakened or collapsed state institutions and some form of sectarian division, such as Syria, Iraq or Yemen.

Lessons from a decade's discussion on sectarianism

The decade following the Arab uprisings has experienced a "sectarian surge", not only in regional politics but also in Middle East scholarship. While the study of sectarian politics is still marked by a considerable disagreement and confusion, the field of "sectarian studies" can still be said to have progressed. The debate has moved beyond an unproductive either/or framing and turned towards a more sophisticated interest in understanding how, for whom, where and when sectarian politics holds relevance. In order to address these questions, there has, moreover, been increasing attention to how it is possible to derive useful analytical tools from broader, more classic debates on the study of (Middle East) international relations, religion, and identity politics. So far, this influence has been quite one-directional, but maybe it is time to turn attention to how the past decade's lessons on sectarian politics may also enrich broader theoretical debates on identity politics in and outside of the Middle East.