Sectarian tendencies and antagonisms grew into levels unknown before in the modern Middle East. They were exacerbated by conflicts in Iraq, Syria, Bahrain and Lebanon, and by the social and political uprisings following the “Arab spring”.

In dealing with this heightened sectarianism there are two common approaches: the primordialist approach which views sectarian identities as largely fixed collectivities influenced by deep ancient hatreds and irreconcilable differences; and the instrumentalist approach which tends to exclusively focus on the ways elites use sectarian categories and discourses to promote their agendas. While rejecting the first approach, this paper argues that elite’s instrumentalism gives important explanation as to how sectarian identities and narratives were exploited by political entrepreneurs. Using sectarian discourse and mobilization as a political tool has been a significant factor in the reconstruction of sectarian identities in the region. However, alone this approach does not explain why sectarian identities have become functional tool of mobilization. The heightened sectarianism is generated by complex social, economic and political transformations. There are sociological and cultural conditions that strengthened sectarian solidarities in societies characterized by weak ‘national’ identities.

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Introduction

Sectarian tendencies and antagonisms grew into levels previously unknown in the modern Middle East. They were exacerbated by conflicts in Iraq, Syria, Bahrain and Lebanon, and by the social and political uprisings following the Arab Spring. Some argue that the Sunni-Shi’a divide, in particular, is “on its way to displacing the broader conflict between Muslims and the West as the primary challenge facing the Islamic societies of the Middle East for the foreseeable future”¹.

The toppling of Saddam’s regime and the occupation of Iraq by US forces in 2003 intensified sectarian conflict and resulted in extreme forms of inter-communal violence. As a consequence, a process of identity construction that emphasizes the sectarian divide within Islam has further evolved and its geopolitical implications begun to be noticeable. This process gained momentum after the uprising in Syria in 2011 that led to a bloodshed that has the characteristics of sectarian civil war. The Syrian war became a proxy war, involving states and non-state actors divided between predominantly Sunni and predominantly Shi’a camps.

This paper examines both the socio-cultural contexts of this heightened sectarianism and its instrumental exploitation by political entrepreneurs. Following the literature on ‘ethnicization’², I argue that ‘Sectarianization’ is a process caused by complex social, economic and political transformations. It cannot be simplified as a ‘revival’ of ancient religious hatreds. There are sociological and cultural conditions that strengthened sectarian solidarities in societies characterized by weak ‘national’ identities. I also argue that using sectarian rhetoric and mobilization as a political instrument has been a significant factor in the reconstruction of sectarian identities in the region.

² Recent literature on identity politics and ethnic conflicts tend to reject primordialism, which takes ethnic and sectarian groups as ‘givens’ and conceives them as de-contextualized ‘entities’. For example, the very concept of ‘group’ has been questioned by Brubaker who, instead, preferred to analyze the ‘groupness’ as cognitive processes conditioned by external variables. Rather than the common concept of ethnicity, he suggested the concept of ethnocization (in my analogy, sectarianization) to reflect the dynamic nature of culture and identities. See R. BRUBAKER, Ethnicity Without Groups, Harvard, Harvard University Press, 2004.; R. BRUBAKER, M. LOVEMAN, P. STAMATOV, Ethnicity as Cognition, «Theory and Society», vol.33, no. 1, 2004, pp. 31-64.
Socio-Cultural Dynamics of Sectarianization

‘Ancient conflict’ narratives are used by groups with sectarian ideologies to create the sense of historical continuity and mission. However, today’s heightened sectarianism, I argue, is caused by the specific conditions of incomplete modernization in the Middle East.

Any attempt to address past events through the lenses of today’s conflicts leads to more misconceptions. For example, defining Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq as ‘Sunni’ and Assad’s regime in Syria as simply ‘Alawite’, is driven less by concrete facts and more by a reductionist approach that views everything through the sectarian narrative. This is not to say that sectarianism has not been an influential force. It was always there, usually playing a role in shaping behind-the-scenes alliances and political leanings. Nevertheless, it was not the only force, nor an important one sometimes.

It is difficult to imagine a minority (e.g. Syrian Alawites or Iraqi Sunnis) ruling a majority within a context emphasizing their minority status: in this case the sectarian identity. While it is undeniable that most Middle Eastern regimes had an inherent sectarian bias, they have always sought to conceal this bias. Their efforts to do so were helped by past conditions when religious and sectarian affiliation was not the main source of categorization and mobilization. The two Ba’athist regimes in Iraq and Syria, both accused of strong sectarian biases, rose to power when ‘secular’ leftist and nationalist ideologies were dominant, especially among civilian and military activists, who descended from newly urbanized or lower middle class families.3

Meanwhile, a process of Islamization and Sectarianization started to change social and cultural identities, contrary to what classic modernization approaches have assumed. This process was facilitated by several factors such as the exacerbating exclusionary nature of power structures and the increasing politicization of previously traditional social sectors that found sanctuaries in their religious identity. Since the 1950s, political authorities in the Middle East had been consolidating their powers in patterns based on extreme centralization and exclusionary politics. This was justified by the needs of state-building processes and the confrontation with internal and external foes. The transformation of the region into a strategic energy source and the Cold War rivalries allowed ruling elites to benefit

from economic and political rentiers in consolidating their powers\textsuperscript{4}. Such conditions helped deepen their authoritarianism, which, in cases like Iraq and Syria, bore totalitarian traits.

Political exclusion produced new social hierarchies, based on personal loyalty, cronyism and patronage. Tribal, regional and sectarian considerations played significant roles in shaping these hierarchies. In Iraq, Syria and Bahrain, sectarian differences converged with socio-political stratification and economic disparities, generating communal solidarities among the disadvantaged groups. Communalism requires narratives and collective symbols that no institution except religion was able to communicate and cultivate.

The increasing religiosity which spread all over the Middle East was largely propelled by the failures of state building and development approaches that have been characterized by severe centralization: unplanned or random urbanization; a neglect of agriculture that was accelerated by growing dependence on oil and the opportunities it provided for ruling elites to act independently from their ‘societies’. In most Arab countries, these ‘modernization’ approaches resulted in massive migration from rural areas into urban centres. It also widened the gap between city and countryside\textsuperscript{5}.

The modern state managed to dismantle traditional relations and structures without succeeding in completely replacing them with modern ones. As a result, semi-traditional and semi-modern social sectors were brought into existence. They lived in the insecure conditions of mobility, uncertainty and cultural perplexity. Some scholars called this transformation the ‘ruralisation of the city’\textsuperscript{6} to distinguish it from modernization’s classic objective of the ‘urbanization of rural spaces’. On the one hand, traditional loyalties and patterns were no longer responsive to the social realities. On the other, the necessary conditions of economic, social and cultural modern patterns only were available to steadily shrinking social minorities. Today, it is common in large Arab capitals like Baghdad, Cairo and Damascus to notice an intellectual discourse lamenting the disappearance of urban culture and ‘civilized’ manners\textsuperscript{7}.


\textsuperscript{6} G. SALAMEE, Al-Mujtam’a Wa Al-Dawla Fi Al-Mashriq Al-Arabi (The Society and State in the Arab East), Beirut, The Centre of Arab Unity Studies, 2008.

\textsuperscript{7} For more details, see H. BARAKAT, The Arab World: Security, Culture and
Islam was re-introduced as an identity and political ideology adaptable to the social contexts of incomplete modernization. It was redefined through new ideological readings that sought to conciliate – or compromise – between tradition and modernity. The new Islamism is not a return to the past; it is the return of the past to serve the present’s conditions. It is an identity that compensates for the dismantled traditional structures and, at the same time, provides a worldview about the state, the just government and cultural affiliation with more politicized societies.

With the rise of political Islamism, sectarianism gained more prominence and it was accompanied by the reconstruction of collective narratives able to serve today’s conflicts. Sectarianization was the latest stage in the broader process of Islamization. While early versions of the new Islamism tried to present a trans-sectarian vision, socio-cultural, geopolitical and ideological differences gradually reemphasized the Sunni-Shi’a schism. This transformation has been triggered by the rivalry among Islamist groups and institutions to gain constituency support, hence encouraging a shift towards identity politics. Accordingly, differences between Sunnism and Shiism in religious culture, doctrines, intuitions and conceptions of state-society relations, were increasingly underlined.

In addition, the growing obsession with identity, which is typical of spheres where official nationalism is failing to represent all social sectors, contributed to the emergence of sectarian groups as new socio-cultural constructs that represent an ‘imaginable community’. Sectarianism managed to revive the notion of ‘community’ in contexts where the state is either very weak or perceived as the enemy. This communal identity is open even to those who are not religious or Islamist. For example, the alliance which links the Iranian regime, Hizbullah and the ‘secular’ Syrian regime represents a sectarian transnational identity. Similarly, it is the ‘Sunnī’ identity rather than any ‘Islamic doctrine’ that brought Syrian rebels, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey together in one camp during the Syrian civil war. When and where the sectarian identity is not the main political frame, political and ideological differences become more prominent (as was the case in the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and both Qatar and Turkey in Egypt).

Sectarian identity is not an organic state of being; it is a conflict-oriented narrative, best suited to conditions of insecurity and instability. It still possesses a negative connotation in the region and is usually used to discredit opponents. With the exception of radical groups, it is hard to find a ‘mainstream’ party which publicly emphasizes its sectarian identity.

cal groups, it is hard to find a ‘mainstream’ party which publicly emphasizes its sectarian identity. Feelings of victimhood are the basis upon which sectarian ideologies thrive, and these feelings are widespread in countries ruled by exclusionary regimes whose populations are disaffected by failing modernization policies. To understand the heightened sectarianism in the region, it is important to examine how internal and external elites use it as an instrument of conflict and influence.

Sectarianism as a Political Instrument

Like all collective narratives, sectarian identities need elites and ‘guardians’ who ‘invent’ and present them to be the “group’s mental maps”\(^8\). Heightened sectarianism in the region was accompanied by processes of reinventing Sunni and Shi’a identities and these processes have intensified proportionally with regional conflicts.

The downfall of Saddam’s regime after the US-British occupation of Iraq was a pivotal event. It not only indicated a transformation in the internal political sphere and regional power relations, but was also a categorical departure from the classical concepts and narratives that shaped national ideology in Iraq and other Middle Eastern countries. One major shift was the quasi-official presence of sectarian identities as public and valid political categories. A significant outcome of this war was the empowerment of Iraqi Shi’a. This ‘Shi’a revival’, as Vali Nasr (2006)\(^9\) put it, was represented by the dominant position Shi’a political groups have gained within the new institutions or through the role played by their collective narratives in shaping public stances and national culture. Furthermore, the new Shi’a political parties that gained this influence adopted a political view which stressed their sectarian identity, further deepening Sunni suspicions\(^10\). This not only sent alarming messages to the ruling Sunni elites in the region, but also encouraged the formation of a counter-sectarian identity among Iraqi Sunnis\(^11\).

Moreover, the uncertain environment caused by the uprisings in several Arab countries has accelerated the dynamics of regional sectarianization. The protests by the ‘Shi’a’ majority in Bahrain and uprising

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by the ‘Sunni’ majority in Syria were particularly significant in this process. The Syrian civil war seems to have taken on a sectarian nature, with Shi’a countries like Iran and armed groups like Hizbullah backing the regime, Sunni countries like Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar backing the opposition, and groups like the Al-Qaeda-affiliated – the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria ISIS – fighting against the regime.

Violence was a prominent factor in consolidating sectarian identities, maximizing feelings of hatred and victimhood, consolidating communal boundaries and legitimizing radicals as the ‘protectors’ of a group’s identity and survivability. Physical violence is usually accompanied and incited by symbolic violence that aims at degrading and dehumanizing the ‘other’. Brutality on the ground is backed, justified and even celebrated in rhetoric produced by clerics and sectarian media. The conflict reaches a climax when physical and symbolic expressions of violence unite in one place. For example, Shi’a and Sunni fighters moved to Syria and joined the battling camps. A symbolic battleground for the two sides was the shrine of Sayida Zaneb in Damascus, which is a sacred place for Shi’as to the extent that young fighters are seeking ‘martyrdom’ in defence of it. For Sunni groups with Salafist-jihadist leanings, the shrine is just another expression of Shi’a ‘polytheism’ and it represents ‘unfair’ Shi’a ascendency in a Sunni land. Several clashes took place near the shrine. These clashes reflect the integration of physical violence with symbolic violence, as did the 2006 attack against the Samarra’s al-Askeri shrine, which instigated civil war in Iraq.

The media and social networks are rife today with expressions of sectarian solidarity on both the Sunni and Shi’a sides. There is an emphasis on the suffering of ‘our victims’ and the brutality of the ‘other’. Such solidarities cut across national borders and create new imaginary communities that are centred on religious and sectarian affiliation. National connection with those belonging to a different sect is replaced by sectarian solidarity with those belonging to a different state. Increasing transnational sectarianism is delegitimizing what remains of already fragile national identities.

However, as far as the Shi’a-Sunni divide is concerned, different histories must be cited. On the Shi’a side, politically motivated clerics such as Khomeini in Iran, Mohammed Baqir al-Sadr in Iraq and Mousa al-Sadr in Lebanon invented new versions of political Shiism both as a philosophy and a movement. It was an ideology opposing existing regimes and aimed at mobilizing people against their marginalization. Political Shiism managed to take power in Iran and Iraq, while building large constituencies among
the Shi’a population in Lebanon and Bahrain. These were events of historical significance because they challenged the status quo in the region and empowered Shi’a communal identity, which has long been repressed by ruling ‘secular’ elites.

Sunni-dominated regimes, especially Saudi Arabia in which Salafism is the main shaper of state identity, reacted by seeking to reconstruct a regional Sunni identity which views political Shiism as its main enemy. This was compatible with official policy, greatly concerned with the objective of combating Iran’s regional influence. Therefore, power was the main catalyst in a conflict that mainly took place between anti-status quo forces and pro-status quo forces.

Through its political ideology, the Iranian Islamist regime managed to build powerful patronage networks with Shi’a movements in Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen. These networks helped the regime to build and maintain its influence in the region and legitimize its claim to lead the ‘resistance’ against Israel and the Western powers. This Iranian-led transnational Shiism has been confronted by a Saudi-led transnational Sunnism, generating proxy wars in Iraq, Syria, Bahrain and Yemen. The geopolitical basis of these alliances provided the right environment, resources and channels of communication and mobilization for dogmatic sectarian groups. The conflict itself has become the main shaper of sectarian identities because it cultivates feelings of victimhood and mutual hatreds.

The Saudi patronage of Salafist groups all over the region aims at sustaining the Kingdom’s influence as the centre of Sunni Islam and appeasing the powerful Salafist establishment that was historically allied with the royal family. The instrumentalist nature of this relation has recently been shown in the hostility of the Saudi authorities to Muslim Brotherhood (MB) organizations. Saudi Arabia was the main regional power that unconditionally supported the coup d’état against the MB’s president in Egypt. MB, and to some extent the Justice and Development Party (AKP) which currently rules Turkey, are viewed as real or imagined rivals for Al-Saud’s leadership in the Sunni world. In the Saudi view, their Sunnism is not sufficient justification for tolerating their potential emergence as rivals for the same constituency.

Conclusions

Societies in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Bahrain have been subjected to unprecedented processes of fragmentation incited by sectarian violence and politics. They are facing the threat of breaking up or continuously engaging in armed conflicts that will be sustained by
external interventions and the dominance of radical groups.

Sectarianism lacks features that could make it a constructive or stabilizing force. It is based on conflict-oriented narratives, fed by mutual hatreds and victimizations. While there are some hard-line forces, such as the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham, that seek to establish a Sunni state all over the region, most other forces relate their sectarian solidarities to pragmatic or calculated purposes. Despite the heightened sectarianism, it would be wrong to ignore the intra-communal divides that, if taken seriously, might question the very existence of sectarian community. Political, ideological, regional and tribal divisions are concealed or made invisible by the Sunni-Shi’a tensions, but they could be awakened as soon as these tensions de-escalate. Therefore, sectarian groups and their sponsors have an interest in maintaining sectarian divides. Again, it is a question of power. It determines “who controls the group” which is equivalent to who “defines the group”.

The coming years are likely to see the continuity of difficult coexistence between sectarian identities and the ‘state’ in the region. The “fragile states” whose number has increased following the “Arab Spring”, are the outcomes of the failure of nation-building processes and development approaches in the region. However, replacing the fragile states with those based on sectarian identities will only complicate the current conflicts. The problem does not lie in the existence of multiple religious and sectarian identities, but in the politics of exclusion. No matter how powerful sectarianism seems to be today, it cannot repress other social cleavages that might emerge again if the exclusion took other forms. Any solution for sectarian conflicts in the region must begin with the understanding that these conflicts are not about religious doctrines. They are about power and social status in contexts where large social sectors have been denied access to them.

Solutions have to be based on broad regional agreement to stop using sectarian instigation as a tool of influence and mobilization. Ideologies of sectarian hatred must be banned and condemned on the global level. In addition, solutions should not be based on emphasizing and institutionalizing sectarian identities, as was the case with the kind of ‘democratic’ consociationalism applied in Lebanon and Iraq. This is a model that sustains socio-cultural divisions and perpetuates the power of sectarian entrepreneurs.

The viability of sectarianism in the Middle East is largely dependent on the potential transformations of socio-cultural conditions that permitted its recent growth in the first place. Addressing the
social and cultural complications created by the incomplete modernization is necessary to achieve this change. This starts with having inclusive governments that are responsive to their societies and capable of adopting sensitive development approaches. This is what the Middle East desperately needs in order to be saved from the hegemony of ideologies and narratives that invest in social despair and cultural perplexity to maintain a state of eternal war.