

**THE SECTARIANIZATION OF THE MIDDLE EAST:  
TRANSNATIONAL IDENTITY WARS AND COMPETITIVE INTERFERENCE**  
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*Introduction*

Scholars have long recognized the exceptional power of identity in the Middle East and the permeability of regional states to trans-state identity discourses (Salloukh 2004). Barnett (1993) and Lynch (1999) argued that identity is shaped by discourse competition in a trans-state public space and, once constructed, it shapes actors' conceptions of their interests and generates norms that constrain their conduct. In the regional states system, rival states bid for hegemony using trans-state discourses (Kienle 1990; Hinnebusch 2013); and the main threats against which many regimes balance has not been foreign armies but subversion challenging their domestic legitimacy in the name of norms derived from identity (Gause 2003-04). Identity, therefore, matters but what is new today is the unprecedented surge of sectarian identity across the region. Instead of inclusive Pan-Arab or Pan-Islamic identities, rival states and movements now exploit the highly divisive sectarian dichotomy between Sunni and Shia.

What explains this rapid diffusion and apparent hegemony of sectarian discourse and practices across the region? This paper will survey the accumulation of factors behind the sectarian surge and argue that it is chiefly the outcome of the state failures brought about by the Arab spring: first, state failures have greatly intensified power struggles within states and across the region in which sectarianism has been instrumentalized; and second, such failures have greatly intensified pre-existing permeability of states, amplifying mechanisms of diffusion, from emulation to intervention.

**Explaining Sectarian Diffusion: From Banal Sectarianism to Sectarian Bi-Polarization**

There are multiple identities in the Middle East, located at sub-state (communal minorities, tribes), state and trans/supra-state (Pan Arabism, Pan-Islam) levels and the dominant identity has changed over time. Sectarianism is only one possible identity and is not an undifferentiated phenomenon (Haddad 2011). So what explains its increasing hegemony across the region?

*Instrumentalization of Banal Sectarianism*

Sectarianism is rooted at the micro-level individual/group. This *everyday (or banal) sectarianism* is an un-politicized identity marker in multi-communal societies compatible with sectarian co-existence and with broader identities (e.g. Arabism). The first step toward sectarianization is its politicization. This may be a function of the increased competition for scarce resources accompanying modernization, especially in times of rapid population growth and increases in the educated unemployed; when many resources are state distributed, political entrepreneurs are incentivized to use sectarianism to mobilize sects in intrastate competition over resources, as famously in Lebanon and individuals to use sectarianism to gain access to clientele networks. This "instrumental sectarianism" has little doctrinal implications or necessary incompatibility with sectarian coexistence.

Sectarianism's use in authoritarian regime building in MENA's multi-sectarian societies further politicized it: patrimonial practices such as reliance on trusted sectarians to foster cohesive ruling groups, as in Syria and Iraq, was a common practice, but it was also balanced by cross-sectarian co-optation of wider social forces, via bureaucratic institutions. Many authoritarian regimes, therefore, both *used* and *contained* sectarianism. However, where inclusionary practices eroded, the excluded, feeling themselves victims of sectarian discrimination, might well embrace a sectarian counter-identity, as was particularly the case in Syria and Iraq. But such sectarianization was by no means inevitable or particularly widespread; the system seemed self-reproducing and required external intervention to set off the destabilization of multi-sectarian states.

#### *Precipitating the Sectarian Struggle: From Global Intrusion to the New Arab Cold War*

The current sectarianization is a recent phenomenon precipitated by the unprecedented intrusion of the U.S. global hegemon into the regional power struggle. The destruction of the Iraqi state amidst massive violence (shock and awe) unleashed Sunni-Shia civil war in Iraq. The United States constructed a replacement political system that institutionalized sectarianism. This failed state provided a congenial space for international jihadists, including al-Qaeda, to stir up sectarianism by targeting Shia mosques. It also allowed for intense penetration of Iraq by Iranian backed Iraqi Shia exiles and by anti-Shia jihadists transiting through Syria – an unprecedented transnationalization of sectarian conflict. The Iraq conflict spilled over in the region by stimulating sectarian discourse in the trans-state media.

Moreover, the empowering of Iranian-linked Iraqi Shia movements alarmed the Sunni Gulf powers, which fought back by instrumentalizing sectarianism. This resulted in what has been called the “New Arab Cold War,” which polarized the regional system in the 2000s between two rival camps – framed as the pro-Western Moderate Sunni bloc (Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan) and the Resistance Axis (Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, Hamas – fighting over sectarian-divided Lebanon and Iraq and divided over the Israeli wars against Hezbollah and Gaza. In the latter, the resistance camp, portraying its rivals as siding with Israel, won the war for public opinion. The moderate bloc fought back by portraying the issue as Shiite Iran's interference in the Arab world against Sunnis. King Abdullah of Jordan famously warned of a “Shia Crescent.” Despite this, sectarianism found little resonance on the Arab street where Nasrallah, Assad and Ahmadinejad were the most popular regional leaders for their resistance to what was still seen as the main enemy, Israel (Valbjørn and Bank 2011). At the elite level though, the power struggle came to be perceived in sectarian zero-sum terms, destroying the tradition of inter-Arab compromise under which (since the end of the first Arab Cold War) regimes had refrained from attacking the others' vital interests.

#### *The Arab Uprising: from revolt to civil war and grassroots sectarianization:*

The Arab uprising further intensified the struggle for power. Once regimes were challenged, they instrumentalized sectarianism. In Syria, Iraq and Bahrain elites' use of sectarianism to consolidate their support bases provoked counter-sectarianism among oppositions. Unlike in the 2000s, this instrumentalization of sectarianism found wide resonance in Arab societies for several reasons.

First, civil wars during which unrestrained violence was deployed in a zero-sum power struggle, turned fighters on both sides to jihadist versions of sectarianism. Jihadism is incompatible with sectarian coexistence, because it seeks to impose, if

necessary by force, its one true interpretation of Islam in the public sphere, demonizing those who do not comply as infidels, and embracing martyrdom for the cause. Unlike an instrumentalist pursuit of material goods, which can be compromised by adjusting shares among the contenders, public religious visions cannot readily be compromised (Brubaker 2015).

Second, as civil wars led to state failure, notably in the Levant, the renewed permeability of states borders allowed Salafist jihadists to intervene on one side and a counter-coalition of Shia led minorities (*hulf al-aqalliyyat*) on the other. There was an unprecedented movement of foreign Muslim fighters into disputed states, while militias from one country, recruited via long-distance sectarian networks, regularly intervened in neighbouring countries, propelling an unprecedented transnationalization of opposing sectarian movements and networks.

Third, the security dilemma pushed all sides to fall back on their communal group for protection; this, combined with sectarian cleansing and intensely sectarian discourse in the satellite and social media, entrenched sectarianism at the grassroots of many Arab societies.

#### *Competitive Interference and Sectarian Proxy Wars:*

In parallel, the Arab uprising reshuffled the cards in the regional power struggle of the 2000s, as state failures created vacuums inviting competitive external intervention in which rival powers provided arms and financing to bring sectarian-affiliated allies to power in uprising states. Notably Syria, the linchpin of the resistance axis, became an arena of competitive intervention, since all sides perceived that the outcome of this “New Struggle for Syria” would tilt the regional power balance in favour of one or the other of the rival camps (Hinnebusch 2015).

Sectarian discourses became the main currency of the new identity wars. Sectarianism in its jihadist version is a particularly powerful instrument for subverting rival regimes, since it combines a sub-state character – the existence of grassroots communities within a state into which people are born – with the transnational networks to mobilize supporters across borders. As the rival regional powers backed the most sectarian factions – because they were the best fighters – the latter came to enjoy greater resources, precipitating a “bandwagoning” of more “moderate” factions to the jihadist poles, further exacerbating sectarianism.

States had unequal advantages when playing the new sectarian power game. Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, with historical identities relatively congruent with their borders and commanding the material resources to co-opt populations, create large security forces, and establish administrative structures over their territory, were more capable of making their borders impermeable to subversion. Their use of sectarianism in the regional struggle strengthened internal support (despite a risk of blowback, e.g. when Saudi Arabia’s export of Wahhabism helped create a threat to it in the form of ISIS). Their trans-state ideological appeal was fostered by superior command of satellite media and financial resources, arms transfers and territorial safe havens enabling their competitive intervention.

By contrast, the most identity-fragmented states (Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain) were victims of the new power struggle. Sectarianism polarized their populations, opposition was framed in sectarian terms and regimes relied more on defensive sectarian *asabiyyeh* (solidarity). Their often-arbitrarily constructed borders, which cut across identity groups and generated irredentism, made them more permeable to trans-state media, networks and movements and – to the extent they

experienced state failure and were unable to defend their borders – they were magnets attracting proxy wars. While they had been players when regional rivalry focused on interpretations of Arab nationalism, sectarianization knocked them out of the game.

Each intervening power has used sectarianism, but strategies differ. Saudi Arabia played a key role in fostering Sunni sectarianism, seeking to exploit the demographic majority of the Sunni world against Iran by depicting the Shia as a heretical minority and Iran's role as non-Arab interference in the Arab world. Iran's Pan-Islamic discourse tried to re-frame the issue as Muslim resistance against the West and its regional collaborators (i.e. Saudi Arabia). While Saudi Arabia exploited Salafist proxies, Iran mobilized trans-national Shia clerical networks. The greater divisions within the Sunni world (e.g. secularists vs. Islamists, Sufi vs. Salafi, Saudi vs. Qatari, Erdogan's Turkey vs. al-Sisi's Egypt) compensated for the Shia's demographic inferiority.

#### *Sectarian Bi-polarization:*

These factors stimulated a powerful cumulative tendency to bi-polarize the region between Sunni and Shia sectarianism in which the moderate secular center was being squeezed out. This was paralleled by radicalization *within* each of the two confessions: within Sunnism, the normative balance has shifted away from the previously majority non-violent versions that accepted co-existence, notably Sufis whose "everyday" sectarianism" was non-political and accommodationist with secular authorities and other sects. Sufism suffered from the rise of Salafist fundamentalism, which, particularly in failed states such as Syria, easily slips into jihadism. At the same time, the modernists of the Muslim Brotherhood brand struggled to sustain their discourse on a civil state, squeezed between regimes' repression and jihadi mobilization. Within Shiism, too, politicized militias, composed of zealots ready for martyrdom in defence of Shia shrines and neighbourhoods, joined the fighting in Syria and Iraq. This has shifted the normative balance within Islam away from co-existence and toward *takfiri* practices (claiming other Muslims are apostates or infidels).

This is not to say that this bi-polarization is uncontested or necessarily permanent. Class, local and tribal identities crosscut sectarianism and civic identities compete with it. People have many identities and the embrace of sect is a function of the current violent conflicts and its instrumentalization in the regional power struggle.

#### **Conclusion**

What began as a variant of the struggle for regional hegemony between powers aligned with and against U.S. intervention in Iraq, framed in familiar Arab-Islamic terms (resistance), has been transformed by the Arab uprising into an unprecedented sectarian bi-polarization of the regional system. Sectarian bi-polarization in the inter-state power struggle was paralleled by a shifting normative balance away from moderates within both Shia and Sunni Islam and by polarizations splitting several identity-fragmented Arab states apart.

Why has this sectarian diffusion so swiftly achieved near-hegemony in the wake of the Arab uprisings? Part of the answer is the instrumentalization of sectarianism in the intense – even existential – power struggles unleashed by the uprising. Inside states, warring patrimonial regime remnants and opposition charismatic movements draw on the historically successful "Khaldounian" practices to build power: in multi-sectarian societies *sectarianism is understood to work* in generating *asabiyya*, mobilizing followers and demonizing enemies. This could be seen as authoritarian learning: drawing on

extensive past repertoires widely available in regional memories to address new episodes of state formation/deformation. At the trans-state level, competition for leadership within sects promotes outbidding by radical sectarian entrepreneurs that marginalizes moderates, a successful practice then widely emulated, which deepens sectarianism. Similarly, in regional level power struggles, rival states emulate each other in what might be called “tit for tat sectarianism” – when one side frames the struggle in sectarian terms, its success leads its rivals to similarly respond.

But what makes this instrumentalization of sectarianism – which before the uprising had, outside of Iraq, quite limited success – so potent? First, the widespread weakening of states has made them much more permeable than hitherto to the diffusion of sectarianism by extensive previously-existing transnational linkages – discourses of preachers, activist networks and armed movements. Second, the unprecedented level of competitive intervention by rival regional powers in failed states results in proxy wars funded and armed by kindred sectarians. Third, in failing states civil war violence and security dilemmas transforms identities in a sectarian direction at the expense of more inclusive ones. Thus, similar structural factors (state failure, civil war) combined with trans-state penetration, emulation, and intervention make states and populations susceptible to unparalleled sectarian diffusion.

The change of dominant identities used in the regional power struggle from supra-state ones to sectarianism profoundly impacts the conduct of politics. The previous dominance of Arabism contributed to the integration of Arabic speaking religious minorities within states and enjoined the Arab states to cooperate at the regional level. By contrast, the current version of radical sectarianism prescribes uncompromising jihad *within* the Islamic umma against heresy. In this Sunni-Shia bipolarization of the region all people and states are pushed to take sides. This intensified regional power struggle waged by sectarian discourse and proxy wars is plunging the Middle East into a new dark age.

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