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THE SECTARIAN REVOLUTION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

RAYMOND HINNEBUSCH

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abstract

THIS ARTICLE EXAMINES THE CURRENT SECTARIANIZATION OF THE MIDDLE EAST. IT BEGINS WITH A CONCEPTUALIZATION OF SECTARIANISM, DISTINGUISHES KINDS OF SECTARIANISM AND EXAMINES THE FACTORS THAT DETERMINE WHICH VERSIONS OF SECTARIANISM DOMINATE AT A PARTICULAR TIME. IT SURVEYS THE PRECONDITIONS OF SECTARIANIZATION – UNEQUAL MODERNIZATION, INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF IDENTITY IN REGIME POWER-BUILDING PRACTICES; THE INITIAL PRECIPITANT OF SECTARIANIZATION, THE US INVASION OF IRAQ; AND THE IMPACT OF THE ARAB UPRISINGS, IN WHICH SECTARIANISM WAS INSTRUMENTALIZED BY REGIMES AND OPPOSITIONS. INSTRUMENTALIZED SECTARIANISM REACHED THE GRASSROOTS AND WAS TRANSMUTED INTO MILITANT SECTARIANISM BY THE SECURITY DILEMMA, COMPETITIVE INTERFERENCE IN FAILED STATES, AND TRANS-STATE DIFFUSION OF SECTARIAN DISCOURSES. THE CONSEQUENCES OF

SECTARIANIZATION INCLUDE ITS CHALLENGE TO STATE FORMATION AND ITS TENDENCY TO EMPOWER AUTHORITARIANISM. CIVIL WAR HAS UNLEASHED MILITANT SECTARIANISM LEADING TO EXCLUSIVIST PRACTICES AMONG BOTH REGIMES AND OPPOSITION. THE REGIONAL POWER STRUGGLE HAS TAKEN THE FORM OF SECTARIAN BI-POLARIZATION BETWEEN SUNNI AND SHIA CAMPS. SECTARIANIZATION CAN ONLY BE REVERSED BY AN END TO THE CURRENT CIVIL WARS IN SYRIA, IRAQ AND YEMEN AND THE REGIONAL POWER STRUGGLES THAT KEEP THEM GOING.

SECTARIANISM, ARAB UPRISINGS, FAILED STATES, CIVIL WAR, REGIONAL POWER STRUGGLE, SUNNI, SHIA

keywords

INTRODUCTION

There is a wide consensus that the Middle East is in the grip of a sectarian wave, despite much disagreement about its dimensions, causes and consequences. While sectarianism has always been an element of the MENA cultural fabric, the recent surge of politicized and militant sectarianism and the bi-polarization between Sunni and Shia is unprecedented in the modern history of the region. Not only has it introduced virulent and violent practices into inter-state competition, but it is also fracturing multi-sectarian states across the region and re-empowering authoritarian forms of governance.¹

Insofar as it has transformed pre-existing power structures, then the sectarian surge in MENA has a revolutionary dimension: identities have undergone significant and rapid change; an unprecedented number of states have failed, relatively empowering trans-state movements; the balance of power among states has been radically upset; and state borders are being challenged. In other respects, however, sectarianism has been a vehicle of counter-revolution that has blocked the transformation of the region envisioned by those who launched the Arab Uprisings starting in 2010. The Middle East looks, in many respects, entirely different than before this sectarian surge; but the outcome is an Arab winter, not an Arab spring

This paper will seek to explain the sectarian phenomenon, particularly its rapid diffusion across the region, and to analyze its impact on the

¹ Gause 2014; Salloukh 2015.

stability of fragile states, its implications for forms of governance and its effect on the regional power struggle and the stability of the regional states system.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: THINKING ABOUT SECTARIANISM

Sectarianism has two characteristics, an identity, perhaps political, which defines a community to which individuals belong and normative prescriptions, that is, the norms and roles attached to the identity.

1) Identity: Multiple & Constructed

Thinking about the construction of sectarianism as an identity usefully departs from the debates over political identity between primordialists, modernists, and instrumentalists. Since primordialists focus on the historical roots of identities, modernism focuses on contemporary structural context and instrumentalists on agency, an adequate approach needs to combine the insights of each. From such a synthesis, it is possible to derive a number of starting points.²

First, political identity is plastic, not fixed or unchanging. Yet, identities cannot be arbitrarily invented, for, as primordialists insist, their credibility and popular resonance depends on memories of long historical experience and inherited shared ingredients such as language, which are only constructed over the *longue durée*; once constructed, identity becomes a durable 'social fact,' part of structure which constrains agency. Moreover, as people are born into an identity – such as sect – it is primordial, appearing 'natural,' 'everyday' and 'banal,' even though it must be continually reproduced by early socialization, kin, peer groups, schools, religious institutions, etc.

Vali Nasr remarks that "how you pray decides who you are"³ but, in fact, religion is only one factor in MENA peoples' identity. Indeed, there are, especially in the Middle East, multiple credible identities, located at different 'levels:' some are small, particularistic and exclusivistic (family, tribe); others define larger more universalistic and inclusive identities (the state, supra-state (Arabism, Pan-Islam)). Sect is therefore only one such identity, located somewhere between the two poles and, as such, by no means inevitably dominant. Also, people may hold several identities simultaneously perhaps because some are not politicized or because they overlap in content, being

² The following section builds on and synthesizes material from the analyses in: Matthieson 2015; Chapter 1; Varshney 2007; Malmvig 2012; Hinnebusch 2016a.

³ POMED 2012.

compatible in their norms; thus, people may simultaneously identify with their sect, their state and a larger Arab or Islamic community. For example, as long as their sectarian identity remained banal and unpoliticized, educated Shia in Lebanon and Iraq were often communists and Sunnis and Christians in Syria were Arab nationalists. With many identities in competition, their salience alters over time, a product of the practices of political entrepreneurs and structural conditions, as instrumentalists and modernists demonstrate.

2) Sectarian Variations

Sectarianism is not a homogeneous phenomenon, but rather varies according to levels of politicization and intensity.⁴ Sectarianism is an identity marker combined with norms but the balance between these components makes for differences in its intensity, producing at least three major variants, banal, instrumentalized and militant sectarianisms.

Everyday (or banal) sectarianism is a relatively un-politicized identity marker in multi-sectarian societies, operative largely at the local level, with few national normative implications and therefore compatible with sectarian co-existence and with state and supra-state identities (e.g. Arabism).

Instrumentalized sectarianism – The first step toward sectarianization is the politicization of sectarian differences for instrumental ends: political entrepreneurs are incentivized to instrumentalize sectarianism to mobilize sects in intra-state 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. Instrumentalism does not imply that identities are merely tools in struggles over material resources for if identities reflect the interests of those who construct them, once constructed identity shapes conceptions of interests by those who hold to them and identity is an ideational interest in its own right that people will defend when under threat; thus in times of high insecurity, instrumental sectarianism facilitates defensive collective action (e.g. the minorities in the Syrian civil war).⁵

Militant sectarianism – in the Muslim world jihadism – has an intense normative content, seeks to impose (universalize), if need be by force, a one true interpretation of religion – usually a fundamentalist one – in the public sphere; it demonizes those who do not comply as infidels and often embraces martyrdom for the cause. The main

⁴ Haddad 2011.

⁵ Malmvig 2012.

indicator of militant sectarianism is the denunciation of the other as an unbeliever, liable to persecution – takfir or the process of declaring others non-believers. Unlike an instrumentalist pursuit of material goods, which can be compromised by adjusting shares among the contenders, a public religious vision cannot readily be compromised.

It should be stressed that this last form of sectarianism – jihadism – with its revolutionary dimension, has been a distinctly minority variant of Islam. Most variants of Islam are non-political (such as Sufism) and jihadism has to be distinguished from other kinds of political Islam, such as Salafism (especially its Saudi exported version Wahhabism), a highly fundamentalist variant that is often deferent to authority, and the modernist Muslim Brotherhood which is both more tolerant and open to *ijtihad* (reinterpretation). Militant sectarianism flourishes amongst intense power struggles and insecurity, particularly that fostered by civil war and state failure and is often promoted across boundaries by trans-state movements and discourses; under these conditions mainstream Islam tends to be on the defensive and other varieties of political Islam, especially Salafism, can mutate into jihadism.⁶ Sectarianism of this variety is a particularly powerful identity in that it tightly combines a sub-state particularistic identity (where people are “born into” a sect at the ‘grassroots’) with the supra/or trans-state level in which states, movements and networks seek to mobilize supporters and delegitimize rivals via a universalizing discourse.

3) The Determinants of Identity: Agency-Structure Interaction

Identity change or reproduction is promoted by ‘political entrepreneurs’ motivated by power and ideology, as instrumentalists argue. Agency is most empowered in periods when several identities are competing, as is typical of the modern Middle East where no one identity has achieved hegemony for long; entrepreneurs, have, in this situation, more potential to politicize unpoliticized primordial identities and to shift dominant identities from one level to the other. However, the power of a particular identity depends on its congruence with material conditions, which encourage some identities and discourage others; thus, modernists would argue that broadened mass identities, such as identification with the state, are enabled by modernization; whether state builders practices are inclusive or exclusive, will affect whether people identify with the state; and in periods when material conditions are fluid, such as revolutions, collective action by identity movements can further change identities, as in the rise of jihadist movements in the Syrian civil war. In summary, which,

⁶ Brubaker 2015.

among several credible identities dominates at a given time and situation depends on a complex interaction of structure and agency. Departing from this viewpoint, explanations for the unprecedented sectarian surge of the contemporary period are attempted in the following section.

DRIVERS OF SECTARIANIZATION

Scholars have long recognized the exceptional power of identity in the Middle East and the permeability of regional states to trans-state identity discourses.⁷ Barnett and Lynch argued that identity is shaped by discourse competition in a trans-state public space;⁸ in the regional states system rival states bid for hegemony using trans-state discourses;⁹ and the main threats against which many regimes balance has not been from armies but ideational subversion challenging their domestic legitimacy.¹⁰ After several decades of post-independence Pan-Arab hegemony in the Arab world, oil-bolstered states appeared to be consolidated and less permeable to trans-state identities for a period peaking in the 1980s; but this proved ephemeral and what Salloukh called “the return of the weak state” – indeed failing states have re-empowered identity wars.¹¹ Yet, if identity has always more or less mattered for regional politics, the identities instrumentalized in this rivalry have hitherto chiefly been inclusive state, Pan-Arab or Pan-Islamic identities. Now, however rival states and movements exploit the highly divisive sectarian dichotomy between Sunni and Shia. What explains the rapid diffusion and apparent hegemony of sectarian discourse and practices across the region? Several tendencies, each of which, in themselves, cannot explain it, and each of which contains counter tendencies, nevertheless when cumulative and combined, have constituted powerful drivers of sectarianism.

1) Pre-Conditions of the Sectarian Surge

Modernization – social mobilization (education, mobility, market integration) driven by capitalist development tends to broaden identities toward the state level, while capitalism also drives class formation and class

⁷ Salloukh, Brynen 2004.

⁸ Barnett 1993; Lynch 1999.

⁹ Kienle 1990: 1-30.

¹⁰ Gause 2003/04; Rubin 2014.

¹¹ Salloukh 2016.

identity that may compete with more particularistic sub-state identities.¹² Yet because, in transition societies, modernization also greatly increases aspirations and competition for scarce resources, it can have the opposite effect: migrants to the city may broaden their identity from village (where sectarianism may be banal) to a larger sectarian community (of an activist instrumentalist kind) without it further extending to the nation-state and sectarian solidarity may become a vehicle for competition for scarce resources.¹³ Where resources are distributed by the state via clientele networks this effect is amplified; the instrumentalization of sectarianism is facilitated by its utility for overcoming the collective action problem thereby allowing people to organize for more effective competition over scarce resources. Where increased supply scarcity intensifies competition, communal solidarity is further amplified. In the Middle East job creation has been lagging behind large increases in education, hence frustrating aspirations among youth. Massive population growth (in rural areas on fairly fixed land resources), fueling large-scale urbanization, was also typical, aggravated in the case of Syria by an unprecedented drought. Finally, the greatly increased inequality in the distribution of wealth resulting from the global move to neo-liberalism, reflected in MENA by the move from populist to post-populist authoritarianism,¹⁴ greatly exacerbates communal tensions.¹⁵ In such conditions, losers often attribute outcomes to sectarian discrimination, raising sectarian consciousness – what we might call ‘aggrieved sectarianism.’

Power building practices – Sectarianism’s use as part of authoritarian regime building in MENA’s multi-sectarian societies further politicized it. In such identity-divided societies latent primordial identities, notably sectarianism, seem ‘ready-made’ for exploitation in power struggles. Ruling politicians have a strong incentive to instrumentalize sectarian asayibya to construct their power bases and oppositions are incentivized to use a counter-sectarian identity to mobilize support against the rulers. Thus, patrimonial practices, such as reliance on trusted sectarians, were used to foster cohesive ruling groups in Ba’thist Syria and Iraq. However, this was initially balanced by cross-sectarian co-optation of wider social forces, via bureaucratic institutions. These authoritarian regimes both used and contained sectarianism; this helps explain their remarkably durable rule over fragmented societies. Conversely, when the balance between patrimonial practices and inclusion through bureaucratic practices tilts toward the former, the excluded may feel themselves victims of sectarian discrimination (‘aggrieved sectarianism’), hence, tend to embrace a sectarian counter-identity. However, as long as state governance remains

¹² Deutsch 1961; Hobsbaum 1990.

¹³ Nagel, Olzak 1982.

¹⁴ Hinnebusch 2015b.

¹⁵ Prasch 2012.

intact, grievances take the form of grumbling and competition centers on *wasta* (clientele connections), not violence; it is state failure that paves the way for instrumental sectarianism to become militant and violent. State failure was, however, by no means inevitable: the region’s neo-patrimonial states seemed self-reproducing and it required external intervention to catalyze their de-stabilization.

2) Precipitating the Sectarian Struggle: Global Intrusion

The current sectarianization is a recent phenomenon precipitated by the unprecedented intrusion of the US 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 US constructed a replacement political system that institutionalized instrumental sectarianism. The invasion also opened the door for intense penetration of Iraq by Iranian backed Iraqi Shia exiles and for international jihadists, including al-Qaida, to stir up sectarianism (by targeting Shia mosques) – an unprecedented transnationalization of sectarian conflict. The Iraq conflict spilled over in the region by stimulating sectarian discourse in the Iraqi and the trans-state media.¹⁶

It also precipitated the so-called “New Arab Cold War” pitting the Sunni moderate states aligned with the US in spite of their opposition to the invasion against those that overtly opposed it – the Resistance Axis. The Sunni states, alarmed that the overthrow of the Sunni Saddam regime had allowed Iran to penetrate Iraq through allied Shia parties that had ridden to power on the back of a Shia majority and also by the growing power of Shia Hizbollah in Lebanon, deployed overt sectarian discourse against what they saw as Iran’s encroachment in Arab affairs. 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.¹⁷ So what turned this elite level instrumentalization of sectarian discourse into a much more dangerous grassroots sectarianism?

¹⁶ Dodge 2014; Al-Rawi 2013; Byman 2014; Al-Qarawee 2014.

¹⁷ Valbjorn, Bank 2011.

3) The Arab Uprising: From Instrumental Sectarianism to Grassroots Sectarianization

The Arab Uprising further intensified the struggle for power inside and among states, thereby unleashing the sectarian demon. To be sure, few of the protestors that launched the uprisings instrumentalized sectarianism; rather, the discourse of the youthful middle class protestors who dominated the early period of the uprisings stressed non-violence and cross-sectarian appeal – in a bid to neutralize regimes’ sectarian divide-and-rule tactics and also to get Western support by advertising their liberal credentials. In sectarian divided states like Syria, there were plenty of covert sectarian grievances operative and the protestors demand for equal citizenship conveyed resentment of what was perceived as the regime’s sectarian discrimination. Still, the uprisings were everywhere chiefly driven by socio-economic and political grievances notably associated by the move to post-populism and the frustration of expectations that economic liberalization would be paralleled by political opening. In the more identity-homogeneous states, this tended to shape mobilization along class lines and to enable broad cross-class anti-regime coalitions (with both workers and the middle class joining against the regime), which in Tunisia and Egypt were sufficient to marginalize relatively minor sectarian differences and sweep presidents out of office. In highly identity-fragmented societies, such as Syria, differential distribution of costs and benefits from post-populist crony capitalism were interpreted as sectarian discrimination; hence sectarian and class cleavages reinforced each other among the main victims, politically-unconnected small businessmen in the medium towns and the rural underclass. However, at the same time, sectarian cleavages cut across and diluted anti-regime mobilization, with significant societal segments declining to join the uprising or aligning with the regime, partly on class, partly sectarian lines. In Syria, there was enough mobilization against the regime to destabilize it but not for revolution from below, instead setting up the conditions for potential stalemate and civil war.

In this structural situation, the instrumentalism of sectarianism provided the tipping point into civil war. Even if non-violent, the flooding of the streets across the Arab world with mass protest that challenged regimes for control of public spaces, was a potent instrument in a struggle for power between counter-elites and ruling regimes, and particularly once protestors demanded the “fall of the regime” it was inevitable that regimes would fight back violently and with whatever tools were at their disposal. Unsurprisingly, once regimes were existentially challenged in Syria, Iraq and Bahrain, elites turned to sectarianism to consolidate their support bases, thereby provoking counter-sectarianism among oppositions. Rivals in power struggles ended up resorting to sectarianism, even if, as was

often so, their own identities were not necessarily sectarian, because it was understood to work in mobilizing followers and demonizing enemies. Regimes framed the threat from the ‘Other’ in sectarian terms, oppositions then relied on militant sectarian discourse to mobilize fighters and fighting spirit (to make up for their usually inferior weaponry) and regimes were then pushed to rely more and more on defensive sectarian *asabiyya*. But what has made this elite and counter-elite instrumentalization of sectarianism, that for many years had failed to move the Arab street, so potent that it rapidly polarized the mass grass roots, increasing squeezing out all those in the middle? What had changed was the unprecedented wave of state failures unleashed by the uprisings inside several states – Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen – in which central governments lost their monopoly of legitimate violence to armed oppositions and lost control of swathes of territory as well as their ability to deliver security and services on which citizen loyalty was contingent.¹⁸

Internal drivers – Inside states, civil wars between forces that could be represented as ‘sectarian,’ during which unrestrained violence was deployed in a zero-sum power struggle, turned fighters on both sides to militant versions of sectarianism; the spilling of blood encouraging an embrace of religion. Jihadism intensified the violence as its adherents embraced martyrdom, e.g. suicide bombers. The ‘takfir-ization’ of the ‘Other’ deterred the compromises needed to stop the escalation of conflict. Second, the ‘security dilemma’ pushed all sides to fall back on their communal group for protection;¹⁹ each group, seeing the other as a threat, acted pre-emptively to increase its own security in a way that made all less secure, by increasing group solidarity, demonization of the ‘Other,’ creation of sectarian militias and sectarian cleansing of neighborhoods. These practices entrenched sectarianism at the grassroots in Arab failed states. Many people have been permanently seared, especially youth whose political formation came in parallel to civil war, their identity transformed from inclusive to much more particularistic identities.

Third, the security dilemma was reinforced by the emergence of war economies: as normal economic life collapsed amidst civil war, people joined fighting factions that provided a minimum livelihood; since Gulf funding gave jihadist groups resource advantages over less sectarian ones, they were more successful in recruitment and, once incorporated, previously non-ideological recruits were subjected to intense socialization by the peer group. Thus, identities were further transformed in a sectarian direction and moderate, secular, middle forces weakened.

Fourth, once civil wars led to state failure, the territory of states became contested and divided up between warring patrimonial regime remnants

¹⁸ Hinnebusch 2014; Byman 2014.

¹⁹ Posen 1993.

and charismatic opposition movements, both drawing on the historically successful 'Khaldounian' practices – co-opting and sustaining loyalty or mobilizing followers on the basis of assabiyeh, some combination of blood kinship and shared religious vision – to build or sustain power. In multi-sectarian societies this takes the form of sectarianism. The result is that regimes and counter-regimes become much more sectarian than had been the case when the uprisings first started.

External drivers – Simultaneously, internal conflicts in failed states not only spilled over to the regional level, but regional forces, at the same time, exacerbated sectarian conflict in individual states. Scholarship has shown that communal conflicts can be contagious, with kindred groups in several states that share grievances mobilized by a demonstration effect, and violent and successful insurgencies spreading readily across state boundaries.²⁰ The shared culture, language, and in some cases, similar sectarian makeup, of the Arab states facilitates such spillover. But it was the widespread weakening of states in the Uprising that made them so much more permeable than hitherto to the diffusion of sectarianism by extensive transnational linkages – discourses of preachers, activist networks and armed movements.

At the trans-state level, state weakening and civil war sectarianized discourse, and, specifically, the media. This began with Iraq's 2003 deconstruction and was intensified by the uprisings, especially in Syria,²¹ with highly sectarian discourses in the satellite and social media readily crossing borders, extremist narratives getting disproportionate attention and few voices pushing back against them.²² This trans-state transmission of sectarianism was not even limited to states with sectarian pluralism or civil war. Sectarianization has increased even in states where there is no civil war, few sectarian minorities and little external interference. Social media and radical preachers, particularly on Gulf-run Arab satellite TV, spread sectarian animosities far from states experiencing civil war.

As sectarianism demonstratively seemed to “work” in mobilizing support and demonizing enemies, trans-state movements emulated each other in its exploitation. Notably in the Levant, the renewed permeability of states' borders allowed Sunni Salafist jihadists to intervene on one side and a counter-coalition of Shia-led minorities (*hilm al-aqalliyyat*) on the other; militias from one country, recruited via long-distance sectarian networks, regularly transited to neighboring countries, while an unprecedented movement of foreign Muslim fighters poured into disputed states, altogether propelling an unprecedented transnationalization of opposing sectarian movements and networks.

20 Lawson 2016.

21 Byman 2014; Al-Rawi 2013.

22 Lynch 2016b; Wehrey 2016.

In parallel, where states failed, vacuums were created inviting competitive external intervention in which rival powers instrumentalized sectarian discourse and provided arms and financing to bring sectarian-affiliated allies to power in uprising states. As the rival regional powers backed the most sectarian factions – partly because they were the best fighters – the latter came to enjoy greater resources, precipitating a ‘bandwagoning’ of more “moderate” factions to the jihadist poles. Rival states emulated 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.²³

At the same time, at the regional level, the violence of civil wars combined with competition for leadership within sects promoted outbidding by radical sectarian entrepreneurs that marginalized moderates within each of the two main 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 slipped 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 defense of Shia shrines and neighborhoods, joined the fighting in Syria and Iraq. The rise of ISIS in Iraq provoked the mobilization of the overtly sectarian Shiite *Hasht al-Shaabi*, which tended to elevate a trans-Shia identity over Iraqi national identity (which would embrace both Shia and Sunnis); Iran used the ISIS threat to encourage Iraqi Shia into joining such groups as these were its most reliable Iraqi clients.²⁴ Yemen's Zaidi identity, not hitherto anti-Sunni, took on a more Shia color amidst a civil war with Saudi backed Salafists.

This stimulated a powerful cumulative tendency to bi-polarize the region between Sunni and Shia sectarianism in which the moderate secular center was compressed, if not squeezed out. This is not to say that this bi-polarization is uncontested or necessarily permanent. Class, local and tribal identities cross-cut sectarianism and civic identities compete with it. Neither Christians nor Kurds align with the two main sectarian camps. Both the “Sunni” and “Shia” camps are heterogeneous. There are social forces and moderate voices that have resisted sectarianization: Sufis, secular youth with a civic identity; modernist Islamists, Ayatollah Sistani in Iraq and Alawi dissidents who rejected the Syrian regime's alliance with Iran. People have many identities and the embrace of militant sectarianism

23 Wehrey 2016.

24 Almarzoqi 2015.

is a function of the current violent conflicts and its instrumentalization in the regional power struggle. But as long as the fighting continues middle voices tend to be either disempowered or impelled to bandwagon with the radicals. The dynamics of violent conflict have shifted the normative balance within Islam away from co-existence and toward takfiri practices. Once let out, this deep sectarianism is very difficult to put back in the box.

Thus, similar structural factors (state failure, civil war) combined with trans-state penetration and intervention made states and populations susceptible to unprecedented sectarian diffusion. What have the consequences of this been? One impact is a deleterious effect on both state cohesion and forms of governance.

CONSEQUENCES OF SECTARIANIZATION

Sectarianism & State Formation/De-formation

As Huntington famously said, the most important differences between countries is not the type of government but the amount of it, that is, their level of state formation.²⁵ For him, state building proceeded through phases, first the concentration of power in an elite center; then an expansion of power through a single party that mobilized supporters, combined with reformism of the Ataturk type that forged a common national identity and a middle class; and thirdly the diffusion of power via multi-party electoralism. As we will see, sectarianism introduces complications into this formula.

Sectarianism and state formation appear inversely related, at least in the long run: strong states constrain sectarianism and failed states are breeding grounds for it. MENA state formation levels, hence the region's vulnerability to trans-state penetration, including sectarianization, has varied considerably. Over time it describes a bell shaped curve, rising from a period of readily penetrated weak states after independence to a peak in the 1980s when authoritarian states were "hardened" against such penetration by oil-funded bureaucratic expansion and co-optation, thereafter declining through the 1990s and 2000s as resources contracted, ending in a new watershed of multiple state failures precipitated by the Arab Uprising, which again exposed many of them to trans-state penetration, largely by rival sectarian movements, networks and discourse.²⁶ Within each time period, too, states varied in their levels of internal consolidation, with those having a historical identity congruent with their borders (such

²⁵ Huntington 1968.

²⁶ Salloukh 2016; Hinnebusch 2015b; Saouli 2015.



IN MENA, THE DOMINANT REGIME/STATE BUILDING PRACTICE WAS (AND IS) NEO-PATRIMONIALISM, AN AUTHORITARIAN HYBRID OF PERSONAL AND BUREAUCRATIC AUTHORITY

as Egypt), and/or co-optative patronage from exceptional oil revenues (such as Saudi Arabia) better able to resist the post-1980 decline. Stronger states are better able to construct identities compatible with statehood and to defend their territory from trans-state penetration. Identities tend to be constructed against an 'Other' and it takes a stronger state to direct such enmity outward to other states while weak states are vulnerable to penetration by rival identities that divide them within and make them potential victims of the former.

On the other hand, sectarianism poses obstacles to state formation. It is most difficult where there are several large sectarian groups, as opposed to relative homogeneity with small minorities or identity fragmentation (with many groups) or where multiple identities cross-cut each other. Most dangerous is when there are large minorities excluded from governance by a majority or when a minority seems to rule over a majority, as in Iraq and Syria.

This danger is amplified where, as in these states, a counter-balancing identification with the state itself was retarded because imperialist-imposed borders were incongruent with historic identities, thereby making states more vulnerable to competing sub- and supra-state identities, including sectarianism. Thus, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq were constructed to suit French and British interests, throwing together groups that did not want to share a state, cutting them off from kin in neighboring territory and mutilating the larger community with which many people identified. In such 'artificial' states, regime building may drive state building and if the regime fails, the state is also put at risk. Yet, even if regime and state overlap, they are not identical and their requisites of success can actually contradict each other.

Given this scenario, what pathways to state building are available in such identity-fragmented weak states? In MENA, the dominant regime/state building practice was (and is) neo-patrimonialism, an authoritarian hybrid of personal and bureaucratic authority.²⁷ Personal authority prioritizes empowerment of those most loyal to the ruler and in multi-sectarian societies this typically means those who share a sectarian identity with him; this elite core approximates what we mean by the 'regime.' Bureaucratic authority, which rests on the creation of state institutions – civil administration, professional army, legislatures and party systems –

²⁷ Bank, Richter 2010; Anceschi et al. 2014.

is more inclusive since recruitment is by merit and party bureaucracies incorporate activists and co-opt constituents. Only cross-class and cross-sectarian coalitions have the capacity to expand or consolidate state power and these require the construction of bureaucratic and political institutions able to incorporate such wider social forces. In Huntington's terms, neo-patrimonial regimes use patrimonial practices, including sectarianism, in the power concentration phase; as such in the short term, at least, sectarianism can be an asset in regime formation, as well as problem for state formation. In the power expansion phase, regimes deploy bureaucratic inclusionary practices in order to contain the negative side of patrimonial practices, which include the alienation of those excluded from high office or institutions on ascriptive (identity) grounds and the inefficiency introduced into state institutions. The more the bureaucratic side constrains the patrimonial one (Egypt), the more rational bureaucracy and political inclusion of pro-regime constituencies strengthens the state; the more personal authority debilitates the bureaucratic capabilities (e.g. Yemen), the less inclusion is possible and the weaker the state. Thus, the balance between the relative salience of the two authority practices, and specifically, sufficient development of bureaucratic institutions, determines the capacity of a given neo-patrimonial regime to include and satisfy actors who, if excluded, embrace communal grievances. Sect is, in this process, both an asset, particularly for regime-building, yet a potential liability in the creation of institutional authority (state-building).

Different institutional configurations are often explicitly designed to deal with identity diversity, and to reconcile the need to create authority while also incorporating constituents through some form of political participation. MENA's initially populist versions of authoritarianism typically adopted the "assimilationist" approach which seeks the "national integration" of social forces through ruling single parties, such as the Ba'th party, that recruited across sect and promoted assimilation into a common Arab identity while constraining overt sectarian competition. In Syria, the Ba'th party's secular Arab nationalist ideology had some success in integrating the Arabic-speaking minorities and in Iraq in bridging Sunni Shia gaps with Arabism. However, the subsequent decline of the party contracted political inclusion, potentially reviving sectarian grievances among the excluded.

The polar opposite model, consociational democracy, has been attempted in a minority of MENA societies where the authoritarian concentration of power was obstructed by highly mobilized sectarian communities sufficiently balanced in size that power sharing was the only viable state-building formula. This model not only accommodated identity diversity but also institutionalized sectarian differences. In the consociational governance prevailing in Lebanon and attempted in post-Saddam Iraq, political competition takes place along communal lines with elites mobilizing votes

through playing on fears of the 'Other' and privileging sectarian clients with patronage. Consociationalism's power sharing among confessional groups could produce a stable regime if elites refrain from mobilizing their sectarian constituencies against each other and from inviting kindred external networks to intervene in the internal power competition on their behalf. If the system constrains competition by guaranteeing quotas of office and patronage to each communal group, sectarianization may be muted but if quotas do not fairly represent the demographic weight of communal groups, they will themselves become the focus of conflict as in Lebanon where this precipitated sectarian civil war in the 1970s. If there is a sectarian majority and it becomes permanent, as in Iraq, minorities are excluded and will counter-mobilize also on sectarian lines.²⁸

Thus, neither model appears to be sectarianism-proof and a lot depends on the resources regimes can deploy. As noted, state formation in MENA followed a bell shaped curve, with economic crises and shrinking resources weakening states after the 1980s peak in state strength and debilitating their co-optative capacity. Thus, in the 2000s, the Syrian and Iraq regimes both became more exclusionary, despite their divergence between neo-patrimonial authoritarianism in Syria and nominal consociational democracy in Iraq. In Syria, Bashar al-Asad's concentration of power in the presidency and the Asad family at the expense of the cross-sectarian collective Ba'th party leadership; the neo-liberal policies that aggrandized crony capitalists at the expense of the regime's popular constituency, and the debilitation of the party and corporatist organization that penetrated and co-opted the regimes initial rural peasant power base – all made his regime more vulnerable to anti-regime mobilization. In Iraq the Shia politicians who took over power after the American invasion had dismantled the existing state, three-quarters of whom had been in exile and therefore lacked Iraqi constituencies, turned to anti-Sunni discourse, framed as anti-Ba'thism, as the only way to mobilize power bases. Nuri al-Maliki constructed a form of electoral neo-patrimonialism that concentrated power in the Shia parties, largely excluding or marginalizing Sunnis.²⁹

As regimes' institutional capacity declined they became more vulnerable to sectarian mobilization by opposition forces, dramatically in the Arab uprisings. Ruling elites in Syria, Bahrain and Iraq instrumentalized sectarianism to turn back this opposition. Yet, this tactic carries high risks for instability and, in extreme cases, civil war and this is especially so in "artificial" states lacking a state tradition and historical identity: there regime formation is almost inseparable from state formation, if the regime fails, so does the state. This provides favorable breeding grounds for sectarianism, as can be seen in the Levant where state collapse and

²⁸ Makdisi 1996; Salamy 2009; Salloukh 2015.

²⁹ Al-Qarawee 2014; Dodge 2014; Hinnebusch 2011.

anarchy generated a security dilemma polarizing populations along sectarian lines. Once sectarianism seeps down to grass roots, the elites that instrumentalized it will find it very hard to put the genie back in the bottle. If regimes survive, they tend to be reconfigured as more exclusionary and coercive forms of neo-patrimonialism often facing opposing charismatic jihadist movements, with both relying on one identity in order to exclude others via repression and demonization, as can be seen most clearly in Syria.

In cases of externally-imposed arbitrary borders, notably the post WWI “settlement” in the Levant, state failure opens new doors for irredentist movements seeking to re-draw them. Borders are more vulnerable where they divide compact minorities, such as the Kurds concentrated in the Turkey-Syria-Iraq interface or where, as between Syria and Iraq they cut across virtually indistinguishable populations. Thus, in Syria and Iraq, both the Kurdish PKK/PDY and ISIS mobilizing populations by ethno-sectarian ideologies are seeking to redraw the borders of Turkey, Syria, and Iraq, to overthrow ‘Sykes-Picot,’ and to constitute new more communally homogeneous polities, a process that inevitably involves a certain “ethnic cleansing.” Whether they succeed depends not just on their relative strength compared to state elites and others committed to existing borders, but also regional and international permissiveness for border alterations.

The Impact of Sectarianism on Regime Type: Empowering Authoritarianism – Debilitating Democratization

There is a vast literature on the relation between multi-communal societies and governance. Early modernization theory expected that sub-state identities would, over time, be subsumed in broader national identities focused on the state; this, Rustow argued, was needed for democracy since, for people to disagree peacefully over issues, they had to share an underlying identity commonality.³⁰ In the religious sphere, modernization was thought to be accompanied by secularization that would facilitate democratization since de-politicization of religious beliefs and religion’s removal from the public sphere was necessary to prevent religious conflict in multi-confessional societies and the use of religion to legitimize authoritarianism.

Later, “Modernization revisionism,’ reflecting the actual adaptation of tradition to modernity, argued that neither ethnicity nor religion were effaced by modernization.³¹ Rather, primordial identities could be modernized and become vehicles of modern political participation, e.g.

³⁰ Rustow 1970.

³¹ Gusfield 1967.

through communal based associations. Nevertheless, trans-national data is ambiguous on the impact of sub-state identities on governance. A study by Merkel and Weiffen finds failed democratizers having the highest communal fractionalization and polarization.³² However, if states survive, moderate levels of communal diversity do not necessarily obstruct democratization and indeed can facilitate democracy in that it provides opposition with a natural social base enabling it to overcome the collective action problem and balance ruling groups.

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MODERNIZATION REVISIONISM, REFLECTING THE ACTUAL ADAPTATION OF TRADITION TO MODERNITY, ARGUED THAT NEITHER ETHNICITY NOR RELIGION WERE EFFACED BY MODERNIZATION.

Religious differences are, however, harder to deal with: cross-national statistical studies show that religious heterogeneity increases the chance of civil war and decreases the chances of democracy (by 8%) because religion’s claims to a single truth are less able to be compromised than conflicts involving class and ethnicity.³³ Inter-religious sectarian divisions increase this tendency. But this anti-democratic effect is highly contingent on the kind of sectarianism. Everyday (banal) sectarianism is probably compatible with any form of governance and instrumentalized sectarianism is highly congruent with consociational democracy. This model, in dividing power among social forces, is a barrier to authoritarianism and where sectarian groups are politically mobilized and evenly balanced, hence must share power, it may be the only viable means of governance.³⁴ But militant versions of sectarianism, particularly the jihadism on the rise in the region cannot be accommodated by consociational compromises and are, hence, obstacles to making such a system work, as can be seen in Iraq where the rise of ISIS is both a reaction to the Sunnis’ effective marginalization in the consociational political system and an obstacle to Sunni incorporation into it. The aftermath of the Arab Uprising provides a new body of evidence on sectarianism and governance, although it is ambiguous. On the one hand, Lebanon’s relative immunity to spillover of the Syrian civil war suggests that consociational power sharing, insofar as a country has been immunized by a previous episode of sectarian civil war, gives majorities in each community sufficient security that they view the system as worth defending against the alternative – a return to civil war.

But the preponderance of evidence supports the argument that sectarianism is a deterrent to democratization and a support for hybrid

³² Merkel, Weiffen 2012.

³³ Gerring et al. 2016.

³⁴ Andeweg 2000; Kerr 2006: 27-28.

and authoritarian regimes. A whole range of techniques have enabled authoritarian regimes to use sectarianism to sustain their rule or helped ruling elites in hybrid regimes to keep limited electoral competition from leading to democratization. Sectarian recruitment of military/security forces are normal practices and when regimes are challenged sectarian paramilitary networks (e.g., Syrian shabiha and Shia militia in Iraq) have been used to repress democracy protests. Co-optation usually accompanies repression: thus, it is common for selective economic benefits to be accorded to loyal groups, usually the ruler's own sect (Bahrain, Syria). Common also are political practices that strengthen pro-regime sects against rivals such as gerrymandering and mal-apportionment in elections (Lebanon, Kuwait, Bahrain). Cross-sectarian democratic coalitions are deterred by coopting NGOs sharing the ruler's sect; cracking down on 'moderate' cross-sectarian NGOs (Lebanon, Bahrain, Kuwait) and banning political parties (which might incorporate cross-sectarian support).³⁵ Encouraging or tolerating inter-sectarian conflict facilitates divide and rule, as when the Saudi and Kuwaiti regimes turn a blind eye to anti-Shia rhetoric by Sunni-Islamist groups as a way of binding the majority to the regime and controlling the minority.³⁶ Regimes may rally sectarian support by posing as protector of minorities against majorities, e.g. Bashar al-Asad posed as the protector of minorities against Sunni takfiris; and the al-Khalifa regime claimed to protect Sunnis against the Shia majority. Another tactic is to delegitimize domestic opponents by painting them as tools of an external sectarian power (e.g. the Bahraini regime's framing of the protesters as an Iranian fifth column). An extreme form of sectarian politics is changing the sectarian demographic composition of society by giving citizenship to foreigners from the regime's sect and depriving members of opposition sects of citizenship, as, notoriously, in Bahrain.

There is, of course, considerable variation in the extent to which sectarianism has been deployed by non-democratic regimes. Yet, even in stable relatively liberal states such as Kuwait, the monarchy exploits the Sunni-Shia cleavage to head off challenges from parliament and society, thus, sustaining a hybrid regime against pressures for democratization.³⁷ In Iraq, despite the launch under US auspices of a new version of consociational democracy, Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki consolidated electoral authoritarianism by playing on fears of a Sunni resurgence to create a permanent Shia majority bloc while also pursuing exclusionary practices against Sunnis and marginalizing cross-sectarian Iraqi nationalist alternatives, such as al-Iraqiyya.³⁸ Where regimes are facing outright insurgency, sectarian strategies are typically intensified. The monarchy in Bahrain and Syria's

35 Gengler 2013.

36 Louër 2013.

37 Wells 2016.

38 Al-Qarawee 2014; Dodge 2014.

Asad regime each used sectarianism to rally their sectarian bases against oppositions, enabling them to beat back democratization demands.

A number of analysts have argued that "authoritarian learning" has taught post-uprising authoritarian regimes the efficacy of sectarian divide and rule. The result has been the emergence of 'hard,' more exclusivist versions of authoritarianism than pre-uprising predecessors.³⁹ The old inclusive populist versions of authoritarianism that rested on cross-sectarian coalitions cannot be reconstructed once violent sectarianism takes hold; rather, uprising states experiencing civil war are spawning more exclusivist, perhaps more de-centralized forms of patrimonialism (in which sectarian militias govern in local areas, only loosely linked to the authoritarian center); on the opposition side, authoritarian charismatic movements whose sectarian ideologies demonize the 'Other' have proved the most effective at recruitment, combat and attracting funding. In Syria, indeed, the civil war has created a scenario of competitive authoritarian state formation in which a more coercive, exclusivist – if also more decentralized – neo-patrimonial Asad regime confronts charismatic jihadist movements (Ahrar ash-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra, ISIS), squeezing out moderate more secular, inclusive and pluralist-friendly forces.

This tendency is reinforced by competitive interference by rival states inside states undergoing upheaval: thus in Syria and Iraq, the Sunni regional powers and Iran have each sponsored and empowered the most authoritarian and coercive sectarian movements, whether Hasht al-Shaabi in Iraq or Ahrar al-Sham in Syria. Indeed, both sides tend to support authoritarian oriented movements partly because these are more ideologically compatible with non-democratic GCC and Iranian governance.⁴⁰ Moreover, one study suggests that the more such external interference in post-Uprising states, the more identity conflict, and the less likely is democratization.⁴¹

— SECTARIANISM AND THE REGIONAL POWER STRUGGLE: THE ARAB UPRISING, COMPETITIVE INTERFERENCE AND PROXY WARS

The Regional States System

The Middle East state system is defined by a multi-polar material balance of power among states embedded in and highly penetrated by a trans-state public space defined by identity in which there is an on-going struggle

39 Stacher 2015; Heydemann, Reinoud 2011; Heydemann 2013; Hashemi 2015.

40 Stein 2016.

41 Hinnebusch 2016b.

over norms, foreign policy roles and regime legitimacy. The multipolar character of the system generates rivalry among states for security and hegemony; location tends to shape perceptions of threat from neighbors, especially where there are territorial conflicts, encouraging construction of the 'Other' as a threat, and the identity of the self against the threatening other. States power balance against such security threats but the main threat to many states is less from armies than internal penetration and subversion in which identity is highly instrumentalized by rival powers challenging each other's legitimacy and the main instrument of balancing is also promotion of ideology or claims based on identity.⁴²

The power balance among rival states is a function of both their conventional power resources (size, population, wealth, armed forces) and levels of internal consolidation, which determines their relative vulnerability to subversion in legitimacy wars. Thus larger states combining resources such as wealth and large populations with cohesive and credible identities (from congruence between their borders and a hegemonic identity) tend to be stronger, less vulnerable to penetration, and more ambitious to assume regional hegemony by promoting claims to leadership of a supra-state identity community – historically Pan-Arabism or Pan-Islam. Periodic bids for hegemony have been made by Egypt, Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia.⁴³ Smaller, poorer and more identity fragmented states tend to be vulnerable to stronger ones and victims of power struggles, unless they can overcome (and even exploit) identity fragmentation in order to construct stable regimes, as Ba'thist Syria did for several decades.

Interstate Geopolitical Power Struggles: the Second Arab Cold War

The main watershed event that transformed the identity contests that have always been part of MENA inter-state politics into a sectarian war, was the outcome of the US invasion of Iraq: the destruction of Ba'thist Iraq as a major Arab nationalist power leaving a vacuum filled by Iran whose Shia Iraqi clients took power. This greatly alarmed the Arab Sunni Gulf monarchies, for whom Iran, contiguous, massive and Shiite, was certain to be seen as a threat but which had hitherto been balanced by Arab Iraq. The empowering of Iranian-linked Iraqi Shia movements in Iraq further deepened the felt threat from Iran among the Arab Gulf and other Arab Sunni powers which fought back by instrumentalizing sectarianism.⁴⁴ This resulted in what has been called the "New (or Second) 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, Hizbollah, Hamas), fighting

⁴² Rubin 2014.

⁴³ Hinnebusch 2013.

⁴⁴ Hashemi 2015; Byman 2014; Dodge 2014.

over sectarian-divided Lebanon and Iraq, and divided over the Israeli wars against Hizbollah and Gaza. The Moderate bloc sought to portray the issue as Shiite Iran's interference in the Arab world against Sunnis, but the Resistance axis won the war for public opinion in the Arab street through the 2000s, owing to its success in portraying itself as the bulwark against Israel and American threats to the Arabs and the Sunni powers as collaborators (which, in eroding the legitimacy of the Mubarak regime made it more vulnerable to the Uprising). The "Resistance Axis" kept the upper hand as long as it could overshadow sectarian framing with the resistance narrative.⁴⁵

The Conduct of the Third Arab Cold War: The Sectarianization of Trans-state Identity Wars

The second Arab Cold war was transformed, as a result of the Arab Uprisings, into a completely new – the third – struggle for the Middle East, waged along quite different lines than in previous decades: Leadership was now sought, not of the supra-state community (Arabism or Islam) but of only one of the sectarian sides, Sunni or Shia, and was conducted by sectarian discourse wars in which the 'Other' was widely demonized. When states are consolidated, sectarianism is tepid and largely an instrument of state rivalry; but what has also changed is that the many failed states issuing from the Arab uprising are now uniquely vulnerable, having lost control of their borders and/or wracked by civil wars, to a deep penetration of their populations by these sectarian identities and to intervention by rival outside powers instrumentalizing these identities.

Across the region, sectarian war is being waged by trans-state movements, networks and discourse crossing state boundaries, which have their own dynamic, autonomous of and "in between" inter-state competition and struggles for power inside states – even though rival states helped empower this trans-state sectarianism through hosting sectarian preachers and satellite TV and funding of sectarian movements. Trans-state sectarian discourse, notably the imagery of violence committed by the 'Other' inflames sectarian animosities which mobilizes activists and puts state elites under pressure to defend 'their' sect against violence from the 'Other,' notably via intervention in contested states.⁴⁶

The autonomy of the trans-state level is evidenced by the fact that sectarianization has increased even in states where there is no civil war, few sectarian minorities, and not much overt state intervention, driven

⁴⁵ Valbjorn, Bank: 2011.

⁴⁶ Alloul 2012; Dashti 2013; Lynch 2015.

by the trans-state links of sectarian networks and discourse.⁴⁷ In Egypt, where there are few Shiites and little state failure, trans-state links between Saudi clerics and Egyptian Salafists have mobilized anti-Shia animosity. Salafism, promoted by trans-state preachers, has grown even in relatively secular and homogeneous Tunisia where there are few Shia, and a stable government exists. That trans-state conflicts can mobilize people even in such societies is evidenced by the fact that the highest per-capita number of jihadists travelling to Syria have come from Tunisia, an indicator of how far the sectarian struggle has become a trans-state phenomenon, building on the spread of a Salafism easily mutated into jihadism, but somewhat disconnected from internal domestic conditions.

This is not to say that specific state contexts do not matter; rather, the still small total number of Salafists in Tunisia is a function of the country's unique power-sharing between secularists and mainstream Islamists (al-Nadha), and the confinement of jihadist recruitment in the most marginalized towns is indicative of the fact that the conditions for deep grassroots sectarianism, notably state failure, are lacking in Tunisia, the one country that has come out of the Arab spring with a working democratic system.

The Arab Uprising and the Regional Power Reshuffle

The Arab Uprising reshuffled the geo-political power balance among regional states. The unequal vulnerability of states to the uprising allowed some to see it as an opportunity to weaken their rivals. The Uprising led to state weakening, even failure, in several states (Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen) creating power vacuums inviting competitive external intervention by more identity cohesive and materially stronger states (Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia), in which the latter sought to defend or bring to power in the Uprising states, clients sharing ideological and specifically, sectarian affinity. Syria, in particular became a battleground of rivalry between Iran and the Sunni powers, since it was perceived that the outcome of the "new Struggle for Syria" would tilt the power balance in favor of one or the other of the rival camps. Thus, in the post-Arab uprising period Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar and Iran, all intervened with arms, fighters and financial aid to governments or insurgents in the identity fragmented and failing states in the Levant, Syria above all, but also in the Gulf (Yemen, Bahrain). Sectarianism was the main tool of these interventions, with each rival state favoring sectarian groups aligned with its own sectarian composition.

Instrumentalizing sectarianism is playing with fire but inside the more identity-homogeneous states it tended to reinforce domestic support and

⁴⁷ Salloukh 2015.

enabled them, at acceptable risk, to stir up sectarianism in rival more divided states where the damage was concentrated. Thus, the al-Saud's alliance with the Wahhabi religious establishment and the solidarity of its Sunni base was reinforced by the identity war with Shiite Iran and the war in Yemen it launched in the name of containing the Shia threat. The Yemen intervention was also a way of deflecting the challenge to Saudi leadership of the Sunni world from ISIS.⁴⁸ The latter's attempt, in its attacks on Saudi Shia, to enflame sectarian tensions inside the kingdom suggests that the sectarianization of the region carries risks even for its main promoters.⁴⁹ However, inside identity-divided fragmented states, notably Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, the effect of sectarianization was far more damaging, deepening and prolonging civil wars and creating anarchy in which the security dilemma further divided populations along sectarian lines. Thus, in Yemen where sectarian differences hitherto meant little, the regional war launched by Saudi Arabia sectarianized the struggle, thereby creating an increasingly intractable conflict.⁵⁰

Each of the main powers in this "Third Arab Cold War" instrumentalized sectarianism but strategies differed: Saudi Arabia, newly assertive and assuming the leadership of Sunni sectarianism, had a stake in portraying Iran as Shia, heretical, non-Arab, hence unentitled to involvement in inter-Arab politics; thereby it would benefit from the demographic imbalance in the Arab world in favor of the Sunnis. Stirring up sectarianism helps Saudi Arabia isolate Iran in the Sunni world, particularly important in the GCC⁵¹ where several emirates have sought to avoid breaking long-standing ties with Iran. Iran, heading the minority Shia camp, and aware its soft power would be debilitated among Sunnis were it to be cast as a Shia power, sought to portray itself as the Pan-Islamic leader of a resistance axis against the US/Zionist imperialism; on the other hand, Iran had to make up for its demographic disadvantage by more mobilized unified Shia networks, and, paradoxically, its capacity to assert trans-Shia leadership was assisted by sectarian polarization which would push Shia minorities to it for protection. Iran also benefited from the greater divisions within the nominally Sunni camp (e.g. secularists vs. Islamists, Saudi-Qatari rivalry; Turkey vs. Egypt under al-Sisi).

The regional battle precipitated an unprecedented sectarian bi-polarization of state alignments, with all states under pressure to take sides on sectarian lines. Alliances formed partly on Sunni-Shia identity grounds, not because the contest was about religion, but because it was about ideational power. Rival states faced little salient military threat and the contest was chiefly waged by via discourse wars, but that made it no less central to their

⁴⁸ Matthiesen 2015a/b, 2016.

⁴⁹ Matthiesen 2016; Al-Rasheed 2011.

⁵⁰ Colgan 2016.

⁵¹ Gulf Cooperation Council (Editor's note – JVdB).

vital interests. States sharing an identity and accompanying legitimizing principles aligned against the shared threat from the opposing camp in the struggle for regional influence. Not only were spheres of influence at stake in the battles over the uprising states, but domestic stability was also involved since legitimacy was reinforced when one's sectarian camp was seen to prevail regionally and at risk if the rival camp triumphed. It therefore matters which side "wins" in Syria or Yemen, not just for geopolitical gains and losses but also for legitimacy, hence stability, at home.⁵²

Bi-polarization has not, of course, wholly effaced other factors in alliance formation. For even though some states felt threatened by what they saw as Iran's bid for regional hegemony – notably Israel and Saudi Arabia and to a lesser degree, Egypt and Turkey – a solid anti-Iran bloc was prevented by variations in identity (between Turkey's modernist Islam and Saudi Wahhabism) and the different location of the main threats to each state (Egypt feared Sunni Islamists more than Iran, and Oman was reluctant to antagonize Iran). Nevertheless, there was enough anti-Iran balancing to check Tehran's ambitions – indeed Riyadh and Ankara's sponsorship of the anti-Asad uprising kept Iran on the defensive. As such, the two camps' counter-balancing preserved the balance of power.⁵³

Thus, as might be expected in a multi-polar system, no side was able to sweep the board, thereby prolonging civil wars. What had changed was that, as a result of the Arab Uprising, the participants in the power balance have been radically reshuffled as several once-key state players have been knocked out of the game by internal sectarian conflict and state failure. This has shifted power from the historically central Arab powers, the secular Arab nationalist republics of Egypt, Iraq and Syria, which used to dominate inter-Arab politics in the name of a more inclusive Pan-Arabism, to the standard bearers of religious sectarianism, the newly assertive monarchies of the Gulf periphery and the non-Arab states of Turkey, Iran (and, although on the sidelines, Israel).⁵⁴

CONCLUSION

What began as a variant of the struggle for regional hegemony between powers aligned with and against US intervention in Iraq, framed in familiar Arab-Islamic terms (resistance to imperialism), was transformed by the rival powers' instrumentalization of sectarianism and the state failures unleashed by the Arab uprising into an unprecedented sectarian bipolarization 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.

Sectarian identities in the sectarian-diverse MENA societies were not created by these developments; but, hitherto, they remained banal or instrumental, not the militant version that excludes sectarian co-existence. As long as sectarian identities were cross-cut by class or subsumed by state and Pan-Arab identities, sectarianism was contained. As long as state-builders balanced their patrimonial instrumentalization of sects with more inclusive administrative and party bureaucracies, sectarianism actually assisted regime formation and state consolidation. However, once neo-patrimonial regimes became more patrimonialized and less inclusive, states were vulnerable to sectarian grievances and potential revolt. The destruction of the Iraqi state, setting off a wave of sectarian consciousness across the region and setting up the regional power struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia, in which they instrumentalized sectarianism, further prepared the ground for sectarianization. Yet the limited resonance of their discourse on the Arab street throughout the 2000s and the remarkable durability and resilience of neo-patrimonial regimes – it took a US invasion to topple Saddam Hussein – make it unlikely sectarianism would have widely destabilized regimes or reached the grassroots without the power struggles unleashed by the Arab Uprisings.

Sectarianization was initiated by its instrumentalization in both the domestic power struggles unleashed in states experiencing uprisings and in the competitive interference in uprising states by rival regional powers, but the resonance of sectarian discourses at the grass roots level depended on state failure, escalation of violence, and the security dilemma in the Uprising states; in turn, this was reinforced by the support of external powers for the most radical sectarian fighters and their financing of a war economy that kept the violence going and deepened the security dilemma.

That the dominant identities used in the regional power struggle have changed from supra-state ones to sectarianism matters profoundly for the conduct of politics: thus, the dominance of Arabism had contributed to the integration of Arabic speaking minorities within states and enjoined the Arab states to cooperate at the regional level. Although competition for Arab leadership often led to conflict among them over the proper interpretation of Arabism, these could be more readily compromised than the current cleavages: indeed, the current version of radical sectarianism prescribes uncompromising jihad within the Islamic umma against heresy. It has split societies wide open, and helped created a slew of failed states in which jihadists find fertile ground to freely operate across borders, challenging the states system. The democratization impetus of the Arab uprising was stopped in its tracks and harder, more exclusionary sectarian-

⁵² Stein 2016; Gause 2016; Rubin 2014; Salloukh 2016.

⁵³ Gause 2016; Vakil 2016; POMED 2012; Lynch 2016a/b.

⁵⁴ Hinnebusch 2014; 2015a.

based versions of neo-patrimonial and charismatic jihadist movements were empowered. In this Sunni-Shia bi-polarization of the region all people and states are pushed to take sides. This intensified power struggle waged by sectarian discourse and proxy wars is plunging the Middle East into a new dark age.

What does the future hold? A cessation in the instrumentalization of sectarianism by rival regional powers and a ceasefire, hence increased security and a return to normal economy in states afflicted by civil war – Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya – could reverse the reproduction of grass roots sectarianization. An end to fighting in Syria, in some ways the epicenter of the sectarian war, could marginalize the militants and empower moderates; indeed, there was evidence of this in the first (Spring 2016) cease-fire in Syria when civil activists re-emerged and the jihadist Jabhat al-Nusra suffered a backlash against its hardline puritanism and takfirism. Were the flow of resources (provided as part of regional proxy war) to warring parties to be halted, warlords profiting from conflict would be weakened and those still hoping for victory if only their patrons would increase support for them would have to accept that a hurting stalemate had been reached that could only be resolved through compromise and power-sharing. Indeed, at the regional level, already some of the actors promoting jihadism in Syria, such as Qatar and to a degree Turkey, have been forced to bend to the backlash at both the regional and international levels.

Yet even were ceasefires to be reached, the sectarian animosity and distrust created by years of killing would likely be an intractable obstacle to the power-sharing needed to create enough stability to overcome the security dilemma in failed states. Whole new generations grown up under civil war have adopted sectarian identities and rival politicians would not be likely to resist the temptation to use sectarianism to mobilize support.⁵⁵ The settlement of the Lebanese civil war demonstrates that such obstacles can be overcome; but a condition in the Lebanese case – the existence of third parties (Syria and Saudi Arabia at Taif) sponsoring and imposing an end to the fighting – seems to be absent in the current Arab civil wars; only if the great powers combined to enforce an end to the fighting, would this have a chance of happening and even then it is questionable whether they have sufficient leverage over the regional and internal players. Moreover, the great powers themselves are starting to use MENA conflicts, notably in Syria, to fight their own proxy wars. The reality is that there are too many “spoilers” to make a settlement of the Arab civil wars easy or likely anytime soon. And without an end to these proxy wars, sectarianization cannot be reversed.

55 Lynch 2016a, 2016b

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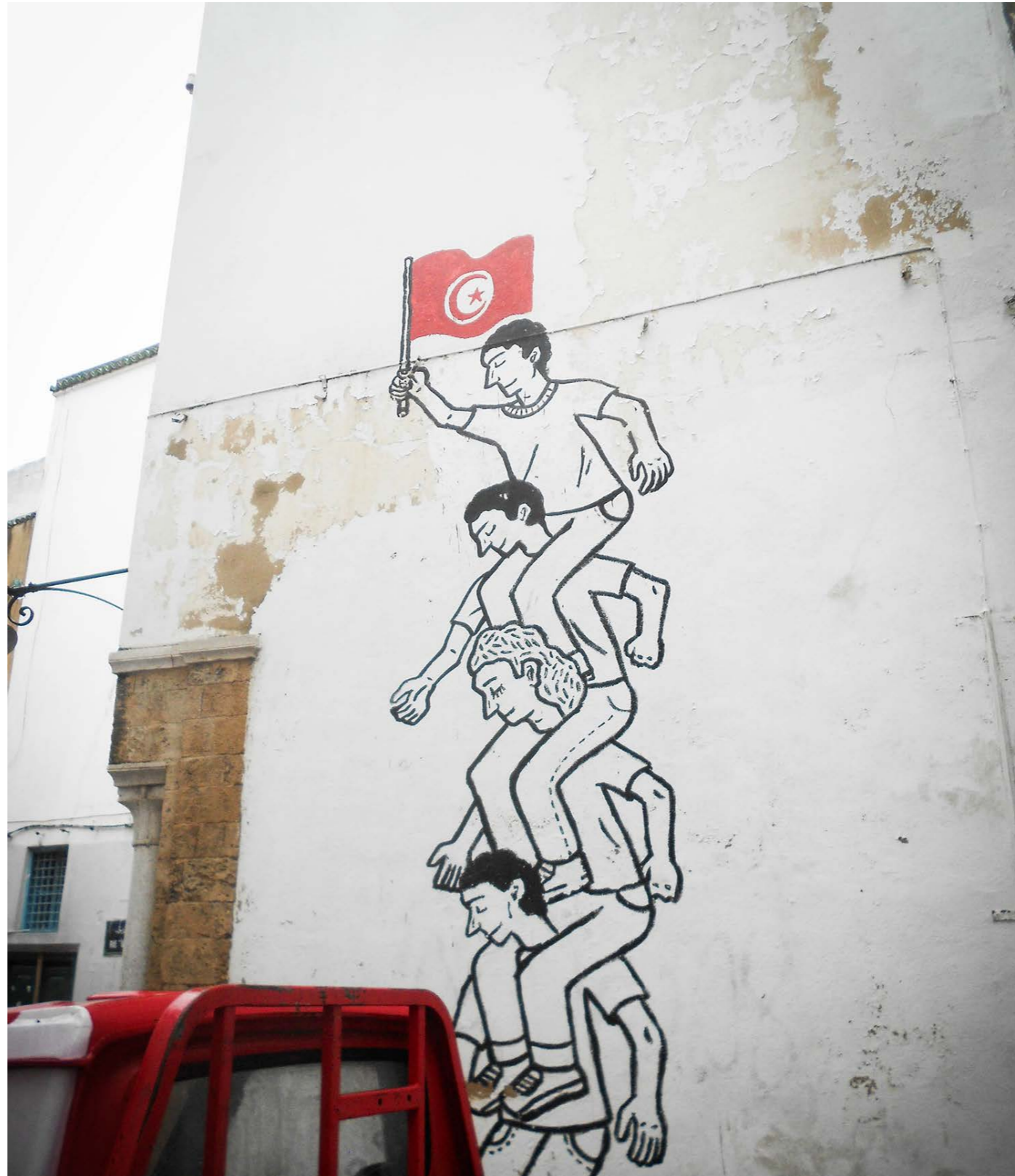
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Raymond Hinnebusch is professor of International relations and Middle East politics at the University of St. Andrews and Director of the Centre for Syrian Studies. His major works include *Egyptian Politics Under Sadat* (Cambridge, 1985); *The International Politics of the Middle East* (Manchester, 2nd edition, 2015) and *Syria: Revolution from above* (Routledge, 2001). He co-edited *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, (Lynne Rienner, 2nd edition, 2014); *Turkey-Syria Relation: between Enmity and Amity*, (Ashgate, 2013); *Sovereignty after Empire: Comparing the Middle East and Central Asia*, (Edinburgh, 2011); *The Iraq War: Causes and Consequences*, (Lynne Rienner, 2006), and *Syria: From Reform to Revolt*, (Syracuse, 2014). He edited *After the Arab Uprisings: between democratization, counter-revolution and state failure*, Routledge 2016. He is currently a co-researcher in the project on sectarianism in the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings based at Aarhus University.

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