'Discoursing Sectarianism' Approach: What and How to Analyse in Sectarian Discourses.

Abstract

This article puts forth 'discoursing sectarianism' as an approach helping overcome gaps in essentialism, instrumentalism and constructivism as the three main lines of analysing sectarianism. The approach takes language as a point of departure, showing how it can dually *describe* reality as a 'neutral' medium of communication and also *create* reality as constitutive component of practices sectarianisation. The approach also focuses on workings of ideology and power relations as part of linking language, texted in variable formats such as written speeches, monuments or images, with contexts shaping or being shaped with them. Thus, we have to study manifestations or articulations sectarianism, e.g. a speech or an image, within the broader process of their actualisation or materialisation (e.g. the context in which these articulations are enforced, transformed, challenged or falsified). This broader process of discoursing sectarianism within language and beyond can thus accommodate elements predominating analyses in the three other lines of enquiry such as religion and history. The final section of the paper maps a practical and analytical toolkit for researchers and analysts seeking to investigate

sectarian discourses by offering the three mutually inclusive levels of textual practices, discursive practices and political practices.

Introduction

Discourse analysis has been often used to understand and explain rhetoric and communication in the Middle East; it is certainly not new. In a region where culture, norms, symbolisms, religion and sects have a profound effect on communication, discourse analysis has been the "go-to" literature. Not least of these are sectarian discourses, given the ample attention it has received due to events such as the Saudi-Iranian regional jostle and to the rise and decline of the Islamic State (IS). Both the methodology of discourse analysis and the study of sectarianisation have enormous explanatory, theoretical, and methodological merits. While the two frequently overlap, this complementarity is more implicit than explicit in most scholarly. But a fusion of the two complementary disciplines can provide a more systemized and targeted approach into enquiring how and *why* sectarianism is discoursed the way it is or has been. This article engages with three

lines of scholarly enquiry and build on them by adding the 'discoursing sectarianism' approach to the literature.

The first line of enquiry is based on considering sectarianism an *entity,* a fixed total set of attributes necessary to the identification of which institutions or actors are sectarian and which are not. Under this line of enquiry, whole countries such as Bahrain or Saudi Arabia are cast as 'sectarian', and others in the same Gulf region such as Kuwait stand as opposite 'non-sectarian' cases (Freer, 2019). This approach is problematic as it runs the risk of drawing a mutually exclusive classifactory system where we can set lists of countries or regions which are sectarian and others which are not on basis of essentialist or fixed criteria. The other risk is positing the antonym to sectarianism, i.e. de-sectarianisation, as so completely the opposite of sectarianism that it can be an almost mechanical solution to the problem. Scholars such as Simon Mabon (2020a; 2020b) went down this road, suggesting solutions in the shape of 'steps' to be taken by states seeking to get rid of sectarianism.

A second line of enquiry to the study of sectarianism has sought to treat it as more malleable and adaptable enough to be an *instrument* allowing agents such as state leaders to 'politicise' and 'mobilise' the term for their own purposes at different times, as is usually the case in the contemporary politics of Iraq and Syria. This

instrumentalism, presumably shifting to fit the interests of those using the term, has nevertheless remained hostage to the pitfalls of the first line of enquiry. Sectarianism is still treated as a fixed entity set within a rigid either/or dichotomisation, and political actors use it against each other. In this game, each actor seeks to essentialise and fix meanings in order to support the accusation 'You are sectarian, and I am not and will never be sectarian' (see Malmvig 2019).

The third line of enquiry pays attention to sectarianism as a *construct*. The term has now gained a bit of flexibility through continuous attempts to construct and reconstruct its meanings for different purposes by different actors and within different contexts. For example, May Darwish & Tamirace Fakhoury (2016) explored the construction of sectarianism by media and religious scholars in Saudi Arabia targeting Shias. The construction includes demonising the Shias as '*Rafedah*' (rejectionists) or considering them 'securitised' threats conspiring with Iran against the 'Sunni' kingdom. Mustafa Menshawy & Simon Mabon (2021) analysed the 'conciliatory' rhetoric at earlier times when Saudi media, establishment, and religious institutions had constructed Shias as 'friends' and Iran as a 'brotherly neighbour'. Nevertheless, this line of scholarly labour still suffers from two key shortcomings plaguing the two other lines of 'essentialism' and 'instrumentalism'.

The first shortcoming is that constructivist writings situate conflicts in terms of Sunni-Shia relations amid political manipulations and foreign policy shifts in countries such as Iran, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. However, the analysis of these constructions is still *essentialized* within specifically fixed bones of contention. These are mainly drawn from one specific historical disagreement over the leadership of the Muslim community after the Prophet Muhammad.[1] The modern split between the Shia and the Sunni is thus constructed by both sides, and inadvertently by scholars studying it, as a reincarnation of historic disagreements despite the 1000-year gap. Tracing the official statements of ruling elites in both Saudi Arabia and Iran clearly reveals such historically-rooted polarisation: the Shia perceive the Sunni as supporters of power usurpation by the Umayyads and responsible for the death of a succession of Prophet Muhammad's true heirs, while the Sunni perceive the Shia as 'apostates', deviating from 'true Islam.' In 1980s, Supreme Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeini dismissed the Saudi monarchy as a 'band of heretics', thus presenting Shia Islam as the true religion. More recently, Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman framed Iranian ambitions to 'dominate the Islamic world' as part of 'creating a fertile environment for the arrival of the

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[1] This conflict is the original point of divergence between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims; it arises from the disagreement over succession and the subsequent killing of the Prophet's grandson, Hussein ibn Ali, at the hands of forces loyal to the Umayyad caliph Yazid in the Battle of Karbala in 680 AD.

awaited Mahdi', a descendent of Ali. This historical essentialism applies to other conflicts in the region as well. Former President Barack Obama directly attributed the Syrian crisis to 'ancient hatreds.' Others blamed the history of colonialism for enflaming and even introducing sectarianism to the inherently integrated Middle East (Menshawy, 2022). Reliance on claims about legacies of a fixed past misses the opportunity of better understanding sectarianism within present developments. These may be related to geopolitical shifts, new external influences or new chapters or actors in regional rivalry over leadership beyond the classical Saudi-Iranian dichotomisation (for a review of sectarianism through the lens of Saudi-Qatari regional rivalry, see Mabon and Menshawy 2021). In short, history becomes an essentialising substance restricting what is meant to be a dynamic process of constructing and reconstructing meanings of sectarianism. This perhaps explains how Darwish and Fakhoury (2016) ended up analysing current sectarian tension between the Saudis and their 'Shia' opponents within the confines of the ancient primordial blood feud that goes back more than a century.

The second level of essentialist construction of sectarianism is *religion*. Despite the clearly instrumental uses of religion, in which particular elements are emphasised or minimized or marginalised by Sunnis or Shias for political purposes, the construction process is still essentialist in nature because the flexible functionality

of religion posits these conflicts and rivalries as essences or fixed attributes. Peter Berger even identified the purpose of religion as essentialising the '*constructed character*' (1967, p, 33. Emphasis in original) of any institutional order or relations. Prophetically describing the reality of sectarian relations between the Sunnis and Shias today, Berger said in his 1967 seminal work, *The Sacred Canopy*:

Let that which has been stamped out of the ground *ex nihilo* appear as the manifestation of something that has been existent from the beginning of time, or at least from the beginning of this group. Let the people forget that this order was established by men and continues to be dependent upon the consent of men (Berger, 1967, p, 33).

Religion also makes the precarious development of current sectarian relations like the ones between the Sunnis and Shias fixed within a 'cosmic frame of reference' (Berger, 1967, p. 37) or the 'all-embracing sacred order of the universe' (Berger 1967, p. 39). With citations from the Qur'an and religious texts, let alone the involvement of religious institutions directing the interpretation of these texts into specific directions, we can see how religion can fixate as well as legitimate political positions within these sectarian relations by 'relating the humanly defined reality to ultimate, universal and sacred reality' (Berger, 1967, p. 36). Finally, religion masks the constructedness of sectarianism by objectification, that is by making its political expressions (such as Sunni-Shia tensions or Saudi-Iranian rivalry) into a 'taken-for-granted factivity' (Berger, 1967, p. 45). This objectification is made possible by the very attributes of constructivism as an

approach, especially the strand of it which prioritises material interests ahead of ideas (Kratochwil, 2008, p. 86) or, to borrow from Seale (1989, p. 90), 'non-socially constructed reality' as dictating and controlling the 'socially constructed reality'. In this vein, constructivist analyses become focused on the actions of specific actors or institutions, such as state leaders and their ideological apparatuses, to realize their material interests and instrumentalise sectarianism by imposing a specific reductive and discriminatory narrative drawn on fixed essentialist totalities. Our approach, presented below as a concept and a method, seeks to address these gaps.

Discoursing Sectarianism: A Conceptualisation

Sectarianism is a process and discourse. It is a process in the sense of always being *in motion* where it is shaped and re-shaped against the surrounding context including shifting interests and evolving instrumentality of its users. Actors are always shaping and reshaping its meanings 'within specific contexts, pursuing political goals that involve popular mobilization' (Hashemi and Postel, 2017, p. 5). It is important to note that it is a process of *sectarianisation* rather than *sectarianism*; we do not analyse it via sectarianism as 'essences' such as religion or history, but rather different actors shifting interests and variable contingencies. As Hashemi and Postel astutely put it: 'authoritarianism, not theology [or history], is

the critical factor that shapes the sectarianisation process.' (Hashemi and Postel 2017, p. 5). Religion and history are situated among other different forms of mobilising people within collectivised constructions or dominant forms of group identifications (Hashemi and Postel, 2017, p. 5).

Associating sectarianisation with identity is significant in allowing scholars to analyse the phenomenon from different perspectives such as 'Self-Other' relations (Malmvig, 2019), or to consider sectarianisation as an identity-making process in which political actors seek uniqueness and distinction beyond religion and history, such as belonging to a nation, an Islamic Ummah or a tribe (e.g. Dukhan, 2021). This processual understanding of sectarianism, henceforth sectarianisation, has led pioneering scholars in the field such as Simon Mabon to move away from the futile task of reaching definitions. Mabon and Ardovinim (2016) simply and insightfully considered sectarianisation as a process of othering or 'becoming different' (Mabon and Ardovini, 2016, p. 552). This is a radical transformation in our way of understanding sectarianism.

As Menshawy (2022) demonstrates in his article published in this special issue, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad furthered his sectarian practices through ideologies that might be presumed antithetical to religion, such as secularism and

nationalism. This analysis could expand our understanding of the phenomenon and re-conceptualise apparently-religious sectarianisation as 'secular', 'tribal', or 'national'. This provides the flexibility lacking in the three above-mentioned lines of enquiry and shift the terrain towards new areas of study.

The analysis of sectarianisation helps to explicate the means by which authoritarian regimes consolidate their rule. The conceptual flexibility of sectarianisation, as distinct from sectarianism, helps to identify how authoritarian leaders might go about upgrading their toolboxes of authoritarianism, drawing new ostensibly-sectarian boundaries amidst shifting allies, adversaries, and interests. In addition, the process takes into account variations in time and space. The othering, as the constituent attribute of the process, of today can be the de-othering of tomorrow, and groups such as the Shia or Sunnis as well as Iran or Saudi Arabia can always shift positions by being friends and enemies across time and space (i.e. friends of today and enemies of tomorrow or friends in one country and enemies in another!). The processual understanding of sectarianisation adds one more analytical benefit: the ability to interact with other concepts which can build up or contribute to boundary-making or othering. For example, demonisation could be part of or imbedded within the process of sectarianisation. The work of Normand (2016) is an important contribution explaining demonisation as discursive mechanism that

strategically 'frames a polarizing identity of 'us' as good and 'them' as bad' (Normand, 2016, p. 14). Interestingly, the concepts of demonisation and sectarianisation are not only complementary, but they can also encompass lines of othering such as religion, which they both draw on in one way or another. The article by Mustafa (2022) in this special issue reflects these combined benefits of processing sectarianism at this broader level. She analyses how social actors counter the so-called Islamic State (IS)'s sectarian discourse through a dynamic process of demonisation and counter-demonisation articulated through the genre of satire.

Discoursing Sectarianism: A Method

Discourse is a concept that can be described as complex, multi-layered and elusive. To the question 'what is discourse?' we adopt the simplest answer: It is the 'is the study of language in use' (Wetherell 2001, p. 3). The study of discourse is the study of 'meaning-making' or a way of how 'to do things' (Wetherell, p. 3).

Discourse can help in the meaning-making process in the sectarianisation discourse along the two broad approaches in discourse studies in general: the descriptive approach and the constitutive approach. The descriptive approach is how discourse describes the reality of sectarianism that is already present as expressed, perceived

or practised by those making it. It is a 'realist' approach in the sense that discourse can be a neutral medium for describing reality in the political or international relations landscape as it is. For example, Tom Walsh (2022) in his article in this special issue analyses the sectarianisation discourse through the language of a video that appeared on YouTube in 2017 entitled 'Saudi Strike Force Movie', allegedly produced or propagated by the Saudi state as part of its propagandistic rhetoric against Iran. The video depicts a Saudi invasion of Iran and is comparable in format and style to a video game like Call of Duty. Walsh uses language, including the non-written one of images and audio-visual sequencing, to describe, indicate or signpost the material under analysis. He describes the language of the video in the form of what he calls 'visual design' as a 'close reading of the image's actualities. This involves consideration of the characters, the scene, actions.' In certain sections of his article, Menshawy (2022) describes the linguistic forms which Assad uses as independent of the purpose or functions which these forms are designed in serve, mainly legitimating his rule and survival. In this sense, language is a 'transparent medium' (Wetherell, 2006, p. 16) or a vehicle for getting to what is in the mind of Saudi campaigners in the case of Walsh's article, and in the mind of Assad in the case of Menshawy's article.

Another line of analysis within this descriptive approach (not taken by any of the articles in this issue) would be to study formalist features such as syntax and grammar. For example, we can search for answers to such questions: does a political actor whom we analyse his speech use more adjectives than verbs? Does she/he use more imperative verbs than declarative verbs? Do her/his sentences follow a specific ordering of words or sentences in his article? Answers to these questions would build up the process of sectarianisation *in language* and more specifically the patterns identified only within the structure of the text and smaller units of language constituting it. Again, the basic elements of discourse are not language *per se* but what is done with it. For example, and to borrow from the structuralism of Ferdinand de Saussure, our interest could be how leaders in the battles of identity politics united the word 'Shia' (a signifier) and a concept of conspiracy, betrayal and readiness to collaborate with Iran (the signified). In other words, we approach language as it simply consists of words that refer to objects in the world, but meanings and signification only occur 'entirely within the system of language (Howarth, 2000, p, 19). As every unit of language gains its 'value' by a relational link with other units within a 'closed' system of analysis and as part of acquiring their identity and meaning, Menshawy shows how Assad uses 'sectarianism' as a synonym of 'unity' and 'social cohesion'. In some examples of his speeches analysed in the article, Assad uses these words interchangeably. The

task of a discourse analyst would be thus to identify and categorize patterns in the language dispassionately. The only function of language identified in this type of descriptive formal analysis is 'referential' (Schiffrin, 1994, p. 21). Analysis of sectarianism can thus draw on elements such as rhetorical strategies of speakers, the variability of linguistic content, the propositional content of utterances, vocabulary or metaphors in texts.

The constitutive approach takes discourse as a social or political *action* rather than a vehicle to carry it. According to the discourse analysis pioneer Norman Fairclough, language is not independent or autonomous of its 'use' (1992, pp. 25-26). For example, Menshawy (2020) analyses the speeches of Assad as comprising elements of political action that constitute the reality of sectarianism in his country. The speeches also constitute Assad's internal relations with his people, as well as relations with the outside world, including countries such as Turkey and entities such as the 'West' whom he accused of exporting sectarianism to his de-sectarianised country. Discourse does not describe or reflect reality - it creates it. Language, away from the mere formalist assumptions of the descriptive approach, is a function. In other words, sectarianisation is not merely a process where it relays sectarian meanings, rather, it can produce sectarianism itself. Ironically, it was Assad himself who drew attention to the functionality of discourse of

sectarianisation from this perspective when he commented on the media portrayal of 'sectarianism':

> Reality begins with a word. When we absorb these words or terms [sectarianism] as part of our culture we would expect that they and all meanings of division and separation and sabotage would be part of our reality within a few years… We should be careful with these terms ... Everything in the world begins with language as language is the carrier of ideas and it would ultimately lead to reality (Assad's Speech, June 26, 2015).

In this sense, the discourse itself is a constituent part of the sectarianisation process; its function is making sense of reality though a mechanism of othering by inclusion and exclusion. The meaning is no longer limited to relational connections between units of language. This mechanism is exquisitely summarised by prominent thinker Stuart Hall:

Discourse 'rules in' certain ways of talking about a topic, defining an acceptable and intelligible way to talk, write, or conduct oneself, so also, by definition, it rules out', limits or restricts other ways of talking, conducting ourselves in relation to the topic or constructing knowledge about it (2001, p, 72)

For example, Walsh's article shows what is not mentioned in the Saudi video on Iran in a section aptly sub-titled 'omission', and Menshawy's article refers to how Assad selected specific meanings from history, such as the Iraq war and Ottoman Empire, to emphasise how he negotiates meanings to support his language propagating long-held 'conspiracies' against his country. As projects analysing other events (e.g. Menshawy, 2017) shows, discourse helps the othering process by

highlighting or emphasising specific details on one hand and by downsizing, hiding, falsifying others to the extent of throwing them into total oblivion. It is an extreme case of othering based on denying opposite entities or characters as if they not there or, to adapt Lisa Wedeen's description on Syrian despotic discursivity (1998), 'as if not'.

Vicky Panossian's paper in this special issue illustrates how an "othering" can be discoursed through monumentation. Panossian argues that monuments established across Europe in honor of the contemporary Arab refugee crisis and the resulting influx of asylum seekers speak to the sectarian and political nature of the refugee identity while explaining why such acts of "kindness" and "compassion" are counterproductive. In this case, monuments as discursive space function as a hindrance that disable the integration processes of first-generation refugees by triggering a notion of belonging pertaining to memory and nostalgia. The themes of compassion which the monument is created to portray becomes a form of culturally appropriated othering of the arriving refugee groups; it is perceived as a marker of the memory of displacement. What can be taken from the Panossian, Mustafa and Walsh articles in this special issue is that images and monuments and what is not said are no less useful a units of analysis than texts. The analysis of texts may have been privileged due their frequency and abundance, but discoursing

sectarianism reminds the readers that texts are not less articulatory than monuments and images.

Thus, discoursing sectarianism can direct research projects towards treating sectarianism as a *politically organized way of making meaning*. These projects can also go beyond language and texts into contexts where language shapes and is shaped. For example, Assad's discourse in his speeches is based on actions on the ground that can *materialise* his articulations, including the use of force. It is important to highlight that discourse is not only about language in texts but the relationship between language and context under which they constitute each other (Schiffrin, 1994, pp. 22). In other words, our purpose in this functionalist constitutive conceptualisation of discourse is not to deny that discourse has any linguistic, cognitive or mental character evidenced in texts. Rather, discourse has also a 'material character' that can be manifested physically.

We cannot juxtapose linguistic and non-linguistic elements; they are both components of discourse. Laclau and Mouffe put it succinctly: 'We can affirm the material character of every discursive structure' (1985, p. 102). As Menshawy (2021) also demonstrated in another article on the Syrian conflict, discourse is the process of 'alignment' of the linguistic and non-linguistic, the ideational and

materialistic. This argument, as philosophical as it sounds, is very important as any discursive analysis of the texts needs to include contextual factors such as institutions which can sponsor, censor or propagate the material, as is the case in the Saudi video, or relations and conditions of production.[2] In Foucauldian terms, we cannot exclude 'rules' and 'relations' under which the Saudi video or Assad's speeches are not mere texts but 'strategies' (Foucault, 1972, pp. 68-69) where political actors attempt to set rules and power relations through propganda and media control.

To sum up the two approaches marking the 'discoursing sectarianism' broader approach, the descriptive strand treats discourse as a neutral medium of communication used to convey ideas to others or communicate with them. The constitutive approach treats discourse as a biased tool of creating or shaping the very world which persons seek to convey to others. It is within the second strand that discourse contributes to sectarianisation by including or excluding parts of reality. We cannot analyse speeches or statements of political actors as objective reflections of reality, as is the approach of much of the literature, but as a deliberately and meticulously composed set of assumptions towards that reality (Jackson, 2005).

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[2] Halliday (1973) reflected on this interaction of language with its context users as: 'language is as it is because its functions in social structures' (Halliday, 1973, p, 65), and Fowler et al followed on by surmising it as '[l]anguage serves to confirm or consolidate the organisations which shape them' (Fowler et al. 1979, p, 190).

How to Analyse Discourse

Based on the two approaches of discourse, the descriptive and the constitutive, we identify three levels of analysis. Mainly adapted and modified from Norman Fairclough's (1998) work on critical discourse analysis, these three levels are comprehensive enough to synthetically include elements of other perspectives such as geneological analysis[3]. The three levels are 'textual practices', 'discursive practices', and 'political practices'.

Textual practices can be organized under a number of main headings such as vocabulary (individual words in the text), grammar (how words combine into phrases or sentences), cohesion (how clauses or sentences are linked together), and text structure (the large organisational properties of whole texts) (Fairclough, 1998, pp. 75-77). For example, 'the name' in the first sentence and 'the word' in the second in the same paragraph are both grammatical subjects, and 'used' and 'referred' are transitive verbs building predicate relations serving the political actor's action of citing other texts or references from history to be used to prove his

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[3]Genealogical analysis treats discourse as a historicised system of representation. It examines the historical emergence of discourses within their formation and development across time (Howarth, 2000, p. 72). For example, Foucault analysed 'madness' by tracing how the image of 'madman' was constructed by such at specific times at a specific historical period when specific medical and psychiatric practices prevailed. Genealogical analysis shares with CDA and other perspectives of discourse analysis focus on dynamics of power, hegemony and ideology. It also pays attention to knowledge and truth are key elements within the discourse-making process, or as Foucault put it, the genealogist produces 'a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects' (1980, p. 117). In his book, *Discipline and Punish*, he explains the history of the justifications and rules, i.e. knowledge, affecting the shifts in the power to punish. Similar to CDA, genealogical discourse also search for patterns and trajectories.

argument, such as references to the etymology of 'Shias' as a name. References to holy texts such as the Qur'an would support the sectarianisation process with archival evidence which fixates, legitimates and objectifies meanings as we mentioned above. If we analyse the discourses of Iranian or Saudi officials, we can show how they both structure their selective citations from references in history as well. This descriptive analysis is still functional as the whole point of these descriptions is to show how discourse is used for a specific purpose, that is legitimating, normalising and justifying the position of each actor as part of expanding their 'discursive' sphere of influence. Other researchers and analysts adopted the same textual analysis to explain different phenomena or 'discursive events' in politics and international relations. For example, Mustafa Menshawy's analysis of Israeli-Egyptian relations (2017) focuses on the replacement of specific keywords such as 'enemy' or 'friend' in state-run Egyptian newspapers to trace the evolution of perceptions towards Israel across 40 years since the 1973 Arab-Israeli war. These words can be treated 'moments of a closed and fully constituted totality' (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 106). However, if we understand their functions, the vocabulary can be related to the changing political positions and the growing sense of normalisation by the Egyptian regimes towards Israel after decades of boycotting it.

Discursive practices are mainly about how texts relate with each other. For example, one could show how a specific statement of the Iranian President on Saudi Arabia during the protests which erupted in Bahrain in 2011 would relate to his statements during similar acts of protests in Saudi Arabia within the same time-frame. Has he used the same vocabulary of othering and de-othering to describe protestors and rulers of these countries? In answering these questions, discursive practices would link the texts in what Fairclough calls interdiscursivity (1998). Furthermore, we can compare the statements of the Iranian President with those of other senior officials in Iran to identify any regularities and irregularities from one text to another to build the 'Iranian official position' on the protests in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. We can also compare texts across longer spans. We can thus judge how far meanings have been fixed or stabilised over time. We can also mix different 'genres' of discourse inside or outside the same text such as holy texts, history books, dictionaries or citations of other people, to fixate meanings. Interdiscursivity makes us think of discourses as hybrid and 'dialogical' in the sense of talking to each other to consolidate meanings. Discourses can also clash, as the Iranian President's discourse could be meant to debunk or falsify that of his opponents in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, especially amidst accusations of external inference and sectarianisation blamed on Iran. The conflictual side of discourses is evident at times of crises such as the Syrian conflict, where proponents and

opponents of the Syrian regime adopt oppositional discourses which correspond with their political positions. Counter-discourses can also de-stabilise the Iranian President's historical claims, presented by him as 'presumed shared knowledge' known to many people and accepted as 'normal and legitimate' (Chilton 2004, p. 80). In other words, discourses stop talking to each other as interruptions dominate especially when it comes to areas of potential disagreement or uncertainty such as Ukraine's history.

Political practices (a modification of Fairclough's 'social practices') seek to relate texts and contexts. The "text" includes all 'linguistic' movements in and across texts, e.g. the repetition or regularity of specific keywords such as 'sectarianism' or 'de-sectarianisation'. For example, Menshawy's analysis of context shows that Assad's use of the terms makes sectarianism and de-sectarianisation two faces of the same coin as they share similar meanings, attributes and functions. Mustafa's analysis of the language of a specific satire show in Iraq shows how the process of de-sectarianisation also carries with it sectarianisation at the level of discriminating against women or specific races. Context adds resonance to the two other levels of analysis. For example, it helps us understand how Assad in the case of Menshawy's article and Saudi producers in case of Walsh's article added 'harmony' (Woodly, 2015) or resonance to the constructed discourses by giving

the latter political and discursive opportunities, such as links to the legacy of his father in the case of Assad. The Saudi video emphasizes the name of 'Arabian Gulf', a bone of contention with Iran which names it the 'Persian Gulf'.

'Political practices' analysis can allow scholars to study the battle over terminology and how it pertains to the rise of identity politics over recent years. Such actions, to adopt and propagate a specific term against another, provide a 'discursive condition of possibility' for the articulation to align with operationalisation. Simply put, words have the possibility and the surrounding circumstances to translate into action. On the other hand, any failure to link articulated threats with an environment conducive to their realisation would create a misalignment and dissonance. For example, analysis can include a comparison between the discourse of Assad and that of leaders of his allies such as Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah to demonstrate patterns of similarities and differences in how they both build their sectarianisation processes. This collusion of discourses can make the overarching process of discoursing sectarianism consistent, coherent and resonant or not.

The three levels of analysis are not mutually exclusive. They are connected at two levels: power and ideology. Texts shape political practices because they can

produce and reproduce power and dominance, including the ability of text makers to persuade and influence the perceptions of their people about a particular topic. As Teun van Dijk (2001) described it as a mind management in these words or to 'change the minds of others in one's own interests' (p. 302). At the same time, texts are shaped by political practices since they await the agency and power of a political actor to give these texts privileged or preferential treatment. For example, Assad's speeches, in which he repeats specific frames on sectarianism by denying its existence in Syria in the first place, are prevented access by not allowing him to attend meetings of Arab League or the United Nations. This 'communicative discrimination' (van Dijk 2001, p. 304) disprivileges Assad's discursive action into marginalisation and exclusion. At the same time, Assad's discourse gains internal dominance via repetition and frequency in Syrian media and as groups opposed to him are denied any discourse rights opportunities. This accessibility can also apply into other contexts; for example, Iran or Saudi Arabia can both deny their citizens access to each other's propaganda material. To borrow from Marxist theories, discourses are 'ideological systems of meanings which obfuscate and naturalise uneven distributions of power and resources' (Howarth, 2000, p. 4). Political actors constructing their versions of 'sectarian' truth also need to propagate it via 'ideological state apparatuses' such as media outlets or mosques.

The other factor linking the three levels of analysis is ideology. Along with the power of producing, disseminating and accessing discourse, the process of discoursing is also about ideology. The latter can be defined as the ways of thinking or behaving within a given society under which specific ideas or concepts would appear 'natural' (Eagleton, 1991) or unquestioned. In other words, as Michael Billig put it, 'ideology is the common-sense of the society' (2001, 2018). So, when a political actor makes a statement, produces a video or delivers a speech, he does not create his own language but uses themes which are 'culturally historically and ideologically available' (Billig, 2011, p. 217). Each act of his utterance might appear novel but carries 'an ideological history', which a political actor can evoke. It is a recycling or re-appropriation of already established meanings again and again. We can identify and trace this recycling if we study discourse as a text produced at the present, as with Assad or the Saudi video, as well as by relating it to similar material or views produced in the past. We can also trace this recycling through other discourses, including those related to public perceptions; people may contribute to this production and reproduction of discourses by 'dissemination' (Wedeen 1998). These textual and contextual practices align with each other to make the political actor's meanings appear 'natural' or 'inevitable', often by including references to history, religion, tradition or social norms. Ideology thus opens the door for analysis to treat texts not only as

presentist manifestations of sectarianism but also as deeply rooted in ideologically drawn perceptions. Texts are ideological utterances also in the sense of being based on attempts to construct a new reality, perhaps changing or distorting an older one. As Eagleton (1994, p. 8) defines it, ideology is 'sets of discursive strategies for displacing, recasting or spuriously accounting for realities which prove embarrassing to a ruling power; and in doing so, they contribute to that power's self-legitimation.'

Analysis is not meant to separate power from ideology or discourse. Indeed, there is a relationship between discourse, ideology and power (Coffin, 2001, p. 99). This link is clear as the success of a political actor in producing a text is related to her or his powers to impose it on other texts that can potentially resist, challenge or falsify this text. The power of a text, and the discourse carried through it, is 'proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanism [ideology]' (Quoted by Fairclough, 1992, p. 50). Power, ideology and discourse are thus linked by resistance. The dimensions of discourse-making also include resistance under which dominant discourses can be resisted or falsified by opponents of political leaders. This has to do with the nature of discoursing process itself, as discourse always operates within a 'surplus of meaning' (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 112) which makes attempts to fully fix or impose specific meanings impossible.

According to Laclau and Mouffe (1985), no discursive formations could enjoy the status of a 'sutured totality' or 'ultimate fixation' (p. 198). The 'field of discursivity' is always open to contestation by discourses attempting to challenge or co-opt each other. Authoritarian leaders can impose a 'particular fixation' by partially limiting this surplus of meaning. However, the discourse is challenged by discursive formations and practices slamming out this dominance as is the case in the Syrian conflict. The missing point in the analysis of Menshawy emanates from his focus on the top-down discoursing of Assad. The discourse can be better situated within attempts to discredit and weaken it by Assad's opponents, especially at the high level of contentious politics in Syria under which meanings are radically negotiated and immensely contested. Mustafa's analysis moves in the other direction by focusing on how discourse can resist the propaganda of Islamic State in Iraq. Ironically (and perhaps presenting one more reason to show the interrelationship between dominance and resistance along with the layers of delineation set above), the resistance of the discourse against IS in Iraq by dismissing it as sectarian, also produced tools for the dominant official discourse based on propagating conspiracy theories and sectarianising narratives othering people on the basis of race and gender (Mustafa, 2022). Although we highlighted the discourse as a process of identifying and grouping patterns or relations of power both inside and outside the text, part of the argument has to be that

discourse is also about engaging with irregularities within the sectarian discursive terrain

Conclusion

This article introduces 'discoursing sectarianism' as an approach to overcome the gaps in the literature on sectarianism at three lines of enquiry predominant in the field of sectarianism studies, i.e. essentialism, instrumentalism and constructivism. The approach takes language, in all formats including written ones, images and monuments, as the object of analysis. It also studies the articulation of language along with its operationalisation. This is evident in the three levels of analysis: texts, discourses linking texts across time and space, and practices relating this analysis to power relations and the workings of ideology. Patterns of sectarianisation and de-sectarianisation are not only about confirming or reinforcing the monopoly of specific discourses. They are equally about resisting or challenging this monopoly with counter-discourses. In this sense, the approaches analyses de-sectarianisation by combining the main level of texts with that of social or political practices shaping or being shaped by these texts. Meanings can emerge through repetition or frequency in texts but also through resonances, or lack thereof, that emerge out of (mis-) alignment with surrounding circumstances. These circumstances include background information or legacies of

the past that might give the impression that themes or frames constituting them are not temporary production of meanings, but extensions of well-established background that might have appear steeped deep into history.

In examining textual and contextual properties of the exercise of dominance, discourse is not neutral; the analyst herself or himself can contribute to the production process by writing his text or making it available. The very point of discourse analysis 'is to take a position' (van Dijk 2001: 307) to expose the 'mechanisms by which the deception operates and of proposing emancipatory alternatives' (Howarth 2000, p. 4). This reveals new problems and shortcomings in the approach which we explain in the article, as analysis can be thus selective, biased and, most significantly, un-repeated since every case and every analyst exploring it can produce different findings. Nonetheless, our hope is that the analytical approach elaborated here, and our argument for its potential contribution, will lead to further research exploring this approach for its possible value in understanding the dynamics of sectarianisation.

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