Afterword: sectarianisation beyond the Middle East

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Abstract

Sectarianisation, a conceptual approach proposed by Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel, has gained a great deal of traction in the study of sectarianism in the contemporary Middle East. Yet despite its popularity, little attention has been paid to the ways in which sectarianisation can operate beyond the Middle East, a peculiar point when considering that only 20% of the world's 1.57 billion Muslims live in the region. This brief intervention explores the ways in which the sectarianisation thesis can operate beyond the Middle East, looking at some of the ontological, epistemological, and methodological questions that are bound up in such an approach. Ultimately, I argue that while sectarianism has become a prominent feature in academic discussions about the Middle East – driven recently by a focus on sectarianisation – there is merit in exploring the application of Hashemi and Postel's thesis in regions beyond the Middle East.

Keywords: Sectarianism; sectarianization; securitization; Middle East

Of the world's 1.57 billion Muslims – around 23% of the world's population – only 20% live in the Middle East. More Muslims (around 350 million) live in Pakistan and India than in the Middle East and North Africa region, which is home to around 320 million. A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center (2009) found that 87–90% of the Muslim population are broadly Sunni, with 10–13% Shi'a, predominantly found in Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, and India, while Indonesia is home to approximately 225 million Muslims, making it the state with the largest Muslim population in the world. In spite of this, scholarship on Islam and sectarianism – and with it, sectarianisation – tends to focus on the Middle East. There are, of course, obvious reasons for this attention: Saudi Arabia is the home of the two holy places of Islam, Mecca and Medina, and prominent schools of Islamic thought are also found in Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, and Egypt, while the Middle East's contemporary history has been punctured by conflict, often viewed through a religious lens. Yet as this collection demonstrates, key features of sectarianisation are found beyond the Middle East and these too require detailed exploration. From the Muslim minorities in India, Singapore, the Philippines, and Thailand to the Muslim majority in Indonesia and Malaysia, the ways in which processes of sectarianisation play out within the context of competing political visions, socioeconomic contexts, ideological contestation, and competing visions of the role of Islam all necessitate further examination.

For Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel, the architects of the sectarianisation thesis, the process of sectarianisation is undertaken predominantly by political elites in an effort to ensure the survival of a particular regime (2017). Writing in response to the resonance of the primordialist 'ancient hatreds' thesis, Hashemi and Postel argue that processes of sectarianisation are predicated on a constructivist approach that views identities as malleable entities that are shaped by the worlds around them, which allows political elites and 'sectarian entrepreneurs' to manipulate sectarian identities in pursuit of power. A key feature of the sectarianisation approach is the existence of authoritarian rule across the Middle East, along with a normative environment that is shaped by geopolitical forces. With precarious political conditions forged in the complex histories of divided societies, the process of sectarianisation is fundamentally a mechanism of control designed to

ensure the survival of the authoritarian regime. It is achieved through the framing of a particular group(s) as a threat to the survival of the political project (Hashemi and Postel 2017).

The sectarianisation process possesses similarities with the securitisation approach (Mabon 2019), initially put forward by scholars involved in the Copenhagen School of security studies. The securitisation approach articulates how issues are framed as existential threats through linguistic methods, calling for the suspension of 'normal politics' in an attempt to ensure the survival of a particular actor. In positing this approach, Barry Buzan, Ole Waever, and Jaap de Wilde articulate an approach predicated on the use of language in an attempt to frame particular issues as existential threats (1998). This strategy occurs across a number of stages, requiring a subject, an object, an audience, and facilitating conditions that allow such speech acts to find traction. As a consequence, certain conditions are required for a securitising move to occur, let alone be successful.

According to the securitisation thesis, an actor seeks to frame a particular issue as an existential threat to the security of a pre-determined audience. Here, 'in security discourse, an issue is dramatized and presented as an issue of supreme priority; thus by labelling it as *security* an agent claims a need for and a right to treat it by extraordinary means' (Buzan, Waever, and de Wilde 1998, 26). Yet these processes do not occur in a vacuum but are shaped by the world around them. As Matt McDonald persuasively argues, context is key in a highly theoretical line of inquiry, yet detailed exploration across time and space is largely lacking. For McDonald (2008), speech acts take place across three areas: the first is the *designation of threat*, the identification of the sector where the securitisation process takes place. The second is the *facilitating conditions*, the dynamics that facilitate such moves to find traction. The third is the *audience,* the group for whom particular issues are posited as existential threats. These stages help to provide important context in the ways in which speech acts within the securitisation process can find traction, shaped by a range of contextual factors. From this, it is necessary to look beyond the speech acts to see the ways in which they resonate. Yet as I have argued elsewhere, securitisation is not always a linear process and there can be intended and unintended recipients of securitisation moves, particularly when the facilitating conditions are found within a transnational religious group (Mabon 2017; 2018). Moreover, when taken beyond its European roots, the nature of the debate about 'normal politics' and speech acts may need to change, determined by the complexities and contingencies of local context.

There are a range of parallels between securitisation and sectarianisation. Indeed, the Copenhagen School provides a great deal of the ontological and epistemological 'heavy lifting' required by the sectarianisation approach. From this, it is easy to see how sectarianisation is a particular instance of securitisation, albeit taking place within the context of sectarian relations. This, in turn, brings with it questions about the ways in which the stages of the securitisation approach apply to the sectarianisation of a sect which is found within and across political projects, particularly in divided societies.

Processes of sectarianisation are populated by similar stages to securitisation, as regimes frame particular identities as threats to state security in an effort to derive support from particular constituencies. Regional developments serve as facilitating conditions in this sense, as the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran plays out across the Middle East and exacerbates fears about a 'Shi'a Crescent'. Here, for example, as the Al Khalifa ruling family in Bahrain seek to sectarianise Shi'a groups, they do so in a regional environment where Iran is framed in a negative way, speaking to Sunnis across the state who may have previously taken to the streets in the early months of 2011 (Matthiesen 2017; Mabon 2019).

While sectarianisation has been used to explore a range of different aspects of Middle Eastern politics, there is nothing about securitisation or sectarianisation that limits either approach to the

Middle East, or indeed to any other part of the world (Wilkinson 2007). While there have been academic discussions about the 'Westphalian' – or Eurocentric – limitations of the securitisation thesis, concerning issues pertaining to the apparently universal application of western ideas of statehood, there are good reasons to use this approach, albeit responsibly, overthrowing the 'shackles of Westphalia' and moving beyond the liberal assumptions underpinning the theory.[1] Likewise, there is little to prevent a similar deployment of the sectarianisation thesis beyond the Middle East, particularly given that the thesis was forged to explore the non-western – and in many cases, non-liberal – world. We should, however, acknowledge potential issues with deploying theory at a universal level, which has been a particular issue across International Relations, albeit prompting some to call for a more 'global' form of IR.

While acknowledging these concerns about a conceptual approach forged in the US out of a canon of western philosophical approaches to politics and identities, the approach – carefully deployed – has some potential. Through stripping the empirical material out of the sectarianisation process, one arrives at a conceptual tool that allows scholars to explore the role of identities within political projects. It does, however, require a great deal of work to locate the speech acts that facilitate processes of sectarianisation within social, political, economic, religious, and geopolitical contexts, much like McDonald (2008) suggests.

Let us now briefly turn to how this could work. For Hashemi and Postel, much like the adherents of the Copenhagen School, a number of key features are necessary in order for sectarianisation to take place. Rejecting the ancient hatreds thesis, Hashemi and Postel argue that the manipulation of sectarian identities occurs through the pursuit of power in authoritarian regimes beset by legitimacy deficits (2017). Thus, to meet the criteria for sectarianisation in the vision presented by Hashemi and Postel, there must be: a society divided along sectarian lines; authoritarian rule; a legitimacy deficit; broader geopolitical currents that resonate across states; and elites with the coercive capital – to borrow from Pierre Bourdieu – to mobilise groups of people along sect-based lines. Under the surface of this are key components of securitisation, namely facilitating conditions, audience, and speech acts (McDonald 2008).

Of course, inherent to this discussion is ambiguity pertaining to a definition of sectarianism (see: Valbjørn 2020). Scholars have taken great care to explore the multifarious ways of interpreting sectarianism and to understand the emergence and mobilisation of sect-based difference (Haddad 2017 and 2020; Mabon 2019 and 2020; Dodge 2019; Strobl 2018; amongst others). Whilst undeniably important, other ambiguities remain central, raising questions as to what is at stake in these discussions. For example, should sectarianism be viewed as tensions between groups of the same faith? Are inter-faith tensions sectarian? What about tensions between secular and religious? How about sectarianism between different ethnic groups? Or should we view this more broadly, reflecting on any form of communal division in society? How one answers these questions determines the scope of analysis which facilitates the inclusion of a range of different groups. These groups are products of their environments, meaning that context is fundamental in understanding the ways in which these identities operate. What I am endeavouring to show here is that there is nothing inherently 'Middle Eastern' about any of these characteristics, although the region undeniably possesses the hallmarks of such approaches. Given this, there is nothing that necessarily prohibits the application of this conceptual toolkit beyond the Middle East. If deployed in a responsible and appropriate manner, then there is no reason why this approach should not be translated to different regions.

In recent years a growing literature has begun to explore intra-Muslim divisions beyond the Middle East, in part, through the lens of sectarian tensions. Here, much like in the Middle East, the issue is not about 'ancient hatreds', but rather the contexts in which sect-based identities are located and

the ways in which communal groups are positioned within political projects, raising questions about power, political organisation, communal relations, and the role of ideology. These contextual forces, determined by the contingencies of time and space, create conditions for elites and entrepreneurs to operate, seeking to manipulate and mobilise identities in pursuit of their own ends.

Beyond this direct application, we may also witness other processes of sectarianisation in operation that transcend intra-faith manifestations of sectarianism to include inter-faith sectarianism. In India, for example, we see the rising influence of Hindu nationalism under the tutelage of Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which has derived a great deal of its popularity around an exclusionary – and vociferous – narrative of Hindu nationalism which, in turn, has created precarious conditions for Muslims across the country, both Sunni and Shi'a. Moreover, this has also had serious repercussions for Hindus who disagree with the vision put forward by Modi and the BJP, demonstrating that this process operates beyond Islam and the Middle East.

Further adding to these tensions across Asia is the increased presence of actors playing out their rivalries in new arenas. In recent years the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has also spread out beyond the Middle East, as the two states seek to cultivate support amongst Muslims across the *umma*. Neighbouring states such as Pakistan and India have become important sites of a rivalry that has played out openly in societies divided along sectarian lines in the Middle East since the Iranian revolution of 1979. Since the 1980s, Saudi Arabia has been engaged in a process of spreading its vision of Islam across the Muslim world, providing financial support to clerics and believers alike to study Wahhabist thought either in their home country or in Saudi Arabia (Farquhar 2016). Unsurprisingly, over time this has helped cultivate anti-Shi'a sentiment in places where Wahhabi teachings have resonated most. Amidst the largesse of Saudi funding, it is hardly surprising that anti-Shi'a – and by extension, anti-Iranian – sentiment is rife across other parts of the Muslim world (Fuchs 2019). Here, albeit shaped by a range of different forces, processes of sectarianisation take place. In Indonesia, the largest Muslim-majority state in the world, Saudi-funded Wahhabis have engaged in a vehement campaign of anti-Shi'a behaviour against Shi'a Muslims across the state, supported by literature espousing similar sentiments in what bears many of the hallmarks of sectarianisation (Nash, 2018; von der Mehden, 2014).

In such contexts, the emergence of a transnational form of Islam driven by particular actors – predominantly Saudi Arabia – often creates tensions with more localised religious identities and groups, exacerbating existing tensions through the provision of support to particular groups, reinforcing difference in the process (Mandaville 2003). One such example of this is Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama, a localised group that has accused transnational Islamic groups of posing a challenge to the state. Moreover, the emergence of groups following more 'orthodox' understandings of Islam has a dramatic impact not only on relations with other groups but also on governance debates and strategies concerning the role of religion in the state and the limits of religious activity. Negotiating these complex relationships between local and transnational groups adds an additional layer of complexity to already fraught local relationships that have played out within particular contexts shaped by the intricacies of political life. Here, one is reminded of Doreen Massey's understanding of *space* which, according to Massey, is in a constant state of flux, a site of myriad possibilities and shaped through the interaction of the intimately tiny and hegemonic forces (2005). Such an understanding can help to conceptualise the ways in which sectarianisation processes take place, taking place within space, shaped by the intricacies of local groups interacting with – and shaped by – more powerful forces (Mabon and Wastnidge 2019).

Following this, it is easy to see how efforts to understand processes of sectarianisation require rigorous comparative exploration. While the focus of this collection is on the ways in which *sectarianisation* operates in non-Middle Eastern states, the line of enquiry necessitates reflection on

a number of variables, including (but not limited to): political organisation and the structures that regulate life; demographics; ideological vision; socioeconomic factors; relations with other regional and international forces; religious and political networks; and the aspirations of elites. Comparative studies provide analytical tools to facilitate such analysis along with the flexibility to operate within – and across – different contexts. Yet in undertaking this project, the authors in this collection are implicitly embarking on a multi-level comparison: between Middle Eastern and non-Middle Eastern processes of sectarianisation, along with reflecting on the different processes of sectarianisation in the non-Middle Eastern case studies.

A key feature of this collection – and one that has largely been overlooked in debates on sectarianisation – is the role of liberal or reform-oriented groups and thinkers in contesting sectarian divisions, in particular, raising questions about established political practices on race and religion that may in turn create an impetus for elite-driven sectarianisation. While some have explored the role of 'sectarian entrepreneurs' in manipulating divisions, little work has been done on the impact of reformist and liberal individuals in re-imagining the role of Islam in political projects and, indeed, in re-imagining interpretations of Islam. Unsurprisingly, given the importance of context and the factors that facilitate processes of sectarianisation and their *reception* (or lack thereof) – which is an important yet overlooked aspect – the influence of these individuals requires more analysis. In moving in this direction, a plethora of other issues emerge that shape the actions of particular individuals and groups, from the structural forces regulating life across time, space, and place, to philosophical reflections on the nature of political organisation which conditions agency.

There is a great deal more that needs to be said around the application of the sectarianisation thesis in and beyond the Middle East. Yet what I have endeavoured to show here is that at a *prima facia* level, there is nothing that necessarily precludes the application of the sectarianisation thesis beyond the region. Indeed, there may be some conceptual benefit from deploying this approach in different contexts, particularly across the Asian subcontinent and beyond, where divided societies operate in the context of increasingly contested political environments. What this collection represents is an incredibly important and timely exploration of the ways in which Hashemi and Postel's ideas translate beyond Islam and beyond the geographical borders of the Middle East.

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Notes on contributor

Simon Mabon is Chair in International Politics at Lancaster University where he directs the Richardson Institute and SEPAD, which looks at sectarianism in the contemporary world. He is the author of *Houses built on sand: Violence, sectarianism and revolution in the Middle East* (Manchester University Press, 2020) and has published extensively across Middle Eastern and International Relations journals.

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[1] See the 2018 special issue of *Global Discourse* on this theme, edited by Simon Mabon and Saloni Kapur, which demonstrates the way that securitisation can be used responsibly in a range of cases.