People, Sects and States:
Interrogating Sectarianism in the Contemporary Middle East

In late 2010, the self-immolation of the Tunisian street vendor Mohammad Bouazzizi triggered the outbreak of the Arab Uprisings, the ramifications of which shaped the nature of regional relations over the coming half-decade. His act, borne out of socio-economic frustrations triggered a spate of protests that dramatically altered the regional order and fragmenting regime-society relations. Previously embedded regimes were challenged and, in some cases, overthrown, as individual agency was empowered. Regional dynamics ebbed and flowed, with revolution and counter-revolution taking place across the Middle East and North Africa. Some states were more susceptible to the tides of revolution than others, with Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen overthrowing autocratic leaders, to varying degrees of success. Regimes in Saudi Arabia and across the Gulf broadly, with the notable exception of Bahrain, were able to stand strong in the face of revolutionary currents. The events of the uprisings seemed to legitimise the actions of certain actors across the region who had long pursued a campaign of resistance to contemporary Middle East power structures. Integral to the actions of many groups across the region were narratives of resistance and a desire to empower the downtrodden of the region yet in the face of this, regimes sought to frame the protests along sectarian lines, subject to external interference.

In the Middle East, few terms have evoked such poisonous responses in recent years than sectarianism. Loaded – implicitly – with negative connotations, the term has increasingly been used as a means of explaining the emergence of violence within deeply divided societies. Following the onset of the Arab Uprisings in late 2010, regime-society relations in the region have become increasingly fractious, with growing divisions taking place along sectarian lines. With a high diversity of identities spread across the region, few states can lay claim to religious or ethnic coherence, resulting in the possibility of difference manifesting in different forms. In a number of cases, these differences were also used as a mechanism of control. Such differences allow fear and prejudice to become dominant factors within domestic – and regional – politics, while serving as a means through which regimes can (re)construct societal relations and security dynamics.

There is a small – yet burgeoning – academic literature on the topic of sectarianism (in the Middle East), which also touches on broader questions of identity. A number of scholars have produced highly commendable works looking at this issue, yet these are typically undertaken within the context of a state or region. At the heart of discussions of sectarianism are questions about identity construction, resulting in debates as to whether identities are *primordial* or *constructed*, with the answer to this question revealing a great deal about the nature of sectarianism. Primordialists would argue that identities are ontologically given and fixed through biological factors coupled with territorial locations. Social norms and traditions then reinforce these identities.

In contrast, the constructivist approach instead suggests that identities are imagined and constructed entities. They do so by building upon the work of Benedict Anderson, whose *Imagined Communities* advances the idea that a political community is an imagined construct, a product of modernity that was a consequence of "print capitalism", which facilitated a group of people to coalesce around a shared vernacular. As Anderson argues, a nation "is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson, 1983, pp67). To understand the role of sectarianism within society, one must consider these different ontological positions, while understanding that within political dimensions, sectarian identities are malleable entities that are often used for political ends.

One point of agreement across an increasingly fractious literature is that membership of a sect involves being part of a group with a shared identity, belief or ideology which can separate them from society. For some, such as Ismael and Ismael, the negative connotations bound up within sectarianism mean that a "generation of animus and feelings of exclusion between individuals and groups on the basis of attaching negative meanings to group traits" (Ismael and Ismael, 2010, p340). Whilst initially conceived as religious difference, in recent years the term has begun to include ethnic and political minorities. Such approaches tend to focus upon the political manifestation of sectarian difference, and on the ways in which violence can arise from a range of discrepancies and perceptions, yet there are other possible ways of engaging with the topic. It is therefore increasingly important to do so in light of recent events in the region, as expanding the understanding of this term can aid the analysis of violent conflicts that are shaping the Middle East. Perhaps the most important aspect here is the tension between the sovereign nation state – the bedrock of a number of International Relations approaches – and the sect, which may not necessarily correspond with the territorial borders of states in the region. Indeed, the power of sectarian identities is often a source of contestation to state power, especially when located within broader geopolitical struggles that have adopted sectarian dimensions.

Regardless of whether sectarianism is related exclusively to religious differences or is expanded to include political and ethnic diversity as well, the power of discourses that arise from it still needs to be examined. Reese (2013, p6) stresses that, as sectarian narratives offer a deeply emotional unifying point for popular mobilization, these sentiments are often polarised by "weak" regimes and external actors involved in conflict as a way to achieve their goals. States weaknesses and failings are found to create a sense of (political) community by encouraging the resort to identities that do not correspond to those of the nation state, these being tribes, ethnicities, sects, or even political parties/religious organizations. It follows that when a rise in sectarian violence occurs it poses an existential threat to these states and, particularly in the case of contemporary sectarian conflicts, sectarianism has to be understood as a symptom of political conflict rather than exclusively as a cause. This is not to say, however, that sectarian motivations can not be used in instances of pre-emptive violence, which further fuel a cycle of violence and perceived state

illegitimacy that can lead citizens to identify with sub and trans identity groups in their quest to find some security (ibid).

This expanded understanding of sectarianism is key in looking at the current events and conflicts that are taking place across the region. Historically speaking, the diverse ethnic and religious compositions of states such as Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria have created prime conditions for instances of sectarian violence to arise, and to very quickly transform into protracted and intractable conflicts. Sectarian divisions that are being exploited by both states and non-state actors today draw on centuries old political, religious, and ethnic tensions, which over time have developed into a plethora of intersectional identities that transcend nation states and territories. Recent years have witnessed the exploitation of these identities as a political tool by various dominant states in the region. Sectarian violence has come to be at the core of regional geopolitics and foreign policies of contending states, and is increasingly being used as a tool to balance competing hegemonies and proxy conflicts and actors through the Middle East. This comes with a painstakingly high humanitarian cost, which newer manifestations of sectarian violence keep on a constant rise.

Therefore, it is fundamental to widen our understanding of sectarianism and of its manifestation and implications in order to make sense of what is currently happening in the region, which is one of this edited collection's main aims. As outline above, although violence between people of different sects had long occurred across the Middle East, the emergence of Da'ish in 2014 has made violence with a sectarian motivation more prominent in discourses surrounding the region. As a result, this has also brought a certain manifestation of sectarian violence to the attention of the media worldwide, which has fostered contemporary debates surrounding the term and its significance. In the case of Da'ish, the group's fundamentalist Salafi vision, with many hallmarks of the Wahhabist ideology found in Saudi Arabia, is vociferously anti-Shi'a and to this end, has sought to kill Shi'a Muslims and destroy sites of religious importance for the Shi'a. While this might seem to conform to a classic understanding of sectarianism in the Middle East, which dates the outbreak of violence back to the Sunni-Sh'ia schism following the death of the Prophet, the implications of Da'ish's emergence are undeniably modern in nature. The brutalities perpetrated by the self-asserted Islamic State have come with drastic implications for the region's already fragile geopolitical equilibrium, bringing old struggles over hegemony and proxy actors back to the fore.

This is particularly the case for Hizballah, the Lebanese Party of God which, having seized vast swathes of territory across Syria and Iraq during the second half of 2014, would become increasingly active, defending the Shi'a in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Speaking after the seizure of Mosul, Hizballah's leader Hassan Nasrallah warned of the dangers posed by Da'ish.

> We have to believe that there is a real existential danger threatening us all and it is not a joke […] This danger does not recognise Shias, Sunnis, Muslims, Christians, Druze, Yazidis, Arabs or Kurds. This monster is growing and getting bigger […]I call on every Lebanese, Palestinian, Iraqi, Syrian and any Gulf national to leave sectarian intolerance behind and think that this phenomenon is not a threat against Shias

> only. No one should regard this battle as a sectarian one, it is a takfiri war against anyone who opposed it. (Nasrallah, 15.08.14)

Despite Nasrallah's calls, conflict in Syria and Iraq increasingly took place along sectarian lines, with external actors such as Iran and Saudi Arabia sensing an opportunity to lay claim to greater geopolitical influence across the region. This quest for geopolitical influence between Tehran and Riyadh has become increasingly influential in recent years, as the fragmentation of states in the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings has provided opportunities for the two states to exert influence and support sectarian kin across the region. The roots of this rivalry are important to our project, demonstrating the potential regional consequences of sectarian divisions.

In a similar manner, the revolution in Iran that established the Islamic Republic in 1979 would also bring religion into geopolitical considerations across the Middle East. The revolution tore up regional relations as they had previously been and empowered previously downtrodden Shi'a groups across the region, most notably in Lebanon with the formation of aforementioned Hizballah. The Islamic Republic of Iran, under the leadership of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, would embark on a proactive foreign policy that positioned themselves at the vanguard of protecting the *umma* and, although Khomeini initially sought to frame the revolution – and indeed Iran's role as protector – in non-sectarian terms, the political dimensions of regional security would result in the manifestation of sectarian tensions.

As a result, a schism between Iran and Saudi Arabia – the state that had derived legitimacy from being the protector of Islam's two holiest places– quickly emerged and spread across the region (Mabon, 2013), and sites of proxy competition emerged where states were home to delicate sectarian balances. The two then provided support to their sectarian kin, although there are complex relationships between groups across the region and their external sponsors and to reduce these relationships to sectarian driven patron-client interactions would be to deny group agency.

Within Saudi Arabia, a vocal Shi'a minority resides, predominantly within the Eastern Province, yet in neighbouring Bahrain – separated by the short King Fahd Causeway – a Shi'a majority is ruled by a Sunni minority and seen by many to be the 'epicentre of a sectarian competition'. The archipelago of Bahrain has a population of around 1.2 million people yet only around 50% of this number are Bahraini. The Shi'a of the country have long endured political marginalisation and economic disenfranchisement, stemming predominantly from efforts by the Sunni ruling family to maintain control. One such way of doing this is to locate the 'Shi'a threat' within broader regional security narratives of Iranian interference. The opposite can be found in Syria, where a Shi'a minority rules over a Sunni majority. Of course in both states – and across the region generally – the construction of identity is far more complex than such binary distinctions initially suggest, with economic, tribal, ethnic, regional and familial factors all feeding into the identity melanges.

The onset of violence in Syria and Bahrain, although initially occurring against ruling elites with greater calls for democratic participation, were quickly constructed in such a way to bring sectarian difference to the fore as a method of ensuring control. In the following months and years, divisions within both states have deepened and violence (both direct and structural) has come to characterised politics. Meanwhile, a nationalist sentiment is often mobilised in an attempt to circumvent domestic tensions, by locating the sectarian 'threat' within broader geopolitical problems, which serves to ensure the support of regional rivalries.

Since 1979, the foreign policies of Saudi Arabia and Iran have increasingly been viewed – incorrectly – through a sectarian lens, often overlooking – or ignoring – *real politik* and domestic factors. Debate about the nature and characteristics of this rivalry are becoming increasingly prevalent, yet the wider repercussions of the instrumentalised use of Islam within political contexts are becoming prominent. All too often, such differences are understood as being a result of sectarian divisions within divided societies, grouping together a multifarious range of differences under one term, which appears increasingly problematic. Understanding the rivalry is one example of the prominence of sectarian discourses as a means of engaging with Middle Eastern politics.

Perhaps the most obvious example of a state that has been characterised by sectarian difference and shaped by regional actors is Iraq, where a lack of congruence between 'nation' and 'state' has posed challenges to domestic stability. A number of scholars have engaged with sectarian dynamics within the Iraqi state, perhaps the best example of which is the work of Fanar Haddad. Haddad stresses that sectarianism, while important, should not be overemphasised at the expense of other factors. Indeed, Haddad suggests that sectarianism is increasingly seen as "the mutually antagonistic other of national identity" (Haddad, 2013, p116), yet this gives far too much credence to sectarian dynamics. Khalil Osman (2014) and other scholars such as Charles Tripp (2007), Liam Anderson and Gareth Stansfield (2004), Adeed Dawisha (2009), and Toby Dodge (2005) all engage with sectarian dynamics within the context of broader questions about stability within Iraq. In *The Origins of ISIS* Simon Mabon and Stephen Royle (2016) look at the conditions that have helped Sunni extremism to thrive, particularly focussing upon the importance of identities within Iraq, and how the politicisation and marginalisation of such identities (tribal and religious) has fed into these conditions. Others, such as Lawrence Potter (2013) and Toby Matthiessen (2013) have look at sectarian dynamics across the Persian Gulf broadly, identifying a number of characteristics that exist in Iraq but also across the region.

Sectarian divisions in Iraq have ramifications for a range of other issues in the state, notably instances of violence along sectarian lines but also, given the prominence of religion in the state, it has also become politicised formally and informally. Within the context of a fragmenting Iraqi state, the 2003 US-led invasion is often heralded as a root of recent troubles, as the deba'athification process designed to prevent the party of Saddam Hussein regaining power left hundreds of thousands unemployed and struggling to meet their basic needs (Mabon and Royle, Op. Cit). Prior to the

invasion, the legacy of sanctions had restricted the ability of social structures to fulfil their designated role. Within the context of this struggle and the increasingly politicised religious identities across Iraq, tribal and religious divisions became increasingly violent. Moreover, existing within the context of a US-led counter insurgency operation and rising Sunni extremism – at this time Al Qa'ida in Iraq, the forerunner of Da'ish, led by Abu Musa al Zarqawi – Iraqis faced uncertainty from a number of different sources. This violence was simplistically framed as sectarian, yet such an approach overestimates the power of religious identity whilst underestimating the importance of a range of other factors.

As an International Crisis Group report notes, such practices were also employed by the government in Baghdad:

> Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has implemented a divide-and-conquer strategy that has neutered any credible Sunni Arab leadership. The authorities also have taken steps that reinforce perceptions of a sectarian agenda. Prominent officials – predominantly Sunni – have been cast aside pursuant to the Justice and accountability Law on the basis of alleged senior-level affiliation to the former Baath party. Federal security forces have disproportionately deployed in Baghdad's Sunni neighbourhoods as well as Sunni-populated governorates (Anbar, Salah al-Din, Ninew, Kirkuk and Diyala). Al-Iraqiya, the political movement to which Sunni Arabs most readily related, slowly came apart due to internal rivalries even as Maliki resorted to both legal and extra-judicial means to consolidate power. (International Crisis Group, 2013)

Supporting this were the emergence of Shi'a militias – later Popular Mobilization Units – who were typically violent organisations that used this violence instrumentally against Sunnis across the state (Mabon and Royle, Op. Cit). The threat of such violence was often used as a strategy of control, a means of regulating life across the state, emerging from socio-economic and political histories.

Within this environment, Sunni Iraqis struggled to meet their basic needs and to ensure their survival as religious differences became increasingly violent. For young Sunnis this was no different. Another International Crisis Group report reads:

> Young Sunnis share the concerns of all young Iraqis, as they see the government operating in slow motion only. But, beyond that, they also feel that they do not enjoy the same opportunities as others. They have yet to feel accepted by society and resent being suspected of affiliation with al-Qaeda (International Crisis Group, 2006).

Sectarian sentiments became embedded within the institutions of the state, with the police routinely engaging in violence along sectarian lines, which, all too often, resulted in detention, torture and widespread violence routinely being carried out against Sunni Arabs in Iraq. Such conditions had a deleterious impact upon economic life across Iraq, with Sunnis particularly badly hit. In the years following the invasion, political life across Iraq was characterised by suspicion. Significant questions were asked as to the "loyalties of some Iraqi units – specifically, whether they will carry

out missions on behalf of national goals instead of a sectarian agenda" (Baker and Hamilton, 2006). Such concerns would undermine faith in the very institutions of the state. Shi'a militias would, in return, use the threat of increasing Sunni militancy and insurgency to extend their influence and reach.

The oversimplification of identities within the context of binary divisions was not helped by the penetration of Iraq by Saudi Arabia and Iran, both of whom sought to shape the future of the state in a way that would best suit their interests. In a US diplomatic cable released by Wikileaks, Saudi Arabia urged the US to maintain their influence until Iraqi sovereignty had been restored,

> otherwise it will be vulnerable to the Iranians. He said the Saudis will not support one Iraqi group over the others and that the Kingdom is working for a united Iraq. However, he warned that, if the U.S. leaves precipitously, the Saudis will stand with the Sunnis. (06RIYADH9175_a 2006)

King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia would also suggest that al Maliki was an "Iranian agent" (09RIYADH447_a, 2009), further supporting the idea that the Iraqi state had been penetrated by external actors along sectarian lines. What quickly became apparent with regard to foreign relations with Iraq was that although other factors were on the surface, sectarian divisions were lurking beneath the surface and could be mobilised given the right circumstances. Following the uprisings in Syria, the two states once more attempted to shape the region in their image, with sectarian schisms playing a more prominent role within the civil war. Such concerns have begun to characterise Middle Eastern politics, albeit within the context of a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy.

As a consequence of this, and with an ever growing literature on Iraq that also engages with questions about Political Violence and Western intervention, our special issue leaves the question of Iraq and Syria to others and focuses upon other case studies that seek to broaden understandings of the concept of sectarianism. Of course, the danger is to overstate the power of sectarian identities and to frame such identities within the construction of a Manichean dichotomy against the national identity, a claim which is often part of analysis, yet one must be careful to avoid essentialising domestic affairs to a struggle between two identities. Rather, it is the interaction of identities within different socio-economic contexts that helps to understand interaction; after all, agency is fluid and complex.

Therefore, for the purpose of this edited collection, the understanding of sectarianism as a concept goes beyond the conventional reference to religious or ethnic minorities, and includes "the tendency to undermine social cohesion by pushing for the reproduction of ancient beliefs and separations" (ibid). In essence, this understanding of sectarianism is understood as a combination of all those practices that turn difference into conflicts, and that politicises and weaponises notions of identity to create divisions between the "sectarian self" and "the other".

Our special issue seeks to do something different, broadening the term beyond a narrow definition. Much like others have sought to do with terms such as violence,

conflict and peace, we suggest that broader understandings of the term are important, which, in turn, also challenge the ontological assumptions that are inherent within narrower definitions. It returns sectarianism to a pure sense of *difference*, removing the baggage that goes alongside it and seeks to show how the term has resulted in the manifestation of difference within a number of contexts. It does this by applying the concept to 10 different case studies, within individual states, but also at a regional level and possesses an implicit comparative dimension. The interaction of these different levels of analysis facilitates a greater awareness of Middle Eastern politics and this is often driven by (the perception of) sectarian difference. We consider how sectarian differences can shape political, economic and security contexts, while also questioning the extent to which the concept itself can be used as a tool of securitization. To this end, we look at the dynamics of sectarianism *within* states and the consequences of such differences upon political and economic stability. We explore the importance of sectarian difference *between* states, to explain foreign policy, whilst also serving as a tool of legitimisation.

The project was born out of conversations that took place in WOCMES 2014 and following this, a workshop was held at Lancaster University in the summer of 2015, when invited speakers were asked to present on the sectarian dimensions of their research. The organisers were looking for a broad range of contexts and approaches and, as a consequence, did not impose ontological or epistemological positions, we did not require participants to adhere to a particular methodological framework, nor did we impose a definition of sectarianism. The results of this workshop are presented in this volume and they demonstrate the wide-ranging application of the term, along with it, the possibility that is also inherent within it. To this end, the special issue is comprised of 8 chapters that explore the manifestation of sectarianism within different contexts and in different guises. A key factor that cuts across a number of these chapters is the tension between endogenous and exogenous factors and consequences of sectarian tensions emerging.

We begin the special issue with a discussion of sectarianism within the context of political violence. Gilbert Ramsay explores the use of sectarian imagery within Da'ish messages, and assess the claim that perpetrators of mass killings de-humanise their victims to justify their own atrocities. By taking into consideration psychological theories of dehumanisation, he argues for a more complex understanding of notions of humanity and inhumanity in the legitimisation of violence. Lucia Ardovini considers the use of Islam as a means of gaining legitimacy and control within Egypt. Although the Egyptian population are largely Sunni Muslims, Ardovini suggests that referring to Islam is a technique through which difference is constructed as a means of alienation. Nicola Mathie's article explores sectarianism within Judaism, with a particular focus upon tensions between the state and settler groups who have a view of Judaism and Zionism that is often in tension with the state narrative. Such tensions have clear ramifications upon security and territory in Israel and the West Bank.

Lebanon is a state that is often defined in terms of its sectarian demographics, having endured a 15 year long civil war and the establishment of a consociational

political system designed to provide political access to these groups. Given the importance of sectarianism within Lebanon, two chapters look at different aspects of politics in the state. Hannes Baumann explores the link between social protest and the political economy of sectarianism in Lebanon. He argues that sectarianism is manifested through the appropriation and redistribution of wealth by sectarian elites in the country, and focuses on how trade unions became the main challengers of such policies in the 1990s. Abbas Assi explores the manifestation of sectarian differences within the consociational system of Lebanese politics in the post-2005 period. Taking into account the impact of intra and inter-sectarian conflicts and external factors on Christian parties in Lebanon, this paper looks at how that has influenced the pursuit of personal and community interests.

The following three chapters engage with the move between internal and external, as domestic actions have repercussions at the regional (and international) level, and vice versa. Sossie Kasbarian and Simon Mabon focus upon Bahrain and the construction of sectarian master narratives as a means of framing conflicts and locating tensions within broader geopolitical concerns. By establishing a master narrative, Kasbarian and Mabon stress that the regime was able to circumvent other factors that had fed into domestic unrest. Nina Musgrave focuses on the way in which sectarian tensions affect regional geopolitics and relations in the aftermath of the Arab Springs. She does so by looking at Hamas' historical disinclinations towards sectarianism, and at accusations of displaying sectarian tendencies moved to the group after 2011. May Darwich and Tamirace Fakhoury offer a comparative account of the role of sectarianism within external behaviour of actors at a regional level. Focussing upon Hizballah and Saudi Arabia, their piece offers an important discussion of the role of sectarian difference within foreign policy, whilst combining it with a securitization approach.

Taken together, these 8 chapters provide an alternative approach to engaging with the question of sectarianism in the Middle East. It involves challenging the ontological and epistemological assumptions that have defined the region within the academy, but shows the potential for other approaches to illuminate the region. Whilst contested, sectarianism can remain a useful conceptual tool through which to understand different aspects of Middle Eastern politics, yet we must be careful not to fall into traps that have characterised prior attempts to engage in similar questions.

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