Explaining de-sectarianization

Instrumental design or organic atrophy

A key feature of the 21st century Middle East thus far has been the vertiginous rise and precipitate retreat of sectarian (Sunni-Shi’a) division as a dominant paradigm in contentious politics and international relations. Understanding these shifts yields important lessons regarding identity politics, state-society relations, regime-maintenance strategies, and inter-group relations.

This article examines sectarian relations (here referring strictly to Sunni-Shi’a relations) in the 21st century Middle East, and specifically how sectarian categories gained and then lost an unprecedented degree of political relevance and societal divisiveness between 2003 and the present. The article identifies the causal factors behind the rise of sectarian division as a dominant paradigm in the region after 2003, and again after 2011, before moving on to explain how that paradigm lost its political relevance and societal divisiveness beginning around 2015-2017. The concluding section considers what lessons can be drawn from the rise and fall of sectarian entrenchment in the region with regards to identity politics and identity construction in the Middle East. Reflecting my own research interests, this article draws on more examples from Iraq than on other cases. However, one of the article’s key arguments is that the rise and subsequent retreat of sectarian entrenchment was a region-wide phenomenon and not restricted to any single country, as will be shown with examples from across the Middle East.

«A period of madness»

«It was like a period of mass madness. We fell into it but we have now awaken, we will not fall into it again.»¹ So spoke one Iraqi political figure, Jamal al-Badri, in 2012. The period of madness he was referring to was the early post-2003 years, particularly the sectarian (Sunni-Shi’a) civil war of 2005-2008 that peaked in 2006-2007. In some ways
al-Badri’s words were premature in 2012, but nevertheless they contained a lot of truth in them, both at the time and in hindsight. On the one hand, the sort of carnage and societal polarization that Baghdad—and several other Iraqi cities—went through in 2005-2008 were never repeated. On the other, sectarian polarization nevertheless persisted: a year after the above comment was made, Iraq’s Sunni-majority governorates were swept by a protest movement against Sunni victimization and, in many ways, against the post-2003 governing order—needless to say, views toward the protests of 2012-2013 were sharply polarized along sectarian lines. Still, renewed civil war in the form of the war against the Islamic State in 2013-2017 differed significantly from the previous round of conflict. Sectarian tensions accompanied the war (for example in the concerns about the Popular Mobilization Units) yet it cannot be described as a sectarian or sect-coded civil war in the same way that 2005-2008 can be.

The profound intra-Sunni divisiveness of 2013-2017 meant that the war of 2013-2017 was not a Sunni-Shi’a war, but one that pitted IS and its allies against the Iraqi state and its (cross-sect, cross-ethnic and international) allies. This was both a cause and a reflection of the fact that, since approximately 2015, the politics of sect were no longer the primary lines of political contestation, nor were they the principal threat to political stability in Iraq.

Iraq’s turn toward and then away from societal and political sectarian entrenchment may be the most dramatic case of a broader symptom that afflicted the Middle East for the better part of two decades after 2003. This stands to reason given that the trigger for the sectarianization of the region began with the invasion of Iraq in 2003. As memorably put by Daniel Byman, the «sectarian wave» began in Iraq in 2003 as regime change altered the balance of power between sect-centric actors, first in Iraq, and then in the region. This raised the political relevance and social divisiveness of the Sunni-Shi’a divide across much of the region, as political and social perceptions were increasingly colored with a sectarian lens. This regional sectarian polarization was dramatically accelerated by the Arab uprisings of 2010-11, particularly those in Bahrain, and even more so in Syria. The wave peaked with the civil war in Syria and crested with the war against IS. Looking back to the heights of regional sectarianization, one is astonished by the prevalence of sect-coded rhetoric both in official and popular discourse, by the hysteria surrounding sectarian identities, and by the dominance of the Sunni-Shi’a divide in discussions of the region, both within the Middle East and internationally. Even in near-homogenously Sunni countries such as Jordan and Egypt, the Sunni-Shi’a divide became a source of media scares, political populism, and popular fears.

Perhaps the most bizarre example of the region-wide obsession with sectarian identity and the Sunni-Shi’a divide was the panic stoked by a children’s toy that was allegedly part of a Shi’a plot to indoctrinate Sunni children. Around 2011, videos emerged online of a toy gun that, when fired, emitted a sound that seemed to say, «strike the lady Aisha», (idhrab al-sayyida Aisha) — Aisha being one of the Prophet’s wives and subject of intense Sunni-Shi’a disagreement. Countless clips emerged from across the Arabic speaking world — from Sudan, Lebanon, Egypt, the Gulf States, Jordan, and elsewhere — showcasing the offending toy gun as evidence of a pernicious Shi’a plot. The climate at the time was such that a fantastical story such as this was readily believed and seriously debated. The matter was raised in political talk shows, countless pulpits, and in at least two parliaments — in Egypt and in Jordan. Rather than a Shi’a conspiracy exhorting children to strike Aisha (while inexplicably still referring to her as sayyida Aisha), what the toy gun actually said was, «Go, go,
go! Pull over and save the hostages.» The absurdity of this episode speaks to the extent of sectarian polarization around the time of the Arab uprisings. Unfortunately, the matter went far beyond ridiculous conspiracy theories about toy guns: it permeated politics, foreign policy, and war at tremendous human cost. So powerful was the Middle Eastern trend toward sectarianization at this time that it caused an echo in places as far away as Southeast Asia.

Thankfully, sectarian identity and «sectarianism» no longer carry the same political relevance that they did for most of the early 21st century. Since inter-group relations do not operate like a light switch that can be turned on and off, it is often difficult to identify specific dates for major shifts in inter-group relations—particularly in the absence of a major rupture such as in 2003 or 2011. Nevertheless, it is patently demonstrable that— from around 2017 if not earlier—there was a marked region-wide shift away from the prism of sectarian competition, particularly where the international relations of the region were concerned. New, more politically relevant and societally resonant framings emerged for regime maintenance, political mobilization, political populism, and geostrategic competition. For example, Saudi Arabia’s rivalry with Iran was increasingly decoupled from the discourse on Sunni-Shi’a competition. The Iranian threat was increasingly being framed as just that, rather than as a Shi’a threat, as was the case with the «Shi’a crescent» that King Abdullah of Jordan warned of in 2004. In Iraq, inter-sect political competition gave way to intra-sect competition, which remains the more salient line of contestation today. Syria—the site of sectarian crusades until recently—was gradually beginning its reintegration into the Arab fold as the conflict wound down and the regime emerged as the victor over a devastated and debilitated country. More broadly, widely held perceptions of region-wide Sunni-Shi’a conflict—so salient after 2003 and after 2011—were eclipsed by crises and regional realignments that could not be contained in what was always a tenuous sectarian framing of Middle Eastern international relations. Few examples are more illustrative in that regard than the 2017-2021 blockade of Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt. Simply put, the context—both regionally and in individual countries—has changed in ways that drastically and mercifully reduced the political relevance of the Sunni-Shi’a divide. This of course does not mean that sectarian identity or its political expression are things of the past. Sectarian entrepreneurs continue to exist, as do their attempts to politicize sectarian identities and create sect-coded controversies. Yet they do so with much less success and societal resonance than they once had. Both in individual countries and especially as a master-narrative of regional politics, sectarian identity and «sectarianism» have undeniably lost the inflated salience they attained between 2003 and the mid-2010s—a fact that has at times escaped commentary on the Middle East.

From above … The shifts described offer students of identity politics an interesting case of how identity categories—even ones assumed to be primary or «primordial»—gain and lose political relevance. Indeed, they highlight the absurdity of primordialist arguments that assume the perennial relevance of sectarian (or any other) identities. Yet they also conjure some of the same questions that marked discussions of sectarian identity when the subject first emerged as a dominant paradigm after 2003. Specifically, the matter of agency and whether the rise and fall of the politics of sect were/are driven from above or from below. Indeed, how one understands the shift away from sectarian entrenchment will inevitably reflect
one’s assumptions about its emergence in the first place: instrumentalists will view the sectarian tide in instrumental terms be it in explaining its ebb or its flow. Yet the reality is that such tidal currents cannot be understood solely through instrumentalist top-down or primordialist bottom-up perspectives. Dichotomising top-down and bottom-up approaches creates an impossible binary that inevitably fails to capture the inherent ambiguity of identity. Instead of a binary, the drivers of sectarian relations come from both above and from below in a circular, mutually reinforcing fashion that reflects the interactions between elites and people.

The twin concepts of sectarianization and de-sectarianization have been used to good analytical effect to understand the shifts in the politics of sect. Sectarianization was most fully articulated in Hashemi and Postel’s 2017 edited volume of the same title. At its most basic, the sectarianization argument seeks to push back against primordialist accounts of «sectarianism». Instead, it argues that what was casually referred to as «sectarianism» was in fact a process, one «shaped by political actors operating within specific contexts, pursuing political goals that involve popular mobilization around particular (religious) identity markers».

Reflecting on the post-2011 context, sectarianization was often framed as a regime-maintenance strategy aimed at the manipulation of sectarian difference by regimes seeking to ensure their survival in the face of widespread contestation. Unsurprisingly, the examples of Syria, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia feature heavily where sectarianization-as-regime-maintenance is concerned. It follows that de-sectarianization is often understood as the same process in reverse: regime-led deconstruction of sectarian difference in service of perceived interests of state and regime maintenance. Yet, for all their benefits, these approaches risk overstating elite agency to the point of eliding contextual factors altogether. Regimes and political elites may—at times—seek to utilize «the sectarian card» for their own interests and self-preservation, but what the last 20 years have shown is that the efficacy and resonance of such strategies cannot be assumed, and that society’s receptiveness to such appeals is shaped by a broader context that is anything but static.

Justin Gengler captures these nuances well in his 2020 reflections on de-sectarianization. On the one hand, he notes that there are clear shifts in instrumentalist elite considerations regarding sectarian rhetoric. For example, in 2019, Saudi Arabian-Iranian tensions underwent a dangerous escalation when Saudi Aramco facilities were subject to a drone attack that was widely suspected of being orchestrated by Iran. Yet despite that, the heightened tension was not accompanied by a spike in sectarian rhetoric. As noted by Gengler, this reflected a region-wide shift away from the sect-coding of geopolitical competition—in this case specifically, the decoupling of anti-Iranianism and anti-Shi’ism. This supports top-down instrumentalist readings of sectarianization and de-sectarianization. Indeed, in Gengler’s analysis (which is clearly informed by the example of the Gulf States), the construction and then the deconstruction of sectarian division was ultimately tied to the shifting threat perceptions of authoritarian regimes. In this reading, sectarianization in the Gulf was initially pushed to defuse the threat from the Arab uprisings of 2010-2011. The move away from sectarian rhetoric was therefore, in large part, a reflection of the fact that...
the threat perception of the regimes in question had shifted. The Gulf States’ primary preoccupation after 2011 was with domestic unrest, but this was soon eclipsed by direct involvement in external conflict that pitted Qatar and Turkey against Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). As noted by Gengler, sectarian division may be a useful strategy with which to counter the possibility of cross-sectional popular mobilization, but is less useful when trying to rally the population behind a national cause and against a foreign rival state. The latter requires the strengthening of national rather than sectarian identification, particularly given that the rivalries in question (between the UAE and Qatar for example) are not susceptible to sect-coding since all concerned are Sunni Muslims of one form or another. Again, this supports instrumentalist readings of sectarianization, particularly when one considers the deliberate shift in state-policy toward militarized «hypernationalism» in places like Saudi Arabia and the UAE since the mid-2010s.\footnote{25}

… and from below
The above-mentioned shifts in regime-maintenance strategies are a crucial part of the puzzle of de-sectarianization but they do not tell the full story. Surveying the last two decades, one finds a gradually altered, enabling environment with a changing set of incentive structures that have diminished the political salience of sectarian identity, and by extension, the efficacy of sectarian division as a regime-maintenance tool. After all, the «sectarian entrepreneurs» of yesteryear (be they religious or political actors) are still very much with us, doling out the same message but without the resonance and the audiences that they enjoyed ten years ago when sectarian dynamics preoccupied so many. Likewise, sect-centric political actors in sect-coded political systems such as Iraq’s and Lebanon’s still try to employ sectarian division to their political advantage, particularly during elections, but with diminishing returns. In both countries, the divide between society and elites is increasingly eclipsing sectarian divides in popular politics, even as sectarian categories continue to define formal elite politics. Both Lebanon and Iraq have had a series of mass protests against their sect-coded political systems, culminating, in both countries, in the uprisings of 2019.\footnote{26} As Iraqis have been commonly stating for many years: the sectarian card is burned, and with it, much of its instrumental utility. What explains the combustion of what – until relatively recently – was perhaps the most potent and most divisive political tool in several Middle Eastern countries?

In addition to the instrumentalist aspect discussed above, there is, first, the simple fact of generational turnover and the normalization of what was once divisive or controversial. Iraq again offers a stark illustration. In 2003, Iraqi politics and society were characterized by a number of factors that made sectarian division and entrenchment likely, albeit not necessarily inevitable: a decades-long taboo around any frank discussion of sectarian dynamics or expression of sectarian identity; a pronounced sense of Shi’a victimhood that manifested in a political culture of Shi’a sect-centricity that was especially evident among the opposition in exile; decades of stringent authoritarianism and relative isolation from the world; thirteen years of sanctions that, in retrospect, proved more corrosive to Iraqi society than all of the country’s wars combined; all of which was then inflamed by the invasion, occupation, and violence that enveloped Iraq after 2003. For a significant body of Iraqi Shi’a opinion, 2003 was an opportunity to right historical wrongs. Namely, ensuring the realization of an ill-defined «Shi’a rule». This outlook was shaped by several recent historic factors, especially the sense of
victimization that many Shi‘as came to perceive in the final decades of the Ba‘th regime. This pronounced form of identity politics was anathema to many Iraqis who were socialized, to one extent or another, in the Iraqi state’s homogenizing and centralizing notions of unity that viewed sect-centricity with profound suspicion. As explained by Harith Hasan, prior to 2003, Iraqis had long been told by the state that they faced three major threats: foreign occupation, Kurdish separatism, and Shi‘a Islamism. In 2003 Iraqis «[...] woke up and saw these three enemies, the occupiers, the Kurdish nationalists and the Shi‘a Islamists, sitting together and setting the rules for the new Iraq».27 This resulted in a clash of visions over the Iraqi state’s identity, legitimacy, and ownership that formed the basis of sect-coded political contestation in the immediate post-2003 era.

None of this is relevant any longer – at least not in the same way that it was in 2003 and for many years after. A key reason being generational turnover: with about 60% of the population under the age of 25, the vast majority of Iraqis today have known no other reality other than the post-2003 one.28 Identity politics, the dominance of Shi‘a Islamists, the prevalence of Shi‘a symbolism in the public sphere, and «Shi‘a rule» are neither controversial nor are they a source of contestation; rather, they are the norm. In Iraq, this normalization is perhaps best captured by growing Shi‘a resentment at the system. For some Shi‘a Iraqis who came of age prior to 2003, Shi‘a rule was a dream to be attained. For some years after 2003, it remained a gain that needed to be safeguarded against any number of threats, real or perceived (a return of the Ba‘th, the enmity of regional powers, Sunni insurgents, and so forth). However, just over a decade after regime change, generational turnover and the normalization of the post-2003 order meant that Shi‘a rule was no longer a dream to be attained or a gain to be defended. For the vast majority of Iraqis, it had become the only reality they had ever known, and one that was resented for its failures, dysfunction, corruption, and unrepresentativeness. This resentment spans Iraq’s ethnic and sectarian spectrums, and is most vociferous in Shi‘a areas – as evidenced by yearly mass protests in Shi‘a-majority areas since 2015, culminating in the October uprising of 2019.29

A similar normalization of Shi‘a political sect-centricity is evident beyond Iraq. Here, it is important to note again, that the trigger for ‘the sectarian wave’ was regime change in 2003. Specifically, the way that 2003 empowered Shi‘a-centric actors in Iraq, and how this worked to Iran’s advantage thereby challenging the relations of power between regional sect-centric actors to Iran’s favor. As a result, anti-Shi‘a sentiment was inflamed after 2003 and was often intertwined with opposition to the American-led invasion of Iraq, opposition to the new political regime in Baghdad, and regional threat perception. In Saudi Arabia for example, the state turned a blind eye to anti-Shi‘a clerical discourse and calls for Sunni solidarity in what was being framed as a sectarian conflict.30 At an official level, Saudi Arabia refused to engage with post-2003 Iraq for many years, viewing it as little more than an Iranian appendage.31 Yet by 2017, the Saudi stance on anti-Shi‘ism and on Iraq had changed. The Kingdom’s new Crown Prince, Mohammad bin Salman, spearheaded a radical redefinition of national identity and officially sanctioned Islam – one that was more ecumenical, depoliticized, and loyal to the throne. As for foreign policy, Saudi Arabia sought to build bridges with Iraq and even with elements of the Shi‘a political elite: in 2017 the Crown Prince hosted Iraq’s Muqtada al-Sadr, a man who, ten years prior, was regarded by many as the face of Shi‘a sectarian radicalism.32

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Working in tandem with generational turnover was the easing of existential fear, and the increasing stability and improved security in former sect-coded conflict zones such as Iraq and Syria. When considering 21st century sectarian polarization, few factors are more important and more often overlooked than the uncertainty and fear borne out of conflict. Ultimately, sect-coded legacy issues, divisive ideologies, elite stoking of sectarian tensions, or antagonistic group myths are, in and of themselves, unsatisfying as causal factors. After all, these existed long before the Middle East’s descent into sectarian entrenchment and will continue to exist long after. The question, therefore, is why these factors attained causal qualities after 2003, and again after 2011, despite the fact that they were hardly novel phenomena. The answer lies primarily in the fear and uncertainty that these years engendered.

Rather than an expression of pent-up innate tendencies, the sectarian entrenchment (that erupted after 2003 and that was accelerated after 2011) was a response to the exceptional circumstances that the invasion of Iraq and then the Arab uprisings created: state collapse, pervasive violence, civil war, profound uncertainty, and existential fear. Into this abyss stepped sect-centric actors ready to fill the political and security vacuums created by the ruptures of 2003 and 2011. It is important to keep the context of the time in mind: a rupture or a vacuum in Iraq, Syria, or elsewhere need not necessarily be filled by sect-centric actors. Had the United States enacted their disastrous regime change policy in 1991 rather than 2003, events would have undoubtedly taken a different turn, and the prism of sectarian identity may well have been a weaker one than was to be the case in 2003; if for no other reason this could have transpired as a function of a less sect-centric opposition in exile. Recent Iraqi history made the sectarianization of the rupture of 2003 more likely, just as the spillover effect of 2003 made the sectarianization of 2011 in Syria and elsewhere more virulent. Given the recent history, demographic makeup, and relations of power in places like Bahrain and Syria, it is almost guaranteed that those regimes will try to play the sectarian card when confronted by mass mobilizations that are predominantly Sunni (in Syria) or Shi’a (in Bahrain); this was indeed the case in previous mobilizations in the 1980s and in the 1990s. However, would this sectarianization have been as successful, and crucially, would it have had the international echo that it had absent the fears of a “Shi’a crescent” and absent a sense of region-wide sectarian competition that was already in place prior to 2011? In short, the ruptures of 2003 and 2011; and the accompanying violence, uncertainty, and existential fear set the stage for societal polarization, while the recent history of the Middle East meant that this polarization was likely to play out along sectarian lines, both from above and from below.

The easing of these conditions saw the easing of sectarian entrenchment, and the reduced political relevance and utility of Sunni/Shi’a identities. Again, we see the importance of the broader enabling environment which far exceeds the causal relevance of anything intrinsic to sectarian identities or sectarian relations in and of themselves. Hence, we see that in Iraq, despite the persistence of sect-coded militants, sect-coded violence, and

Supporters of Moqtada al-Sadr celebrate his parliamentary victory in Baghdad October 11, 2021.
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identity-based proportional representation in the distribution of political office (what Iraqis refer to as muhasasa), the societal divisiveness and political utility and relevance of sectarian identity were in clear retreat by 2015 or thereabouts. For instance, in sectarian Sunni-Shi’i terms, the war against IS was nowhere near as societally divisive as the earlier round of civil war in 2005-2008 was. This was due to the profound intra-Sunni divisiveness of IS in addition to the greater stabilization and perceived resilience of the governing order, which in turn reduced feelings of uncertainty and existential threat. As such, Iraqis after 2014 might fear Sunni or Shi’i militants without viewing Sunnis or Shi’as writ large as a threat, as was the case in earlier years. Put another way, views of the sectarian other shifted from a «high generality of difference», where the other is viewed negatively as an undifferentiated mass, to a «lower generality of difference» that allows for nuance and variation in line with the easing of existential threat and the relative normalization of power relations and of the political order.

On a regional level, the shift away from sectarian polarization—and by extension the reduced political utility of sectarian division—are equally evident. Rather than the stark binary implied by warnings of a «Shi’a crescent», regional politics today are of a complexity and intersectionality that cannot be contained in the prism of sectarian division, no matter how superficially applied. Ties have been re-established between Iran and its competitors in the Arab world and Iraq, and to a lesser extent Syria have been reintegrated into regional politics.

Conclusion

In a survey conducted in 2021, Lebanese and Iraqi respondents were asked to rank what national issues they considered most important for their country. The results reflect the shifts discussed above. Where previously concerns about sectarian tensions would have undoubtedly been at the top of the list, in 2021 the most pressing issues were «maintaining security and stability» (Lebanon: 37.4%, Iraq: 33.2%), and ‘fighting poverty and unemployment’ (Lebanon: 29.3%, Iraq: 34.6%).
"Reducing sectarian tensions" was prioritized by only 16.5% of Lebanese respondents, and by a mere 1.2% of Iraqi respondents. This shift in priorities from identity politics to issue politics is very much in line with region-wide shifts in recent years. Surveying eight Arab countries in 2016-2017 and again in 2018-2019, Gengler found that concern over regional sectarian division had plummeted across the board. Likewise, Gengler’s analysis of Google searches for the Arabic word *ta'ifiyya* (sectarianism) between 2011 and 2019 shows a peak in 2011 and a quick plummet in such searches in subsequent years: the figure for 2019 is a mere 6% of what it was in 2011.

For much of the first two decades of the 21st century, political sect-centricity, and the Sunni-Shi’a divide were at the forefront of political populism and central to how regional and local conflicts were framed. Regardless of whether it ever accurately reflected reality, the dominant perception in those years was that the region was in the midst of a grand Sunni-Shi’a struggle. Today political sect-centricity has lost much of its political relevance and societal resonance. Indeed, in places such as Lebanon and Iraq—where the politics of sect are more institutionalized than elsewhere—we find that political sect-centricity is an increasingly elite concern and a tool of status quo actors. By extension, in recent years, political populism has often been aimed against sect-centricity which is equated with unrepresentative elites. Rather than sectarian solidarity or fear of the sectarian other, the language of political populism has, for some years now, been grounded in demands for better governance. This shift in popular sentiment is aptly represented in the uprisings of 2019 in both Iraq and Lebanon.

Beyond these two countries we find similar transformations in regional politics. Power struggles between the major powers of the region are no longer framed in terms of sectarian competition. The sectarian framing was never an accurate reflection of the regional turmoil that followed 2003 and 2011, but it carried enough resonance and utility at the time for it to be used to great effect. This is no longer the case and contestation over questions of regional order and relations of power have long since ceased being framed or perceived through the dated prism of sectarian division.

This article has sought to chart and explain these shifts. Some of the key factors behind the declining political relevance of sectarian identity include generational turnover; the normalization of what was once contested or controversial; the stabilization of a post-2003 and then a post-2011 order, complete with vested interests and hierarchies of power; the winding down of internationalized sect-coded conflicts, and with it the diminished sense of uncertainty and existential fear; and finally, as a result of the preceding, altered threat perceptions and incentive structures both at the level of political elites and popular opinion. Sect-centricity will continue to exist but the massification that it underwent after 2003 and again after 2011 seems today, to be a thing of the past.

A question worth pondering is the reversibility of this process. Some analysts have made alarmist arguments as to the possibilities of a "sectarian resurgence". While it is of course possible for sectarian identity and the Sunni-Shi’a divide to regain political relevance, it is unlikely to revert back to a mirror image or even a continuation of the sectarian entrenchment of the post-2003 and nationalized sect-coded conflicts, and with it the diminished sense of uncertainty and existential fear; and finally, as a result of the preceding, altered threat perceptions and incentive structures both at the level of political elites and popular opinion. Sect-centricity will continue to exist but the massification that it underwent after 2003 and again after 2011 seems today, to be a thing of the past.

Even separatist movements in Iran are primarily ethnically coded rather than sect-coded.
post-2011 years. There are too many contingent factors to any given period of sectarian entrenchment for the process to be replicable further down the line. Nevertheless, whatever shape a ‘re-sectarianization’ of the region might take, its causal drivers are likely to be similar: a threat (real or perceived) to the balance of power between sect-centric actors (be it in individual countries or regionally), and heightened fear and uncertainty in contexts of civil conflict that are prone to sect-coding. Even then, it should be noted that there is nothing inevitable about such scenarios, and that even if they were to come to pass it will likely be difficult to recreate the massification and mainstreaming of sectarian division that were witnessed after 2003 and 2011. People today are far more aware of—and hopefully more cynical toward—political sect-centricity and so-called sectarian entrepreneurs.

There are a number of important lessons to be derived from the story of sectarian relations in the 21st century Middle East. First, there is the obvious point regarding the inherent fluidity and ambiguity of identity and inter-group relations. The determinism and essentialism with which Sunni-Shi’a relations and conflict were viewed in the 2010s could never stand to scrutiny, and is all the more redundant today with the clearly diminished political relevance of sectarian categories. In hindsight, it is clear that such commentary exhibited the all-too-common tendency of assuming that, « [... ] wherever we happen to be [with a given identity category] is where we always have been and always will be [...] »45 This tendency underpinned the tendentious arguments that sought to link sectarian competition in the 21st century with medieval episodes of the same to make the case for the perennial relevance and divisiveness of sectarian categories in the Middle East.46 The oscillations of sectarian relations over the last 20 years—to say nothing of the last 14 centuries—clearly reveal the fallacies of this line of thinking, which in Ussama Makdisi’s words, rests on the «medievalization» of the contemporary Middle East.47 Indeed, what the broader history of sectarian relations reveals is how unremarkable sectarian categories are when compared to other frames of identity. The inflammation of sectarian division in the early 21st century had clear causal and contingent drivers relating to politics, power, and security rather than to anything innate to sectarian identity itself.

Another lesson from sectarian relations in the 21st century concerns the presumed impact of identity-based conflict on inter-group boundaries. This point was recently raised by Taif Alkhudary in her discussion of consociationalism.48 As she explains, consociational theory assumes that, while identities change and are subject to fluctuations, they have a tendency to harden and became more rigidly delineated as a result of conflict, hence the need for a consociational bargain. While this model is certainly applicable to many cases across the world, it is patently not so with regards to sectarian identity in the Middle East. Rather than forming the basis of hardened, unbridgeable identities, the sectarian conflicts of the early 21st century are, today, viewed as an unwelcome aberration from the norm of banal coexistence (irrelevance even) that more consistently marks sectarian relations in ‘normal’ times.

Part of the reason for this may be that normative conceptions of both Islam and of Middle Eastern nationalisms position sectarian identities as inherently subsidiary to larger religious and national frames. This has lent sectarian relations a significant degree of elasticity in that they can be calmed or inflamed but remain highly resistant to a definitive break between Sunnis/Sunnism and Shi’as/Shi’ism. Indeed, such a break would necessitate a significant redefinition of the parameters of how both mainstream global
Islam and nationalism are imagined in the Middle East. In this way, sectarian identities in the Middle East differ from ethnic identities in that the latter have had a greater capacity to create hard boundaries and to form the bases of alternate visions of nationalism and political community. As such, the modern Middle East has had no shortage of ethnic separatism and ethnic nationalism but has had very little in terms of a sect-coded parallel (a possible exception is the far from straightforward and far from clearly secessionist example of 18). Even separatist movements in Iran are primarily ethnically coded (Kurdish and Baloch for example) rather than sect-coded despite being Sunnis in a Shi’a-centric state. This may reflect the European intellectual roots of nationalism, and the normative link that they established between nationalism, and linguistic and perceived ethnic commonality. By overlooking the subsidiary nature of sectarian identities, observers have routinely failed to correctly contextualize both the inflammation and the easing of sectarian identity’s political salience in the 21st century.

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1 Interview, Jamal al-Badri, Baghdad, Jan. 2012. Jamal al-Badri is the son of famed Iraqi Sunni Islamist cleric Abd al-Aziz al Badri. The elder Basri was a prominent member of Hizb al-Tahrir and was executed by the Ba’th in 1969. Jamal al-Badri engaged in politics after 2003. He was at one point director of the Ministry of National Mobilization. More recently he has held senior positions in the Iraqi Commission of Hajj and Umra.


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3 For a broader discussion of this theme see Fanar Haddad, Understanding ‘Sectarianisation’: Sunni-Shi’a Relations in the Modern Arab World, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), chapter 7.

4 PMU is an umbrella term for the mostly Shi’a (and certainly Shi’a-dominated) paramilitary groups that were mobilized in the war against the Islamic State and that have since been formally institutionalized as part of Iraq’s security structures. The formations of the PMU vary in their ideological leanings, the date and manner of their formation, and their proximity to Iran. For details, see Inna Rudolf, «From Battlefield to Ballot Box: Contextualising the Rise and Evolution of Iraq’s Popular Mobilisation Units», International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, May 2018; Renad Mansour and Faleh A. Jabar, «The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq’s Future», Carnegie Middle East Center, April 2017.

5 The shift from inter- to intra-sect contestation continues into the present. For an overview of political contestation after the most recent Iraqi elections (2021) see Sarhang Hamasaeed, «What’s behind Moqtada al-Sadr’s bid to shake up Iraq’s politics?» United States Institute of Peace, Aug. 4, 2022; Simona Foltyn, «Is Moqtada al-Sadr Trying to Stage a Jan. 6 Insurrection in Iraq?» Foreign Policy, Aug. 11, 2022.


10 Chiara Formichi, «Violence, Sectarianism and the Politics of Religion: Articulations of Anti-Shi’a Discourses in Indonesia,” Indonesia, 98 (Oct. 2014): 1–27; Rahat Husain, «Malaysian ‘Confronting the Shi’a Virus’ Seminar was Precursor to Anti-Shi’a Alliance
FANAR HADDAD


«Sectarianism» is in quote marks due to its undefined and problematic qualities. For a discussion of the terminology surrounding the study of sectarian dynamics, and particularly the term ‘sectarianism’, see Fanar Haddad, «Sectarianism» and its Discontents in the Study of the Middle East», Middle East Journal, 71:3 (2017): 363-382.


Vali Nasr, «All Against All: The Sectarian Resurgence in the Post-American Middle East», Foreign Affairs, Jan./Feb. 2022; Robert A. Pape, «The Path Forward in Iraq: What Robert A. Pape Thinks», National Interest, April 13, 2019. Few examples are more incongruous with the altered landscape than Jordan Peterson’s 2012 advice to Muslims to transcend sectarian division by, amongst other things, finding a Sunni/Shi’a pen pal. See, «Article: Message to Muslims», uploaded July 13, 2022, youtube.com/watch?v=7pd0HLeYKsE.


Ibid., p. 4.


A recent study argues that Saudi Arabia’s stance pushed Iraq further towards Iran, See Katherine Harvey, A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy: The Saudi Struggle for Iraq, (London: Oxford University Press, 2022).


Even some of the most sect-centric actors only shifted towards sect-centricity in the late 1980s/early 1990s. See for example, Joseph E. Kotinsky, «Brave New World


37 For more on the sectarianization of 2003 and 2011 see Haddad, Understanding ‘Sectarianism’, chapter 6.

38 This shift away from a zero-sum negative framing to a more spectral one was noted by Neta Oren in how Arab actors have been framed in Israeli political discourse: the easing of tensions and fear encourages a lower generality of difference. Neta Oren, «Israeli Identity Formation and the Arab Israeli Conflict in Election Platforms, 1969–2006», Journal of Peace Research, 47:2 (2010): 193–204.

39 Toby Matthiesen, «How Gaza Reunited the Middle East», Foreign Affairs, Feb. 9, 2024.


42 Gengler, «Sectarianism from Top Down or Bottom Up».

43 Andreas Krieg, «Divided over narratives: the new fault line in the Arab world,” Middle East Institute, July 24, 2019; Hussein Agha and Robert Malley, «The Middle East’s Great Divide is not Sectarianism», The New Yorker, March 11, 2019.

44 Vali Nasr, «All Against All: The Sectarian Resurgence in the Post-American Middle East», Foreign Affairs, Jan./Feb. 2022.