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Sunni–Shia Relations After the Iraq War

Summary

- In Iraq, as elsewhere in the Middle East, the social, political, and technological changes of the 21st century are giving birth to a new sectarian landscape.

- The three most consequential drivers behind the change in sectarian relations have been the political change in Iraq of 2003; the near simultaneous spread of new media and social networking in the Arab world; and – perhaps as a consequence of the first two – the ongoing search for alternatives to familiar but moribund forms of authoritarianism, as demonstrated most dramatically by the "Arab Spring."

- 2003 highlighted the uncomfortable fact that there were multiple, indeed contradictory, visions of what it meant to be an Iraqi and by extension what it meant to be a part of the Arab world.

- New media, social networking, user-generated websites, and private satellite channels helped to make Iraq's accelerated sectarianization contagious.

- The mainstreaming of sectarian polemics has increased the relevance of religious, doctrinal, and dogmatic differences in views regarding the sectarian "other," a particularly dangerous development.

"In a post-2003 Arab world where sectarian identities have attained an unprecedented level of social and political relevance, there is no fire more easily started than a sectarian one."

Introduction

The Iraq war in 2003 does not signal the dividing line between a sectarian and a non-sectarian Middle East, but rather it marks a qualitative shift in how sectarian identities are imagined and how Sunni-Shia sectarian relations are structured. Throughout the past 10 years, Middle Eastern sectarian relations have had to adapt to unprecedented pressures and challenges, radically altering the significance and dynamics of sectarian identity and sectarian relations.

In Iraq, as elsewhere in the Middle East, the social, political, and technological changes of the 21st century are giving birth to a new sectarian landscape. The three most consequential drivers behind this process have been the political change in Iraq of 2003; the near simultaneous spread of new media and social networking in the Arab world; and – perhaps as a consequence of the first two – the ongoing search for alternatives to familiar but moribund forms of authoritarianism, as demonstrated most dramatically by the "Arab Spring." These three developments have had a profound impact on sectarian relations: In addition to their unprecedented political relevance, sectarian dynamics today are more regional, more grassroots, and more religious than ever before.

Après Iraq, le déluge!

The political change in Iraq in 2003 was the most serious challenge to the once familiar political and social landscapes of the Arab world. With respect to sectarian relations, 2003 turned the unthinkable into a political reality: The empowerment of ethnic and sectarian outgroups – namely Shia and Kurdish political forces. It also allowed, for the first time ever, the full, unfettered assertion of previously suppressed subnational identities. In other words, 2003 highlighted the uncomfortable fact that there were multiple, indeed contradictory, visions of what it meant to be an Iraqi and by extension what it meant to be a part of the Arab world. In 2003, a longstanding and self-evident, yet relatively well-suppressed, fact was revealed: Historical memory, victimhood, conceptions of the nation's friends and foes, its myths and symbols – in other words what "we the people" constitute and represent – were not a site of consensus but rather of division. Since then, with the partial demise of more familiar yet outdated forms of authoritarianism, similar Pandora's boxes have been opened throughout the Middle East.

One can fairly ask why it was that sectarian identity came to dominate perceptions and why it became the prime political marker in the new Iraq. After all, 2003 facilitated the airing of innumerable grievances and the expression of countless suppressed identities. Why did other frames of reference – region, class, ideology – fail to dominate Iraq as sectarian identity did? Two intertwining reasons suggest themselves: First, the inherent – even irrational – suspicion with which many Sunni Arabs regard organized assertions of Shia identity or Shia mobilization; second, the backgrounds and proclivities of many of Iraq's new political elites.

To take the expression of sectarian identity, we must first recognize that prior to 2003 this was an issue largely restricted to Arab Shia with Arab Sunnis having little awareness of themselves as Sunnis. There was no marked Sunni identity and as such little in the way of specifically Sunni expression or Sunni symbols or rituals. Reflecting demographic realities and the realities of power, whatever Sunni rituals, symbols, narratives, or causes that existed prior to 2003 were perceived in Islamic or national rather than specifically Sunni terms.

Thus, "sectarianism" – a phrase mired in negativity – was often perceived as a phenomenon restricted to the Shia rather than applying equally to Sunnis. With no Sunni parallel of note, Shia rituals, symbolism, and, above all, Shia political activism were viewed with suspicion by Arab Sunnis many of whom were ambivalent with regards to Shias' national, Islamic and Arab pedigrees. This nurtured a degree of sectarian entrenchment – though not necessarily hate – prior to the war as most clearly evidenced by the depth of Shia feelings of communal victimhood. Needless to say, such a context meant that the empowerment of Shia political forces and the enabling of Shia expression in 2003 had an emboldening effect on Shia actors and was a bitter pill to swallow for a significant body of Sunni opinion both in Iraq and beyond. These early steps toward sectarian entrenchment were accelerated by the chaos that followed the fall of the former regime and by the divisive presence of the United States.

In addition to the prejudices and pre-existing sectarian entrenchment mentioned above, the political orientation and calibre of Iraq's new political elite further ensured the centrality of sectarian identity in post-2003 Iraq. Many of the most prominent post-2003 political actors were, throughout their careers, more akin to ethnic and sectarian lobbyists rather than national politicians. Rather than acting as politicians who happen to be Shia, many if not most of the post-2003 Shia political elite retained their role as sectional sectarian advocates for whom Shia identity and Shia interests were intrinsic to their political outlook. Their failure to make the transition from Shia rights advocates to national politicians validated Sunni prejudices and fears, which were exacerbated by the fact that many of these political actors were based in or had strong links to Iran. Finally, the political elite's

short-sightedness coupled with their political backgrounds and Shia-centric outlooks meant that they did little to try to assuage the fears and suspicions resulting from their empowerment.

One result of these developments was an intense and violent sectarian backlash facilitated and accelerated by the security vacuum and general sense of chaos that followed the fall of the regime. Accompanying this violent reaction was the rise of a robust and explicitly Sunni identity, rooted in feelings of encirclement and entitlement. Fear of the "other" worked cyclically as both Sunnis and Shias mobilized against existential threats (real and perceived).

Nor was this restricted to Iraq: Across the region, and particularly in the Mashreq, Arab Sunnis were increasingly identifying themselves as Sunnis with fears of the "Shia crescent" nourishing a sectarian outlook on regional events. Unfortunately, what began as an Iraqi tragedy has been turned into a regional one in a manner and speed scarcely imaginable before the information and communications revolutions that were unfolding just as the new Iraq was being born.

Iraq's Sectarianization Goes Viral

New media, social networking, and the revolutionary changes to the flows of information that signalled the end of more familiar forms of censorship in the Middle East were a key part of the perfect storm unleashed by the invasion of Iraq. These monumental changes facilitated expression and mobilization and gave events, no matter how local, the potential to become regional. New media, social networking, user-generated websites, and private satellite channels helped to make Iraq's accelerated sectarianization contagious. The extent to which the new Iraq's tortuous birth coincided with the emergence of new media is truly remarkable: After regime change in 2003, Facebook was launched in 2004, YouTube came online in 2005 and Twitter was founded in 2006. In other words, these technological innovations came at a time when sectarian identity was being scrutinized as never before due to the Iraq war. As a result, sectarian polemicists, sectarian vitriol, and sectarian violence were among the pioneering genres in social networking and user-generated media in the Arab world.

In many ways, these innovations brought an end to the taboos surrounding discussion of sectarian identity and made sectarian polemics mainstream. What this has meant in practice is that, first, because of the proliferation of new media, sectarian entrenchment is just as likely to be driven from the grassroots level as from the political elite. It is of little use to highlight the role of the sectarian entrepreneur or the rabid sectarian television-cleric without acknowledging that the very fact of their proliferation reflects the resonance of their message with a significant body of opinion. Secondly, sectarian dynamics have become more regional than ever before with the Sunni-Shia issue appearing in hitherto unlikely places such as North Africa, and with local events now having a transnational echo.

Finally, the mainstreaming of sectarian polemics has increased the relevance of religious, doctrinal, and dogmatic differences in views regarding the sectarian "other." This is a particularly novel and dangerous development: in the era of the Arab nation-state sectarian rivalry was driven by and framed in temporal and national terms overlaid by considerations of class, ethnicity, region, and local grievances rather than religion per se.

Since 2003, however, what used to be the preserve of clerical circles – especially of the Salafist and Saudi Arabian variant – has become far more prevalent: The exclusion – indeed hatred – of the other based on their doctrinal beliefs and the mobilization, not just of sectarian identity, but of sectarian dogma as well. This rising trend threatens to decouple sectarian identity from national identity and to yield more rigid and ruthlessly maintained sectarian boundaries as evident in many examples from both Iraq and Syria.

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New media has, of course, been instrumental in militant discourse and jihadi propaganda. The previous decade's prolific militant networks have both reflected and shaped sectarian dynamics in the post-2003 Arab world. Given that Iraq and Syria – two conflicts perceived in heavily sectarian terms – have become epicenters of jihadi activity and symbolism, it is scarcely surprising that sectarian violence and rhetoric occupy a central role in Middle Eastern militancy. Indeed it often seems that the language of sectarian hate has, to an extent, displaced anti-U.S. and anti-Zionist rhetoric as the dominant frame in jihadi discourse in the Arab world. Similarly reflective of the post-2003 Middle East is the proliferation and assertiveness of Shia militant groups and the novel yet worrying phenomenon of transnational Shia militancy. More broadly, militant groups today, whether Sunni or Shia, are likely to project themselves as defenders of the sect alongside whatever other roles they perceive for themselves. The starkest illustration of the novelty of this is the changing place of Shia identity in Hezbollah's public image and public discourse.

Giving Birth to a New Middle East

The bigger picture within which the changes to sectarian identity and sectarian relations need to be framed is the region-wide challenge to older, more familiar political and social frameworks. This is likely to be particularly relevant to sectarian dynamics: The "old way" of ordering sectarian relations is now redundant and various Middle Eastern societies are struggling to negotiate an alternative. What is clear is that the taboos and awkwardness traditionally enveloping the issue of sectarian identities have all but withered away. More importantly, submissive acceptance of a status quo that empowers one sectarian group while disenfranchising another is something people—at least the disenfranchised amongst them – will no longer willingly tolerate. Sectarian relations, like much else in the Arab world since 2003, have been a struggle between those seeking change (benevolent or otherwise) and those who are threatened by it.

Our understanding of today's Middle East is hardly served by dismissals of post-2003 sectarian dynamics as a façade obscuring the reality of local and regional power politics. Even if, for the sake of argument, we grant that sectarian entrenchment is solely the fruit of cynical political calculation, 10 years of it can nevertheless have a normative societal effect. Indeed, as novel as all this might seem to older people, a generation has now grown up in an Arab world where sectarian identities carry significant socio-political relevance. However, this is not an argument for reducing Middle Eastern dynamics to their sectarian component. Despite their increased socio-political relevance, sectarian identities are not the 'be all and end all' of the 21st century Middle East. Furthermore, despite toxic levels of politicization, sectarian division is far from all encompassing and remains context driven. Sunnis and Shias are as internally divided as any similarly large groups and pragmatic self-interest is still likely to trump sectarian loyalties. Nevertheless, identity and communal relations are never just one static thing; rather, they are inherently ambiguous and, in a post-2003 Arab world where sectarian identities have attained an unprecedented level of social and political relevance, there is no fire more easily started than a sectarian one.