Query: What are the understandings of sectarianism in MENA countries, including economic, social, and political aspects?

Enquirer: MENAD, DFID

Contents

1. Overview
2. Conceptual Understandings of Sectarianism
3. Sectarianism in the Middle East region
4. The Sunni-Shi’a Divide
5. Country Cases
6. Additional resources

1. Overview

There is some debate about how sectarianism, particularly as it relates to the Middle East is commonly conceptualised. For many in the Middle East, it has come to be defined as the process of ascribing political and social claims or rights on the basis of religious adherence and belonging (Douwes 2009). However, scholars stress the importance of developing an appropriate conceptual framework if the history and politics of the region are to be adequately understood. They argue that rather than emphasising the religious aspect of sectarianism, analysts should see it as “politics organized along sectarian lines” (Makdisi 2008). Universal theories of sectarianism are also not appropriate. Instead, it is important to historicise and trace the evolution of specific sectarian arrangements, laws, institutions, and structures in the modern Middle East. In this way, sectarianism can be understood as the process by which, religious groups, operating within a common historical context, compete for power and influence within specific national political spaces as defined by particular state borders. This helpdesk report therefore, defines sectarianism as the process of politicisation of religious identity, which may be manifested through collective action, or through violence. It therefore seeks to uncover the factors which drive or sustain this politicisation in the region.

Peteet (2008) argues that a particular problem with the way that the Middle East has been conceptualised as “a multitude of discrete sociocultural units based on sect, ethnicity, and tribe means that complex social processes and relationships are distilled into bounded categories which do not necessarily correspond to reality”. Such a conceptualisation also fails to understand the power relations that exist within and between communities, as well as the fact that they are cross-cut by other social formations, such as class. She points to the example of the ethno-sectarian division model being proposed for Iraq, arguing that invoking sect and tribe in this way has served to crystallise what were previously latent social formations and affiliations. She also argues that once such a categorisation is used as the basis for distribution of resources, it will become further solidified.
Predictably, the majority of the literature on the issue of sectarianism in the Middle East region seems to focus on divisions between the Sunni and Shi’a communities, which come increasingly into focus in the region. This seems to be as a result of three important developments:

- the increasing assertiveness of the the Shi’a Iranian regime;
- the increased regional profile of Lebanon’s Shi’a Hizballah; and
- the emergence of Shi’a dominated Iraq.

Whilst this has enhanced the confidence of Shi’as across the region to demand greater representation and rights, it has also led to a corresponding Sunni backlash, with various Sunni leaders voicing alarm over the possible emergence of a ‘Shi’a Crescent’, i.e. an alleged Iranian plan to shift the regional balance by supporting an alliance of Shi’a regimes and movements across Middle East.

In terms of Sunni-Shi’a divisions, and sectarian issues more generally, there are a number of common themes which emerge from the literature in terms of what drives sectarianism, and the conditions necessary for sectarian activism. These are as follows:

**Insecurity.** The Middle East is characterised by strong repressive states (Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iran) and in the case of Iraq, no state at all. Much of the literature argues that in environments characterised by insecurity and the fear of persecution, individuals tend to turn to sources of protection from state or non-state violence, which are considered areas of safety and trust (Williams and Timpson 2008; Peteet 2008). This source of protection is often found within a strong communal identity, or within groups organised around sectarian lines, family or kinship. Often times, as in the case of the Lebanese Christian militias of the 1960s, these groups are mobilising not to establish a religious state, but out of fear of “communal extinction” (Owen 2004). In addition, groups will look to delegate authority as political spokesperson to a religious leader so that they may address the concerns of the community. These leaders can build support through activism on key grievances, which often correspond to the lack of (human) security in the region. While insecurity in the region remains, religion and its actors can draw upon their position, heritage and resources to retain social and political significance (McCallum 2011). Owen (2004) argues that if there is confrontation between groups, as there was during the civil war in Lebanon, it is when the fighting intensified, and as individuals and then whole districts became targets simply in terms of their confessional allegiance, the role of religion as a marker took on great salience.

**Discrimination and inequality.** Minority (and in some case majority) groups in the Middle east are subject to deep-seated institutional discrimination, which often results in lower standards of living and inequalities (for more on this please see the GSDRC Helpdesk report on ‘Religious Identity and Inequality). Discrimination inevitably breeds discontent and resentment. There is considerable evidence that Shi’a resentment about their socio-economic deprivation in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, and historically in Lebanon has led to both occasional violence and to political activism when conditions allow it. However, Middle Eastern state security services have in general managed to prevent open expressions of discontent (Ottaway et al 2008).

**The politicisation of Shi’a identity and increasing Shi’a activism.** Shi’a opposition and religious leaders across the Middle East have traditionally promoted using non-violent dissent and avoiding escalation of conflict with the regime. However, it is argued that they have little to show for it, and as a result, in a radical break from a long tradition of political quietism, there are emerging clear signs of the rise of Shi’a activism. This is due to a variety of factors, including the rise of the theocratic regime in Iran, which stresses the country’s Islamic identity; the rise of a Shi’a dominated government in Iraq; the choice made by many Shi’a to stress their religious identity; and the growing importance of Hizbollah in Lebanon, which has become not only an important domestic player, but as a result of its action against Israel in
2000 and 2006, has also emerged as a regional force, having gained, for a time, a heroic reputation (Ottaway et al. 2008). The fall of Saddam’s regime has also opened up some of Shi’ism’s holiest cities and centres of learning to Shi’as from across the region, strengthening transnational Shi’a religious and cultural identity.

The role of the clergy. The Shi’a clergy have always played an important role in Shi’a communal life. Shi’a students from across the region have often studied in Iraq and Iran, which are home to some of Shi’ism’s oldest centres of learning. There they were influenced by new religio-political ideas, many of which had a strong political component, and combined an emphasis on clerical activism with an engagement with Marxist principles, and the spirit of popular revolution (Owen 2004). Many of these leaders returned to their home countries and founded social movements, such as Musa Al-Sadr’s creation of the Movement of the Disinherited in Lebanon in 1974, and the milita ‘Amal ‘or atwaj al-muqawama al-lubnaniya as the country descended into civil war. These institutions cultivated the religious-cultural identity of the Shi’a and promoted a sense of self-confidence and political power (Ma’oz 2009).

The literature also shows that governments in the Middle East have responded to sectarian activities mainly through repression - which has included arrest, detention and torture (Bahrain), and often gone as far as razing entire towns as punishment (Saudi Arabia). The literature suggests some of the factors that drive this behaviour:

Weak legitimacy, and the cycles of protest and repression. It is argued that governments of multi-religious societies can perceive minorities (or subordinate majority groups) as a threat to their legitimacy, and can subject them to discrimination, ostensibly in an effort to ‘defend the walls’ of the dominant religion. Government need for legitimacy can be evidenced by the example of the ‘Alawi regime in Syria, which in the face of ongoing rejection by its Sunni population for not being from a mainstream religious group has sought to take on Shi’a credentials for itself (Ma’oz 2007). However, selective restrictions on religious minority groups may strengthen the ethnoreligious identity of those groups, and give them a legitimate cause to rebel. In addition, religion can function as a legitimizing force for both governments and for the groups who oppose the governments. As seen in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, these protests are often met with violent repression by the government. This may work to temporarily silence protest but can further entrench a sense of grievance and communalism. For example, in Bahrain, considerable ill-will persists today amongst Shi’a communities who have been subjected to arrest, harassment and torture as punishment for past protest. There is little satisfaction that past grievances have been resolved (Ottaway et al. 2008)

Shi’as and the loyalty question. The 1979 Iranian Revolution made Sunni governments extremely paranoid that Shi’a communities within their borders would join with the Iranians to take over their countries. As a result, Shi’as in Sunni-majority countries remain under growing suspicion by their governments and Sunni society. It is true that, inspired by the revolution, some more radical Shi’a Islamist groups, such as those in Lebanon, began to envision the establishment of a Lebanese Shi’a Islamic state along the lines of the Islamic Republic of Iran. However, the objectives of the most Shi’a activism have been and mostly remain domestic in nature, primarily to fight socio-economic and religious discrimination and achieve more political representation. Nevertheless, many leading Shi’a clerics and politicians, in Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain for example, have had to repeatedly declare their loyalty to the

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state and deny that they are part of a grand Iranian-led conspiracy against the Arab states of the Gulf (Ottaway et al). Both the Bahraini and Saudi governments continue to view the Shi’a community as a security threat, using regional conflict in order to suppress internal demand for change.

**Geopolitical rivalry.** Some of the literature argues that current sectarian divisions are a result of geopolitical rivalry between the US and Iran. It is argued that in their quest for predominance, the two countries are “reshaping alliances and defining, or redefining, conflicts both old and new. Witness the lurch towards civil war in Lebanon, the Hamas “self-coup” in Gaza and the violent battle for power in Iraq” (Hilterman 2007:796). Other literature mentions that, in the aftermath of the 1979 Revolution, the Iranian government did in fact support violent but abortive Shi’a uprisings in countries like Bahrain, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia (Owen 2004; Ma’oz 2007). Others argue that Sunni-Shi’a rivalries are being emphasised in an effort to deflect attention from the US occupation of Iraq and continuing Israeli aggression (Abdel-Latif 2007). Hilterman (2007) argues: “If political manipulation is not curbed there is a risk that political divisions and sectarian tensions are created where previously only social, cultural and religious differences existed.”

### 2. Conceptual Understandings of Sectarianism

The summaries below form part of the ‘Quick Studies: Questions and Pensées’ section in a 2008 volume of the Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, where a range of experts aim to answer a particular question. They question here is:

*How Useful Has the Concept of Sectarianism Been for Understanding the History, Society, and Politics of the Middle East?*


This article is available to purchase from Cambridge Journals: [http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=2428944](http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=2428944)

This expert argues that the concept of sect should not be seen as the sole explanatory factor for events in the Middle East, and while it is critical to understanding the Middle East region, it must be historicized and understood in terms of its relationship to external and internal events. In addition, “the politics behind its invocation must not be neglected. Of most significance, we need to probe how concepts of sect (and tribe) are then appropriated by the local population.”

Yet, old ideas about the centrality of sect and tribe have significant resonance amongst the US military and media. The expert argues “(i)nvoking sect and tribe suggests an absence of modernity and a unified state with universal citizenship because of the primacy of primordial ties and identities”. As a result, Iraq has been imagined as three geo-social units which correspond with ethnicity, tribe, and sect: a Kurdish north, a Sunni triangle in the middle-north, and a Shi’a south. US occupation forces have also structured political representation along sectarian lines, as seen by their appointment of a twenty-five-member Iraqi Governing Council, which included thirteen Shi’a, five Sunnis, five Kurds, one Turkmen, and one Assyrian Christian. By activating these constructs, Petee argues formerly latent social formations and affiliations became tangible.

The problem with conceptualising the region as a multitude of discrete sociocultural units based on sect, ethnicity, and tribe means that complex social processes and relationships are distilled into bounded categories which do not necessarily correspond to reality. They also fail to explain how communities emerged historically and their relationships with each other and
the state. Of most importance, it often ignores the power relations among and within communities and their fluid boundaries, as well as the fact that the concept of sect is that it is crosscut by other social formations and ties, particularly class.

These reformulated social categories have also become avenues for distributing resources and access to power, and the author argues that sects and their leaders thrive when they have greater access to and control over resources than the state does, or, as in Lebanon, the state is organized, and distributes resources, along sectarian lines. In addition, insecurity and repressive state can promote sectarianism tribalism, and family solidarity. These become strategic sources of protection from state violence and are reinforced as arenas of safety and trust.

This article is available to purchase from Cambridge Journals: http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=2428956

In this response, the author argues that in trying to develop analytical tools to understand sectarian conflict in the Middle East, it is important to distinguish between “religion/religious identity and consciousness” (as theology/theological consciousness) and “sect/sectarianism” (as social organization, relationships, dynamics/group identity, and consciousness). ‘Sectarianism’, he argues, “is about how ‘differences’ are constructed; because people can believe they are very different when they are not, the task of the scholar is to describe what differences do exist, how they emerged, and why people believe they are different. Differentiation is a process […] that operates through the everyday—through socialization, through family systems, and through various other aspects of social organization in both systematic and erratic or contradictory ways.”

The author points out that religion and sectarianism have operated or been manifested in profoundly diverse and contradictory ways in recent history, and this should inform analyses of conflicts in the Middle East. The issue, he argues “is not, what are religious differences? Rather, it is a series of questions: What do specific people believe these differences to be at specific points in time and specific places? How have they come to believe them? How have those shifting beliefs transformed into motivations that have material effects?”

Thus, “sectarianism” should be seen as a sociological concept, and as social formation in history. Equally important is an analysis of “the culture” of sectarianism which highlights the process of production, how it is that ideas are produced and transformed into reality.

This article is available to purchase from Cambridge Journals: http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=2428980

This expert argues that the notion of sectarianism can be useful in understanding the Middle East. As in India and Ireland, sectarian (or communal) identities have been crucial to the elaboration of modern politics in many parts of the region. However, unlike India and Ireland today, the Middle East is subject to American domination. The result is that the study of Middle Eastern sectarianism is extraordinarily politicized. Therefore, it is necessary to address various problematic assumptions.

First, rather than emphasizing the religious aspect of sectarianism, and thus encouraging distorted and historically untenable comparisons, analysts should put politics first, and think
of sectarianism “as what it is: politics organized along sectarian lines”. Instead of trying to develop a universal theory of sectarianism, it is important to historicize and trace the evolution of specific sectarian arrangements, laws, institutions, and structures in the modern Middle East. This is because sectarianism refers to a process through which religious identity is politicised – “not an object, not an event, and certainly not a primordial trait”.

Therefore, scholars and analysts must seek to understand how religious identity is manifested within specific local and historical contexts: how and why and in what context it has been mobilized, affected, transformed, and enacted. The author argues: “When it comes to the modern Middle East, from 19th-century Mount Lebanon to Mandatory Palestine to American-occupied Iraq, this often, if not invariably, means acknowledging the intersection between Western intervention and local aspirations. Sectarianism in the modern Middle East reflects a set of unequal choices made by unequal players. It is this unequal relationship that has so often created the problem we seek to study. To have any meaning to scholars, sectarianism as discourse and practice must always be historicized.”


This book is available for purchase from Amazon UK: http://www.amazon.co.uk/Between-Spaces-Christian-Minorities-Transition/dp/9052015651

A preview of this book is available at Google Books: http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=hNGbSCRAghQC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false

In this chapter, the author argues that in the Middle East, the term ‘sectarian’ has come to be defined as the process of ascribing political claims or rights to religious communities that go beyond matters of worship or family. In fact, minority issues are often seen as being part and parcel of negotiating statehood and the use of public space, in particular uses that carry ethnic – such as Kurdish versus Arabic – or religious – such as Christian against Muslim – connotations. More and more, religious adherence and belonging are being regarded as the basis for social and political organisation.

The author also outlines the difference between kinship-based regimes, and those that are more religiously based. In religiously-based states, and in particular in the public domain which is shared by the various religious groups, various communities compete for visibility. Regimes allegedly based on kinship, such as that of Syria and Bahrain, and for that matter, clan-based political networks, such as those in Lebanon, are basically a-religious in the sense that they do not have any sacred agenda other than the cult of the family or clan leader, such as the late Saddam Hussain, Hafiz al-Asad and Rafiq Hariri. Though these cults may have occasional religious connotations, they are secular in nature and political in purpose.

3. Sectarianism in the Middle East region


Chapter 9 of this book looks at the impact of the contemporary religious revival – Christian, Jewish as well as Muslim - in the Middle East. The author argues that even though the Iranian Revolution in 1979 sparked increased activity by religiously inspired political movements, religion had long before that “played an important role in the process of state- and nation-building in the region due to the fact that it was inextricably involved with central questions of identity and of communal values. And it continues to remain of exceptional
importance as states and religious organizations of many types vie with one another for influence over basic issues concerning the exercise of power and the creation of a just society." Owen also argues that firstly, the study of religion in politics is needed to understand its influences on the policies and the distribution of power within a modern state. The author further argues that modern politico-religious movements in the Middle East all operate within a common historical context in which they are all competing for power and influence within specific national political spaces as defined by particular state borders. While a number of movements may have significant regional linkages, the vast majority of religio-political actors behave as through their primary aim was to influence policies and practices within the system they are located in.

The book highlights the impact of the Iranian revolution on many Arab countries, both on the local Shi'a populations who saw it as a means to improve their own status and on many sections of the Sunni Muslim community, particularly those living under dictatorial or western-allied regimes. In fact, it was taken as proof of the fact that a popular movement could overthrow a tyrannical regime. As a result, authoritarian regimes began to face a fresh challenge from a range of political actors who discovered the mobilizing power of religious language, as well as the fact authoritarian regimes could not control mosques, as well as the educational and welfare activities that took place, and thus provided a space from which the activist message could be spread.

The author also highlights the rise of militant Shi'a movements at this time: "Historically the Shi'a communities had been forced to the margins of the Arab world by a long series of Sunni ruling dynasties, and tended to live in poor, mountainous or desert areas with access to few resources and only the poorest land. Their members were thus particularly responsive to late 20th century movements of communal self-assertion, whether expressed in religious or class terms." Another feature of Shi’a communal life was the role of the clergy and the influence on it of some of the new religio-political ideas learned during their period of study in Iraq and Iran. It was there, for instance, that many of its members went for study and became acquainted with the ideas of men like Muhammad Baqr al-Sadr of Najaf, whose thinking had developed a very obvious political component, combining a stress on clerical activism with Marxist ideas and popular revolution.

Shi’a movements were particularly prominent in the Gulf during the 1980s, and many of them received inspiration and sometimes direct assistance from members of the Iranian revolutionary government. Their growing assertiveness led to a series of clashes with the Sunni rulers, notably in the eastern province of Saudi Arabia in 1979–80. Over time, these movements came to be contained or dispersed by the local authorities, and their leaders began to concentrate more on calling for democracy as a way of promoting their demands for better representation and equality.

In Lebanon, on the basis of the 1931 official census, the Christians were allocated the offices of the President and the Commander of the armed forces, and the largest share of posts in the government. The author points out that over time, some Christians became wary about the growing power of Arab nationalism regionally and then, after 1967, the increase of Palestinian power within Lebanon. When using the army to subdue the PLO guerrillas proved ineffective, they too turned to sectarianism and began to cultivate Christian-based militias, which led them to confrontation with the forces of the Palestinian/leftist alliance in 1975. The author explains that as the fighting intensified, and as individuals and then whole districts became targets simply in terms of their confessional allegiance, the role of religion as a marker assumed great salience. The author argues however, that "the struggle is only explicable in communitarian, rather than purely religious, terms. While it is true that the majority of Lebanese Christians identified themselves as believers or 'strong' believers, this in no way seems to have implied that they thought they or their leaders should be fighting for a Christian state [...] We must assume, therefore, that it was fear of communal extinction, rather than religion per se, which was the major reason for the bulk of the Christian
communities to place themselves under the protection of what were essentially politico/military forces.” (p.175)

This concern with self-preservation is mirrored by smaller Christian communities elsewhere. For example, in Egypt, during the first decades after independence, the political leadership effectively demonstrated that it considered the Coptic community an integral part of the Egyptian nation. However, with time, the welfare of the community came to be seen largely as the responsibility of the clergy, who in turn encouraged a process of Coptic self-assertion during the early Sadat period. This took the form of a communal mobilization centred round the churches, and the creation of many new benevolent associations, often with funds from the Coptic immigrants abroad. The author argues that these developments were driven by a strong sense amongst the community that Sadat was moving Egypt towards a more forceful assertion of its Islamic character: for example, his invitation to the Muslim Brothers to participate in the discussions concerning the 1971 Constitution. It was also fuelled by the growing antagonism of some of the more militant Islamic groups towards the Copts, beginning with a dispute over an attempt to convert a Coptic philanthropic association into a church in 1972 and culminating in a series of attacks on Christian property in Cairo and Upper Egypt in 1980. President Sadat’s efforts to restore peace included the arrest of hundreds of both Muslim and Christian activists in the summer of 1981, including Pope Shenouda himself.

This process of communal assertion continued in a more muted way under President Mubarak, with further efforts to draw as many Copts as possible into church-led institutions and to participate openly in Coptic religious festivals like Christmas and Easter. The Coptic leadership is criticised by Muslims of promoting separatism in this way, and responds by stressing the importance of religious culture in Egyptian history and of the role of Copts as popular saints and heroes.


This article aims to provide an overview of Christian political developments in the Middle East, by using two case studies, the Coptic church in Egypt and the Maronite church in Lebanon. The author argues it is not only Islamic religious leaders in the Middle East who continue to have a political dimension to their spiritual role, but that this holds true for Christian leaders too. These leaders build their support through activism on key grievances, which often correspond to the lack of (human) security in the region. While insecurity in the region remains, religion and its actors can draw upon their position, heritage and resources to retain social and political significance.

The author also identifies three further reasons why religious identities have moved into the political arena:

1. While the failure of nationalist policies to produce development and security has affected everyone, Christian groups have become particularly disillusioned as they saw these policies as a means to participate in the state on the basis of full equality, an expectation which did not materialise. Instead religious identity has been used to separate them from the majority and in some cases, exclude them from full participation. As a response to this process, Christian religious identity has been reinforced and accentuated.

2. Individuals from the community with links to the government are frequently dismissed as unable and unwilling to work to address the community's concerns. They are also often perceived as advancing their own personal interests. As a result there exists a leadership vacuum, which is often filled by religious leaders who have the additional advantage of being seen as of high moral calibre.
3. In an environment characterised by insecurity and the fear of persecution, it is to be expected that individuals are willing to turn to a strong communal identity and delegate authority as political spokesperson to a religious leader on condition that they address the key grievances of the community.

Both the Maronites and the Coptic leaders iterate the above concerns within a nationalist framework, stressing that their religious identity is closely linked to that of the nation state. Aware of allegations of disloyalty to the state and alliances with Western actors, they are careful to frame the discourse as a domestic concern, arguing that their communities only want to enjoy full participation and equality in their own homeland. In these ways, they try to bridge the gap between their role as spokesperson for their community and their adherence to the state.

4. The Sunni-Shi’a Divide

http://www.nowlebanon.com/Library/Files/EnglishDocumentation/Studies/new_middle_east.pdf

This report argues that one of unanticipated consequences of U.S. intervention in Iraq has been the increase in sectarian tensions not only in that country but in the entire region. The authors argue that the collapse of the Iraqi state has led to greater Iranian assertiveness, and there are growing concerns amongst Arab countries about the rise of Shi’a power in the Middle East. For example, in 2004, King Abdullah of Jordan used the term “Shi’a Crescent” to describe alleged Iranian plans to shift the regional balance by supporting an alliance of Shi’a regimes and movements across Middle East. A few weeks later President Mubarak of Egypt accused the Shi’a citizens of Iraq and the Gulf of being more loyal to Iran than to their nation-states. However, the authors argue, although there is considerable discontent among Shi’a, particularly in the Gulf countries and in Lebanon, such discontent is not likely to translate into a grand regional alliance dominated by Iran. The paper goes on to outline three main ‘realities’ relating to this:

The politicization of Shi’a identity and the rise of Shi’a activism. This is due to various factors, including: the rise of the theocratic regime in Iran, which stresses the country’s Islamic identity; the rise of a Shi’a dominated government in Iraq; the choice made by most Shi’a to stress their religious identity; and the growing importance of Hizbollah in Lebanon, which has become not only an important domestic player, but as a result of its action against Israel in 2006, has also emerged as a regional force, having gained, for a time, a heroic reputation.

Shi’a demographics. Shi’a are a majority only in Iran, Iraq, and Bahrain, where they represent 70 percent of the population. They are also the single largest sect in Lebanon, although not the majority. However, in most Arab and Islamic countries the percentage of Shi’a in the population is quite small. This suggests that focusing on a “Shi’a Crescent” would not be a successful strategy for Iran.

Discontent among the Shi’a. Shi’a in various Arab countries are subject to deep-seated institutional discrimination and tend to have a lower standard of living. Discrimination is particularly severe in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. Whilst discrimination inevitably breeds discontent and resentment, the authors argue that the real question, is whether this resentment has translated into greater political activism and, if so, what kind of activism - political opposition or violence?
So far, resentment has only led to open violence several times in Bahrain and once in Saudi Arabia. In Lebanon, Shi’a discontent in the 1960s and 1970s led to large-scale mobilisation and was part of the dynamic of the 1975–1990 civil war. In Bahrain, violence erupted in 1975, as a response to the passage of the new State Security Measures Law, which effectively voided the rights guaranteed by the 1973 constitution, and again in 1994, when demonstrations demanding a return to the 1973 constitution were brutally suppressed by the government. In Saudi Arabia, a Shi’a radical group, emboldened by the Islamic revolution in Iran, briefly seized the Great Mosque in Mecca in 1979, leading to a period of great tension. In general, however, open expressions of discontent have been prevented by the security apparatus’s ruthless measures. For example, during the 1979–1980 confrontation, the Saudi government literally bulldozed the entire historic downtown of Qatif, a major Shi’a stronghold. In 2009, the Saudi religious police and Shi’a worshippers clashed in Medina, which led to a wave of unrest.

The Iranian revolution undoubtedly had an impact throughout the region. New political organisations developed in several countries, with ties to each other and Iran, and Khomeini’s radical interpretation of Shi’a doctrine to justify theocratic rule became influential. Similarly, elections in Iraq taught Shi’a communities about the power of numbers in elections. More recently Shi’a in Saudi Arabia have taken advantage of the few available political opportunities - many ran in the 2005 municipal elections in the eastern provinces - but most of their activities are covert and difficult to evaluate. There is evidence therefore that Shi’a resentment has led to both to occasional violence and to political activism when conditions allow it – but it cannot be conclusively argued that that it has led to the development of a transnational movement.

Mobilisation so far has been confined within the borders of existing nation-states. Shi’a communities have also not questioned the legitimacy of the states in which they reside based on a grand Shi’a narrative. Rather, the objectives of their activism have been domestic in nature, primarily to fight socioeconomic and religious discrimination and achieve more political representation. Such efforts predate the war in Iraq or the Iranian revolution. Apart from marginal and unpopular militant groups, the Shi’a of the Gulf have remained loyal to their nation-states. Indeed, in the face of growing Sunni suspicions, many leading Shi’a clerics and politicians have repeatedly declared their loyalty to the state and denied that they are part of a grand Iranian-led conspiracy against the Arab states of the Gulf.


This paper also addresses the prospects of the emergence of a ‘Shi’a Crescent’ and argues that the Shi’a are more concerned with changing their situation within their existing countries than in binding themselves to Iran, or in creating any other form of pan-Shi’a alliance. Growing numbers of Shi’a prefer social and political integration on equal terms in their national communities and reject Sunni accusations that they are loyal to Iran. Even Hizballah in Lebanon has nominally changed its attitude and claims to seek integration, although the author suspects that it still harbours a desire to seize central authority in Lebanon on the basis of the Shi’a plurality.

However, the author argues that at the core of the issue of the Shi’a in the Middle East is the eventual nature of relations between Iran and Shi’a Arab Iraq. Shi’a parties and organizations in the Arab Middle East were initially inspired by the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran and with Iranian assistance staged violent but abortive uprisings in Bahrain, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. That approach has largely changed, due to changes in Iranian policy and a greater willingness by Sunni Arab-dominated states in the Persian Gulf to be more open to their Shi’a
populations. The recent empowerment of the Shi‘a community in Iraq has cemented this approach.

The reports also points to the increase in anti-Shi‘a rhetoric from Sunni clerics and Sunni Islamist groups. Several Sunni clerics, particularly Wahhabis, have incited Sunnis against the Shi‘a. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi proclaimed war on the Shi‘a in Iraq and Lebanon. Wahhabi clerics depict the Shi‘a as heretics whose strand of Islam is, they claim, close to Judaism or the pre-Islamic Persian religion of Zoroastrianism. The almost exclusively Shi‘a Hizballah movement in Lebanon was harshly criticized by Saudi Arabian, Egyptian and Jordanian leaders for its “irresponsible actions” against Israel in July 2006, actions that provoked a massive Israeli onslaught on Lebanon.

The report then turns its attention to the sectarian dynamics within particular Middle Eastern states. Selected case studies follow:

**Syria**

The ‘Alawis have historically been marginalised by the majority Sunni community in Syria. However, during the time of the French, they were given more political representation and power. The report argues that given the Sunni Arabs’ enduring rejection of the ‘Alawis, and in an effort to enhance its legitimacy, the ‘Alawi-led Syrian regime sought to take on Shi‘a credentials for itself. In 1973, eighty ‘Alawi religious figures issued a joint proclamation that stated that the ‘Alawis were Twelver Shi‘a who adhered to the teachings of ‘Ali and the Quran. In 1973 the leading Shi‘a imam in Lebanon, Musa as-Sadr, who was president of that country’s Supreme Islamic Shi‘a Council, confirmed that the ‘Alawis were doctrinally the same as one the Shi‘a. The Iranians also offered similar support as the Sunni Arab rebellion in Syria turned violent in the early 1980s. In recent years, several Shi‘i clerics from Iran and Lebanon have also been invited to Syria to deliver sermons in ‘Alawi villages, while young ‘Alawi men have been sent to attend Shi‘a seminaries in Iran.

The author argues: “The Syrian regime’s survival strategy is based not on rhetoric but realpolitik. Syria’s most credible allies are Iran and Hizballah, because of common strategic interests and not their alleged shared Shi‘ism. Each needs the other to fend off what is seen as a U.S.-Israeli attempt to erode their respective positions, whether by pushing Syria out of Lebanon, imposing sanctions on Iran for its nuclear program or encouraging the Lebanese government to disarm Hizballah”. For example, the “common front” between Iran and Syria was announced after Syrian troops were obliged to leave Lebanon in April 2005, and further consolidated by the Iranian-Syrian military pact of June 2006.

In terms of Syria’s involvement in the feared Shi‘a Crescent, the author argues that the Syrian regime also knows that it has to spread its bets, which is why it is careful that its Shi‘a identity is not so prominent so as to alienate the Sunni states. Syria’s connections with Saudi Arabia and Turkey enable it to fend off US and UN pressure, particularly over the murder of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in February 2005, in which Syria was deeply implicated. “These ties with moderate states do not mean that Syria has adopted a moderate policy, but that it is seeking the cover that these moderate states can provide as well as a fall back option should its alliance with Hizballah and Iran prove too costly. For Syria, state interest is a more important guide than its supposed role in the “Shi‘i crescent.””

**Lebanon**

Although the Shi‘a of Lebanon have been historically discriminated against, they have, unlike other Shi‘a communities, consistently participated in national politics for many generations, initially through their feudal chiefs but more recently through their popular movements such as Amal and Hizballah. As a result, although a minority in Lebanon, they have been “transformed from a passive, divided and “dispossessed” population into a politically mobile, vigorous and assertive community.” Various factors and processes have underpinned this development:
A share of political power. In preparation for the departure of the French in 1943, the unwritten National Pact agreed an informal power sharing arrangement. The Christian Maronites were given the office of the President, the Sunnis the prime ministership, and the Shi'a, who were around 20 percent of Lebanon’s population according to the 1932 census, were assigned the position of the speaker of parliament and proportional representation in parliament and the public administration. Although this put the Shi'a in third place in Lebanon’s pecking order, it nonetheless strengthened thei role in Lebanon’s power structure.

Enduring under-development. Socio-economically, however, the Shi’a’s status remained underdeveloped. The French, and subsequently Maronite-dominated independent Lebanon, showed little interest in ensuring that the Shi’a received equitable access to health and educational services. As the Lebanese economy started to change, many poor Shi’a migrated from the rural areas to Beirut where they became an economically marginal group. As the Lebanese economy developed, some of these Shi’a, in the search for political leadership that could address their socio-economic needs, began supporting national, secular or socialist parties that promised to create a non-sectarian and egalitarian society.

The leadership of Musa al-Sadr. Things changed further still with the emergence of the charismatic figure of Musa al-Sadr, who was an imam born in Qom, Iran, a key centre of Shi’a learning, and who arrived in Lebanon in 1959. In 1969, he established the Supreme Islamic Shi’a Council. In 1974 he created the Movement of the Disinherited, and the following year, with Lebanon descending into civil war, he set up its militia ‘Amal’ or afwaj al-muqawama al-lubnaniya (Battalions of the Lebanese Resistance). These institutions cultivated the religious-cultural identity of the Shi’a and promoted a sense of self-confidence and political power. The Lebanese civil war (1975-90), Syria’s military intervention in Lebanon in 1976, the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, and the Israeli invasion and occupation of southern Lebanon (1982-2000) contributed further to radicalizing the Lebanese Shi’a and deepening their sense of self-reliance.

The emergence of Hizballah. Inspired by the 1979 Iranian Islamic revolution, more radical Shi’a Islamist groups began to envision the establishment of a Lebanese Shi’a Islamic state along the lines of the Islamic Republic of Iran. These actors began to break away from Amal, and an important cluster formed around Muhammad Fadlallah, an Iraqi-born cleric who had studied in the Iraqi holy city of Najaf and had been associated with Da‘wa, Iraq’s oldest Shi’a Islamist party. In 1982 these clerics founded Hizballah. Hizballah’s military achievement in forcing Israel to leave Lebanon in 2000, its uncorrupted record and popular socio-economic agenda, have since made the party the most powerful political force among the Shi’a and in Lebanon more generally. Importantly the author argues: “Hizballah also appears to have moderated its political agenda, although it remains unclear if this is tactical and temporary, or strategic and permanent. There is a strong argument to be made that Hizballah will eventually use the Shi‘i plurality in Lebanon’s population, the community is now reckoned to be forty percent of Lebanon’s population, to alter the sectarian system to its advantage”. Certainly, since the mid-1980s, Hizballah’s key ideological leaders have proposed electoral changes in Lebanon that would empower the Shi’a. For example, they have suggested scrapping the constituency system that enrenches sectarianism and instead having a national list system. In addition, they have called or the president to be elected by a national vote – in practice this would make it most likely that the post would be held by a Muslim. The author states: “Such changes would transform Lebanon from a confessionally-diverse polity into a Shi‘i-dominated state, of the kind that Iraq has become since 2003.”

http://www.teachingterror.net/resources/ASGMAPPING_JIHADIST_THREAT.pdf#page=70
This chapter argues that regional politics in the Middle East is shaped by two realities:

Firstly, Sunni fall from power in Iraq has ended their hegemonic domination of regional politics and diminished the power of Sunni regimes and ruling communities. It has also produced a popular Sunni backlash, intensified sectarian rivalries and raised the spectre of broader Shia-Sunni conflict that could threaten regional stability. Certainly, the insurgency in Iraq draws on Sunni anger to wage a campaign of violence against U.S. occupation, but also to prevent the Shia consolidation of power. Saudi Arabia’s Wahhabi clerics denounce Shi’ism as heresy and as an American fifth column, echoing pronouncements by Iraq’s pro-Saudi Council of Muslim Clerics and Abu Musab Zarqawi, and those of militant Sunni clerics in Syria, Jordan, or Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Secondly, regime change in Iraq has empowered Shi’as in that country, and this has in turn led to a Shi’a revival across the Middle East that, as a cultural and political force, will shape regional politics. Iraq has encouraged the region’s Shi’as to demand greater rights and representation, but also to identify themselves as members of a region-wide community that extends beyond state borders. The Saudi government is also under pressure from its resurgent Shi’a minority to relax its restrictions on that community, to recognize their religious rights and to allow them to practise their religion in the open. The Saudi monarchy has so far cautiously yielded to Shi’a demands, but is under pressure to do more. This would however mean weakening the Wahhabi-Saudi compact that since 1932 has formed the religious and political structure of the Kingdom. This will also encourage other minority groups and tribes to also demand rights, which will further erode the authority of the Saudi monarchy. The author argues: “This would put to question the religious legitimacy of the monarchy as the defender and propagator of Islam in the eyes of its hard-line clerics, an outcome that will weaken the Saudi monarchy. It is the Shia challenge, not al Qaeda that is the primary threat to the Saudi regime.”

The fall of Saddam’s regime has also opened up some of Shi’ism’s holiest cities and centres of learning to Shi’a from across the region, strengthening transnational Shi’a religious and cultural identity. The leadership of Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in Iraq has in particular strengthened allegiance to the faith at the popular level, and helped spawn new networks of people and organisations around the authority of the clerical leadership in Najaf. In addition, in May 2005 Ayatollah Sistani strongly criticised the Yemeni government for its suppression of a Shia rebellion in northwest Yemen. This was a clear warning to the Saudi regime regarding the treatment of its Shia minority and an indication that transnational Shia ties and the Najaf establishment will challenge Sunni regimes, demanding greater rights for the Shia.

**Hilterman, J., 2007, ‘A New Sectarian Threat in the Middle East?’, International Review of the Red Cross, Volume 89, pp. 795-808**
http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=1889004

In light of the Sunni backlash against the Shi’a resurgence in Iraq, this article discusses the origins, manifestations and implications of the Sunni-Shi’a divide. The author argues that the primary battle in the region is not between Sunnis and Shi’as but between the United States and Iran. The author argues: “the more significant conflict in the Middle East is between a “Shiite” power professing to be something else – Iran – one side, and the United States and its disparate band of friends (both Israel and “Sunni” Arab states such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan) on the other. An intense rivalry between the United States and Iran for predominance is reshaping alliances and defining, or redefining, conflicts both old and new. Witness the lurch towards civil war in Lebanon, the Hamas “self-coup” in Gaza and the violent battle for power in Iraq.”

The author further argues that the political tactic of portraying the struggle between a global and a regional superpower in sectarian terms serves both individuals and regimes. It is used by both political actors, hoping to outrace more scrupulous competitors, and autocratic
regimes seeking to win popularity in lieu of free elections, and perpetuate themselves in power. If political manipulation is not curbed there is a risk that political divisions and sectarian tensions are created where previously only social, cultural and religious differences existed. Therefore, the most effective long-term solution to the growing sectarian rift in the Middle East lies in the creation of an environment based on tolerance and which prevents any single sectarian group from becoming dominant.


The article provides an overview of the developments surrounding the Shi’a revival in the Middle East. It argues that, in a radical break from a long tradition of political inactivity, there are clear signs of growing Shi’a political activism in the region. The development of a political Shi’a identity has been manifested in several ways. For the first time, in Iraq, the Shi’a have gained power in an Arab country. Further, Shi’a dominated Hizballah is seeking to replace the Lebanese government, though this is denied by party leaders.

However, tensions between Shi’a groups have also emerged. Recently the leader of Hizbullah distanced himself from the Shi’a in Iraq, exposing the fallacy of supposing the Shia's rise to power in Iraq as part of some grand Shia design. One Shi’a thinker close to Hizbullah even argues that what is happening in Iraq, “is not something from which strength can be drawn; rather, the opposite is true, and the Iraqi situation weakens political Shi’ism”. The author argues that there are clear signs of growing Shia political activism, but the model that is being adopted is “one furnished by Hizbullah and not that of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution”. In this mobilisation, the arch enemies are the Israeli occupation and US hegemony not Sunni Muslims.

The author also finds that the consensus in both Sunni and Shia circles appears to be that attempts to emphasise Sunni-Shia rivalries are intended to deflect attention from both the US occupation of Iraq and continuing Israeli aggression. Both sides believe that in an attempt to create an anti-Iran alliance the US is resorting to a strategy which aims to raise the spectre of sectarianism across the Muslim world.

5. Country cases

BAHRAIN

International Crisis Group, 2005, ‘Bahrain’s Sectarian Challenge’, ICG, Brussels
http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iran%20Gulf/Bahrain/Bahrain%20Sectarian%20Challenge.ashx

This report highlights that a principal factor behind the government’s treatment of its majority Shi’a population (they make 70 per cent of the country’s native population) is the deep suspicion among officials and Sunnis regarding their national loyalty and ties to the Shi’a in Iraq and Iran. The report points out that this stems, in part, from misconceptions about the relationships between the Shi’as’ spiritual and political leaderships. The report also highlights that the moderate Shi’a leadership’s control over more confrontational elements within its community is beginning to weaken. While some opposition members advocate reconciliation, others are pushing for more dramatic steps.

Discrimination. Since the late 1970s the Shi’a have been subject to multiple forms and levels of discrimination. “Against the backdrop of frustration with Bahrain’s struggling reform experiment, protracted socio-economic difficulty and anti-Shiite discrimination are generating
the confrontational tendencies that emerged in 2004 and provide a decidedly sectarian hue to the island's troubles.” Please see section 8 in the GSDRC Helpdesk Report: Religious Identity and Inequality in the MENA region for more on this.

Suppression of protest. The recent phase of unrest began in late 1994 in Shi’a villages outside Manama, the capital. The report outlines a wide range of root causes: authoritarianism; the absence of basic civil and political rights; extensive anti-Shi’a discrimination; corruption and favouritism within the ruling family and among those closest to it; a repressive and largely foreign-staffed security apparatus; and a stagnant economy. Shi’a formed the bulk of protesters, although Sunnis angry about the dissolution of the National Assembly in 1975 also participated, and helped organise pro-reform petitions signed by tens of thousands. The government responded by detaining thousands of demonstrators, and exiling opposition leaders. The next several years saw an escalating cycle of repression and violence – including burning tyres, stoning police, and using cooking gas canisters as makeshift bombs. While the violence eventually subsided, it continued at a low level until 1999. Thousands of Bahrainis were arrested and tortured, and the government detained many key opposition figures without charge or trial, and often in solitary confinement. Those who signed reform petitions, whether Shi’a or Sunni, faced official retribution ranging from harassment and employment blacklisting to detention and ill treatment. Considerable ill-will persists today in many Bahraini communities, particularly in the Shi’a areas, where arrest, harassment and torture were commonplace. There is little satisfaction that past grievances have been resolved.

The impact of the Iranian Revolution. Most commentators agree that differences between Shi’as and Sunnis were exacerbated and became structural in the aftermath of Iran’s 1979 Islamic Revolution, which radicalised Shi’a communities throughout the Gulf, notably in eastern Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, and heightened Sunni anxiety. The Bahrain government drove out two representatives of Iran-based clerics in 1980, allegedly for fomenting anti-government activities. One of these, Hadi Al-Mudarrisi, who is now based in Karbala, Iraq, founded the radical Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (al-Jabha al-Islamiyya li Tahrir al-Bahrain) that year. During the 1990s uprising, Iran reportedly established a link with an organisation calling itself Bahraini Hizbollah. State security forces apprehended members in 1996 and paraded several on television, where they confessed to having trained in Lebanon and Iran, planning acts of terrorism and reporting directly to Ayatollah Ali Khamene’i, Iran’s supreme leader. The government responded by aligning itself more directly than ever before with the Sunni community/ The report argues that historically, “this was a profound shift”. Before this, the government had believed the most serious threat emanated from radical leftist organisations. Since then, however government practices, if not its stated policy, have been principally orientated toward the manipulation of sectarian differences and fears, and cementing identity issues.

The loyalty question. There is deep suspicion among officials and Sunnis regarding their national loyalty and ties to the Shi’a in Iraq and Iran. The report points out that this stems, in part, from misconceptions about the relationships between the Shi’as’ spiritual and political leaderships – mainly that the structure of Shi’a religious authority (marja’iyya) crosses national boundaries and that many Bahraini Shi’a emulate clerics from Iran, Iraq and Lebanon. In fact, seeking guidance from or emulating leading clergy (marja’ al-taqlid) has a central place in Shi’a theology. Suspicions are also fuelled by the open support shown by Shi’a for Iran’s Supreme Leader Khamane’i in political and religious gatherings. Additional fears of foreign influence and doubts about the community’s loyalty are generated by its appropriation of the political symbols of the Lebanese Hizballah, which Sunnis see as an indication of coordination with the organisation.

However, for most analysts, there is little evidence that the Shi’a community’s political objectives are shaped by outsiders; rather, their focus remains on resolving domestic challenges through local activism. In 2005, Shi’a opposition leaders urged supporters to
express their loyalty to the state. On 25 March 2005, tens of thousands of Bahraini Shiites marched through the streets of Sitra carrying the national flag as well as placards expressing their faith in the nation and calling on the regime to honour the demands for political reform made by loyal citizens. Shias also make clear they have no interest in establishing an Iranian-style regime, let alone incorporating the island into a greater Iran. The report also argues that support for Shias political and religious figures should be seen not as a sign of disloyalty, but a clear indication of rising frustration. For example, “(the exhibition of Hizbollah symbols and support for its leadership chiefly reflect the appeal of an organisation that, through determination, steadfastness and confrontation, has achieved many of its goals. In other words, it serves as a symbolic means of expressing both frustration with issues of local concern and sympathy for a more activist posture to achieve change.”

A move towards greater activism. Since 2002, Shia opposition and religious leaders have emphasised the necessity of non-violent dissent and avoiding escalation of conflict with the regime. However, with little to show after years of employing such an approach, there are signs that its grip on the Shia community – and therefore its ability to maintain calm -- may be weakening, and that rival, more militant organisations may emerge. Certainly, the increasing violence of recent demonstrations is one indication of increased support for a more confrontational approach.

SAUDI ARABIA

Jones, T., 2009, ‘Shi’as and the Politics of Confrontation in Saudi Arabia’, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point

In order to understand the grievances of the Saudi Arabia’s Shia community, this paper examines the history and politics of Saudi Arabia’s Shias and their goals. It highlights Shia frustration about the government’s failure to address discrimination, religious intolerance, and socio-economic inequalities. For example, the government has not cracked down on Sunni scholars and clerics who regularly make inflammatory statements about Shias across the region. The attack on Shia pilgrims in Medina in 2009 has further outraged Shias in the Eastern Province and resulted in an escalation of sectarian tensions. For its part, the Saudi government worries that the rise of Iran (and its influence on Syria and Lebanon’s Hizballah) and the empowerment of Iraqi Shias threatens the kingdom’s hegemony in the region.

The emergence of Shia political activism. The paper highlights that it was during the politically turbulent times of in the late 1960s and 1970s that political Shi’ism, which rejected the political quietism of earlier generations, began to emerge. It was during this period that the leaders of today’s Shia leadership emerged and in which their approach to politics and ideology took shape. Various aspiring Saudi religious scholars went to study in Najaf in Iraq, which is considered the spiritual heartland of global Shi’ism. These students were deeply influenced by the rise of political Shia groups such as Hizb al-Da’wa in Iraq, as well as the the emergence of Ayatollah Khomeini as a revolutionary figure. His call for revolutionary politics helped stir Shia as to action in the late 1970s and he remained symbolically important for Saudi political activists into the 1980s. Indeed, in 1979, the Ayatollah began calls to export the revolution to Iran’s neighbors, particularly Saudi Arabia, and even beamed a powerful radio signal into Saudi Arabia, exhorting Saudis to revolt against the kingdom. In response, local security forces in Qatif began systematically rounding up and detaining Shia suspected of sympathizing or even coordinating with Iran.

Prospects for Shia radicalisation. The dominant political trend in the Shia community has not been violent. For the most part, the community and its leaders continue to seek protection from religious extremism as well as social and political justice, by promoting accommodation rather than confrontation. They have avoided direct confrontation with the powerful Saudi
state and the religious establishment, partly out of fear of a more repressive crackdown but also partly as a product of the historical social and political relations that had long prevailed in Shi’a communities. Whatever the impetus behind their quietist approach to politics, the combination of Saudi-Wahhabi oppression and the clergy’s caution has led to a considerable erosion of their standing. As a result, the conditions for a new Shi’a militancy are taking shape. Events in early 2009, including an assault by Saudi religious and security forces on Shi’a pilgrims in the holy city of Medina, have heightened the possibility that Shi’as will respond to government oppression by lashing out violently. It has already encouraged an array of new activism in the region. A previously unknown group called the Free Men of Qatif as well as a group of anonymous religious scholars issued statements and petitions calling for civil disobedience and public demonstration in the face of official oppression. In addition to mobilizing new political actors, the behaviour of government forces also led to the reawakening of previously dormant organisation. Hizballah in the Hijaz, which had been almost wiped out by the crackdown that followed the 1996 al-Khobar bombings, reappeared and responded to the violence by issuing its first public statement in over a decade, saying that the time has arrived for renewed confrontation. The author argues that a turn to confrontation must be understood as the outcome of the many difficulties endured by the kingdom’s Shi’as and by the Saudi government’s continued unwillingness to address the community’s long-standing frustrations and grievances.

For example, the fallout from the 2009 clashes in Medina encouraged an array of new activism in the region. A previously unknown group called the Free Men of Qatif as well as a group of anonymous religious scholars issued statements and petitions calling for civil disobedience and public demonstration in the face of official oppression. In addition to mobilizing new political actors, the behaviour of government forces also led to the reawakening of previously dormant organisation. Hizballah in the Hijaz, which had been almost wiped out by the crackdown that followed the 1996 al-Khobar bombings, reappeared and responded to the violence by issuing its first public statement in over a decade, saying that the time has arrived for renewed confrontation.

For its part, the Saudi government continues to view the Shi’i community primarily as a security threat. The author argues: “Violence is entirely avoidable, but it depends on the community finding support from a government that too often has sought to manage sectarianism and anti-Shi’ism by relying on such sentiments when convenient, rather than working earnestly to eliminate them. The Saudi government continues to deal with Shi’is as though they are a security problem rather than a minority community that seeks amelioration from social and religious discrimination, an approach that exacerbates the very problems facing the community. The government’s anxieties about the rise of Iran and Shi’a Iraq have clouded its ability to see clearly on domestic policy, increasing rather than diminishing the potential for a more serious clash.”

**IRAQ**

Williams, P. and Simpson, R. T., 2008, ‘Rethinking the Political Future: An Alternative to the Ethno-Sectarian Division of Iraq’, American University International Law Review, Volume 24, Issue 2, Article 2

http://digitalcommons.wcl.american.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1086&context=auilr&sei-redir=1#search="sectarian+groups+middle+east"

This article assesses the ideas behind ethno-sectarian divisions and describes the most prominent plans for the division of Iraq along ethno-sectarian lines. The authors set out that the arguments for ethno-sectarian division, and state that at their core is what is called “the security dilemma”. This exists “when one community faces a distrustful “other” while at the same time its own defensive actions are viewed as antagonistic to the security of that other. Thus, when war begins, mobilization of all members of one group is necessary, as other groups are likely to recognize those members as enemies. Once war mobilizes ethnic
groups, the war cannot end until the populations are separated into defensible, mostly homogenous regions.” Therefore, those advocating for ethno-sectarian division argue that the restoration of civil politics cannot occur unless the groups are separated into defensible, ethnically-determined enclaves. They argue that solutions designed to avoid population transfers, such as powersharing or state re-building, are insufficient in and of themselves to resolve the security dilemma.

However, the authors argue the current ethno-sectarian tension in Iraq, arguing that this is a recent development, feeding largely on the security void left by the dismantlement of Saddam Hussein’s regime and the initial inability to create an effective central government. The author argues that the lack of institutional and coercive national government authority is an important cause of the rise of ethno-sectarian tension in Iraq as Iraqis in need for protection turn to the only organizations that appear to offer it: groups organized along ethno-sectarian lines. They set out further set of critiques of plans to divide Iraq along ethno-sectarian lines:

1. There is overwhelming lack of popular support for such a division;
2. There are various practical and political difficulties of dividing a state as diverse and heterogeneous as Iraq. The authors argue that “neat ethno-sectarian lines are nearly impossible to draw”. In addition, Iraq’s social classes were complex and differentiable along lines of property ownership, income, and political influence in addition to ethnicity, religion, and sectarianism, making it inadvisable to divide them along sectarian lines alone;
3. Ethno-sectarian division is likely to increase violent conflict. The prevalence of inter-sectarian and non-sectarian based violence, the disintegration of the Iraqi central government, the alienation and isolation of Iraqi minorities, and the likelihood of opportunistic or defensive neighbors all suggest the violence in Iraq will continue. Iraq’s diversity would also necessitate the forced relocation of thousands of Iraqis that will only compound the on-going displacement.
4. Prior ethno-sectarian divisionist attempts have seldom succeeded;
5. There are various insurmountable constitutional hurdles; and
6. Such an approach would undermine the significant signs of recent progress and cooperation in the Iraqi political framework.

6. Additional information

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International Crisis Group, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Brookings Institution, Rand

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