

## **A Reassessment of Sectarianism and Sectional Divide in the Middle East: A Case of Saudi-Iran Political Impasse**

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**ABSTRACT:** *The bigger picture within which the plague of sectarian identity and sectarian relations, such as is the current case with Saudi Arabia and Iran needs to be framed is the region-wide challenge to older, more familiar political and social frameworks. The paper tends to analyse the intricacies inherent in the Saudi-Iran political standoff and try to position it outside of the conventional wisdom often used to analyse the conflict, which is to situate it within the framework of a sectarian crisis. The paper uses content analysis and a review of existing literatures to draw home the above points. It concludes that the crisis has a political undertone often fuelled by external parties and resolves that it is a political tussle; it therefore recommends a political solution to the conflict in the interest of all.*

**Keywords:** *Reassessment, Sectarianism, Sectional, Divide, Middle East, Saudi-Iran, Political, Impasse*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The bigger picture within which the plague of sectarian identity and sectarian relations, such as is the current case with Saudi Arabia and Iran needs 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 peoples—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 is 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.

#### **Defining Sectarianism**

Whether in Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Lebanon or Saudi Arabi or indeed on cyberspace, can we speak of distinct Sunni and Shi’a identities that are condemned to incompatibility? Indeed how useful are the terms Sunni and Shi’a in social and political contexts? Faleh Abdul Jabbar has argued cogently against using such terms to designate sociological categories submitting that they form, “a loose cultural designation, which may differentiate a certain group from another in religious terms but never specifies social, cultural (not to mention political) differentiated aspects within this ‘group’ itself.”, Faleh (2013). In other words, ‘Shi’i’ and ‘Sunni’ are not monolithic groups, rather are themselves dissected by various social, economic and political categories that in themselves may unite ‘Sunnis’ and ‘Shi’as’ on the basis of, for example, class or political ideology. Unfortunately one often finds commentaries on Saudi-Iran society reducing these societies to Shi’as and Sunnis whose political and social behaviour is completely dictated by these designations. It is this line of logic that facilitates notions of ancient or primordial hatreds. In fact the same logic dictates any notional ‘clash of civilizations’ as it does not allow for significant plurality within any one group.

Abdul Jabbar's work was concerned with organised Shi'i political activism and did not venture into the more mundane daily aspects of sectarian relations as felt and acted out by individuals. In fact there is barely any work that seeks to examine sectarian relations 'from below' – most commonly, the focus is either on state sponsored sectarian discrimination or sectarian political activism. Discourse on the subject, particularly in the Arab world, portrays sectarian difference as a societal feature that is manipulated by elites, regimes and foreign forces into sectarian discord, (Ibid). Burhan Ghalioun has addressed sectarian relations in the Arab world on many occasions. Whilst acknowledging the difference between social sectarianism and political sectarianism he fails to assign any linkage between the two. In other words, malign political sectarianism in Ghalioun's work is presented as completely autonomous from its benevolent and very distant relative, social sectarianism. In fact, Ghalioun defines social sectarianism as little more than the plurality of sects in any one society thereby implying that any discrimination or sectarian tension is a product of political machinations from above, Ghalioun (2007). Ghalioun's theory presents society as a silent actor manipulated by political and cultural elites and responds to the charge of overlooking the fact that elites are born of society by saying, "Some may question our insistence on the responsibility of elites (for sectarian discord) objecting that these elites are of society and represent its consciousness. This is incorrect. What makes an elite a national elite is its ability to have the awareness to rise over narrow sectional interests and its ability to project and represent the general good." Ghalioun (2007). It is not immediately apparent why national elites should be bestowed with such qualities particularly as Ghalioun himself goes on to say that, "most Arab elites that lifted the banner of nationalism [*wataniya*] and adopted it as a slogan did not elevate themselves to the level of a national elite." More importantly, Ghalioun's argument is contradictory in that he posits sectarian discord as being the product of politics yet urges elites to rise above, "traditional templates," thereby recognising that sectarian discord is a social phenomenon that is projected onto politics by elites who fail his test of elevation to what he calls a, "truly national elite." In short, if sectarianism is a political and not a social problem, then what are the elites trying to rise above?

The fact is that Shi'as and Sunnis (as religious categories) exist in Iran and elsewhere. The importance of this religious designation will vary from person to person and from time to time depending on wider circumstances. A non-practicing Shi'a, for example, may still fervently identify himself with his/her conception of Shi'ism if it were seen to come under attack or during emotive religious events, Ghalioun (2007). The obvious point to make is that the relevance of Shi'a or Sunni identity to the individual will vary according to the context. Therefore, whilst the importance of sectarian identity varies from person to person and 'Shi'a' and 'Sunni' are not precise sociological terms, these identities do gain analytical relevance when they are perceived to be under threat or the subject of a verbal or physical attack; in other words the validity of employing 'Shi'a' and 'Sunni' as analytical categories depends on the salience of the terms at any given time. To illustrate: one would be hard-pressed to find a Shi'i Iraqi (practicing or not) who was not incensed by the military strikes on the holy shrines in Karbala and Najaf in 1991, (Ibid). Perhaps the primary shortcoming in analyses of these societies is the failure to account for the elasticity of sectarian sentiment. This may be due to the fact that, as a religious designation, sectarian identity is viewed as fixed or ascribed. Likewise, this shortcoming may be a reflection of ideological standpoints that, for whatever reason, seek to validate theories of Saudi or Iranian unity or division. When considering the works available on sectarian relations in these societies, one cannot help but be reminded of Kurt Vonnegut's 'extraterrestrial Tralfamadorians' in 'Slaughterhouse-Five' who see time as one would see a stretch of the Rocky Mountains whilst the simpler Earthlings see time as a single peak or valley of the same stretch. Likewise, our discourse on sectarian dynamics in Iran and Saudi Arabia often ignores the 'stretch' of history opting instead to focus on a particularly gruesome example of sectarian violence or an admirable episode of sectarian coexistence and generalising from there often with the aim of proving preconceptions of hopeless division or unbreakable harmony.

### **Drivers of Sectarian Identity**

How is sectarian identity activated? To rephrase, how does sectarian identity gain the salience needed to elicit a shift in levels of self-definition from person to group based identity or from non-sectarian group based identity to a sectarian group based identity? There may be much number of factors that can mobilise sectarian identity: from state policy to conversational stimuli – the oft-heard accusation that all Shi'as are loyal to Iran is likely to elicit a response from most Shi'as regardless of their attachment to their faith. However, it would be more fruitful to focus on group rather than individual mobilization. How is sectarian identity mobilised and how does sectarian identity acquire salience amongst a large cross section of the Shi'i or Sunni populations? Looking at various examples one can identify four key factors: (Ibid) external influence, economic competition, competing myth-symbol complexes and contested cultural ownership of nations, Reider (2005). It is arguable that the first two factors are less directly linked to sectarian dynamics but are important as facilitators of the latter two categories.

### **External Influence**

Foreign influence is a crucial factor in understanding sectarian dynamics which is often either overlooked or overemphasised. In an attempt to focus on societal factors and examine the micro-level aspects of sectarian relations, it is easy to ignore the impact of foreign influences. Likewise, a perhaps soothing way to explain sectarian

divisions would be to amplify the foreign aspect leading all too commonly to conspiracy theories, Ghamamah (2006). However, we should be careful not to dismiss the role of foreign powers in the name of avoiding conspiracy theories. The only major incidences of sectarian violence in modern and early modern Iraq, Iran and Saudi Arabia have been caused, at least indirectly, by regional/foreign, as opposed to domestic/Iraqi dynamics, Tarabishi (2008). Foreign influence is of course highly relevant in these societies as a number of processes were unleashed by the invasion of Iraq in particular, and also the intrigue the politics of these foreign powers in the antagonism between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Nevertheless, foreign influence should not be understood as a synonym for invasion; events in neighbouring countries can have an effect on sectarian relations as can foreign media that could exacerbate sectarian tensions – this was certainly a feature of this sectarian crisis.

### **Economic Competition**

It should be noted that economic disparities and unfair distributions of wealth have served to sour sectarian relations even if they were carried out along non-sectarian lines. As will be seen, economic discrimination on tribal or geographic lines can foster the perception of sectarian discrimination thereby increasing sectarian self-definition and exacerbating sectarian tensions. The experience of the Iraqi nation state itself has perhaps served to heighten the risks of sectarian tensions. The simplest argument would be that in 1921 Sunni and Shi'a Arabs became primary stakeholders in the Middle East; consequently the distribution of patronage and resources could and did impact on people's views of themselves and the other. Political awareness and political maturity added a sense of entitlement amongst both communities that served to, at times; complicate sectarian relations in the absence of an equitable distribution of state resources. Examples of economic and political disparities (real or perceived) being conflated with sectarian difference are abundant: for example, the British Consul-General reported in February 1951 from Basra that Sunni notables complained that Shi'as were increasing their control of vital sectors of the state whilst, "the Sunnis," one notable complained, "are hopelessly divided, and must watch uncouth Shi'a upstarts coming to the fore in all parts of the administration.", Kedurie (1988). Such fears would have undoubtedly seemed ridiculous to many Shi'as who themselves often complained of being under-represented in the administration of the region. Iran's Shi'i activism throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century has usually been animated by a sense of socioeconomic and political disparity and discrimination (real or perceived) and contrary to alarmist polemics, never sought to challenge the concept of the Iranian nation state.

### **Competing Myth-Symbol Complexes**

The core of the ethnic identity is the 'myth-symbol complex' – the combination of myths, memories, values and symbols that defines not only who is a member of the group but what it means to be a member. The existence, status and security of the group thus come to be seen to depend on the status of group symbols, which is why people are willing to fight and die for them – and why they are willing to follow leaders who manipulate those symbols for dubious or selfish purposes, Kaufman (2001). The competition of myths and symbols is crucial to understanding sectarian identity; and it could be argued to be the single most important dynamic in sectarian identity and sectarian relations. Specifically, the salience of sectarian identity is dependent to a large extent, though not exclusively, on myth-symbol complexes and symbolic politics.

### **The Implication of Sectarianism; Saudi-Iranian Rivalry**

Saudi Arabia and Iran have deployed considerable resources to proxy battles, especially in Syria, where the stakes are highest. Riyadh closely monitors potential restlessness in its oil-rich eastern provinces, home to its Shia minority, and deployed its forces, along with other Gulf countries, to suppress a largely Shia uprising in Bahrain. It also assembled a coalition of ten Sunni-majority countries, backed by the United States, to fight Houthi rebels in Yemen. The war, fought mostly from the air, has exacted a high civilian toll. Saudi Arabia provides hundreds of millions of dollars in financial support to the predominantly Sunni rebels in Syria, while simultaneously banning cash flows to al-Qaeda and extremist jihadi groups fighting the Assad regime. Iran has allocated billions of dollars in aid and loans to prop up Syria's Alawi-led government and has trained and equipped Shia militants from Afghanistan, Lebanon, and Iraq to fight in Syria. Iran and Saudi Arabia, which have repeatedly postponed efforts to establish a dialogue for settling disputes diplomatically, discussed the conflict in Syria in October 2015 at U.S. urging. This was a notable development though cast into doubt by a rupture in diplomatic relations in early 2016. Both countries have confronted the Islamic State, with Iran fighting it in parts of Iraq, while Saudi Arabia and other Sunni-majority countries back a U.S.-led air campaign against the extremist group in Syria and Iraq.

### **The Saudi-Iran Impasse: A Paradigm Shift in the Debate**

As one of the key international players, Russia's relations with the Islamic Middle East have changed tumultuously since the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. It could be said that Russia's ties with the region have been substantially shaped on the basis of distrust in Saudi Arabia. To some extent, Moscow's scepticism towards

Riyadh could be understood considering the Saudis' strategic and economic relations with the U.S. and its perceived sponsored Wahhabi-Salafi militant groups that have been operating in Russia's North Caucasus Muslim-populated regions of Dagestan, Ingushetia and Chechnya since the Cold War ended. A series of developments from the Chechen conflict erupted in the middle of the 1990s - the Beslan School hostage crisis in 2004 together with activities of the Caucasus Emirate, which was by its very nature affiliated with the Saudis - have undoubtedly nourished Russians' anti-Saudi Arabia sentiments and perceptions of security. Beyond being an American "outpost" in the Middle East according to the classical nihilist Russian mindset directly inherited from Soviet-era Cold War logic, Saudi Arabia is the largest oil exporter and definitive actor of the prize mechanism of crude oil. Saudi Arabia's fully-fledged control of OPEC management and balance of supply and demand in the oil trade has somehow damaged Russia's resource-based economy since the oil price collapses in 2009 and from 2014 to the present. In return, Russia's leadership has accused Saudi Arabia of political manipulation and economic speculation, as the country's economy and national currency have already been crippled under the pressure of Western sanctions imposed in the wake of the annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine. Hence, Russian-Saudi relations are said to have been so far stretched over path-dependent regional geopolitics and hardcore strategic realism that tensions between the parties have grown exponentially

### **Russia Support for Iran and the Intricacies of the Political Tussle**

As relations gradually soured with Saudi Arabia, Russia has chosen Iran as its pivot in the Middle East. Once regarded ideologically and militarily as sworn enemies, Russia and Iran could have mended their bilateral relations over the course of time. Thanks to the nuclear spring, the new-born Moscow-Tehran axis has appeared as a game-changer in the post-9/11 Middle East, while the U.S. has been withdrawing from the region during the consecutive administrations of President Barack Obama. Russia was eager to fill the power vacuum that surfaced due to the U.S. military withdrawal from Iraq, and the nuclear stand-off between Tehran and the West has provided Moscow with just such an opportunity. Since then, the diarchic leadership of Russian President Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev has redundantly engaged Russian foreign policy with a newly assertive Iran and its Shiite geopolitics in the region. In this sense, the Kremlin has long backed Iranian rhetoric considering the regional security complex, and enabled the extension of nuclear talks, which have resulted in a preliminary tentative framework agreement between Iran and the six world powers, dubbed the P5+1, in the Swiss town of Lausanne on April 2, 2015. Russia's usually constructive attitudes and push for a diplomatic solution to the nuclear issue paved the way for the lifting of international sanctions on Iran, but it also alienated Moscow in the eyes of the Arab public because of the Kremlin's excessive use of its veto power in the U.N. Security Council at any cost in favor of Tehran. In this context, the Russian-Persian partnership further complicated the regional political and security relations among Arabs, Iranians, Turks and Kurds as sectarian disputes and discontent had already surfaced during the Arab Spring.

Undoubtedly, Russia's motives in the Middle East have derived from its decades-old anti-Western, most particularly anti-American attitudes. So far, Moscow has properly used Tehran's internationally isolated status as a fulcrum in order to return to the region. However, the Kremlin's recent engagement with Tehran has positioned Moscow as a supporter of Shiite geopolitics, a fact that has been taken for granted. This geopolitical strategy began spreading its sphere of influence when the U.S. destroyed Iran's two main antagonists, namely; the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein's Baathist rule in Iraq. Hence, Russia has found itself meddled in what is perceived a sectarian clash between Shiite and Sunni political Islam, which is considered a doomsday scenario for the Middle East, and containing the potential cause and effects might ricochet back at Moscow as well.

### **From Syria to Yemen: When the sectarian fault lines break**

Needless to say, the on-going crises in Syria, Iraq and Yemen have brought the Middle East to the brink of sectarian warfare between Wahhabi-Salafi-oriented Sunnis tilting towards Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies, and Jafari-Zaidi Shiite expansionism fomented by Iran. Russia's intervention in terms of conflict resolution and crisis management, foremost in Syria in favor of Iran, has further escalated the Syrian civil war over the past four years. That is to say Russia and the United States political attitudes and posture with regard to the Syrian crisis have precipitated the failure of their strategic realism, thereby limiting their influence in the region. Moscow's vital support for the regime of President Bashar Assad in Syria has created some discontent in the Sunni realm and has intensified its fracas with the United States, while outrageous war crimes have been persistently committed against civilians and the region is left to suffer. Yet the Russian stance on the Syrian conflict has not changed since the civil war erupted in 2011 and neither has the United States, both Kremlin and the West have either reinforced the Assad regime or the rebel forces to maintain their offensive even after the Geneva II Conference on Syria. Moreover, such an anarchic and chaotic atmosphere has also provided a base for the legitimization of the terror groups affiliated with both al-Qaida and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), as they have been securing their rhetoric and struggles either against Damascus or the West. In brief,



both Russia and the United States have had a long history in fuelling this standoff between the Two perceived Superpower in the region and therefore cannot be a part of a solution in Syria from which as a result, at least 220,000 people have been killed so far in the four-year conflict according to death toll reports released by the U.N. and the London-based watchdog, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. Similar to Syria, Yemen has also come to prominence as it constitutes a neural hub in the context of the sectarian rivalry between Sunni Arabs and Shiite Iran. Undoubtedly, the geopolitics of energy transportation (given the country's strategic maritime location between the Gulf of Aden, Red Sea and Bab-el Mandeb strait) have facilitated the internationalization of the Yemeni civil war, when Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies interfered with their ongoing aerial operations in and around Sanaa. The Saudi-led aerial operations aimed to weaken the advancement of the Iranian-backed Shiite Houthi rebel forces toward southwest Yemen, but instead further enhanced the geopolitical rift among regional and international powers which is also an underlining factor in the complexities of the perceived sectarianism that has taken the dimension of struggle for power and control rather than piety.

## II. CONCLUSION

The submission of the paper is thus that it seeks to demonstrate that current conflicts in the Middle East cannot be accurately understood as arising from sectarian division between Sunni and Shia Muslims. It argues instead that the best framework for considering regional dynamics is as a cold war in which Iran and Saudi Arabia play leading roles backed by the WARSAW PACT and NATO-US alliances. Many of the crises currently facing the Middle East are being increasingly framed in terms of a conflict between the Sunni and Shia sects of Islam. However, the papers makes the case that the best prism for understanding the regional politics of the Middle East is within the above context in which Iran and Saudi Arabia are the main protagonists. The paper also counters the assumption that these conflicts are primordial and unresolvable despite the perceived importance of sectarianism in the conflict, describing its source as a fundamental Sunni / Shia divide is an oversimplification. As such, it is important to stress that these divisions are not beyond political solutions.

## III. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Improvement in Saudi-Iranian relations would greatly enhance chances of political settlements in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Bahrain and would lessen the poisonous sectarianism that so dominates the region's politics.
- Multilateral (rather than bilateral) approaches will also be more effective in cutting ISIS and all armed groups down to size in Iraq and elsewhere in the region. An immediate task of foreign policy is to make sure that the Islamic State is defeated on the battlefield, forcing allies in the Sunni community to distance themselves from the group.
- The Middle East is a multi-polar region with a number of important regional powers acting in its politics: Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Israel and Egypt. If one of them seems to be emerging as a dominant force, the others will naturally work to balance against it and limit the growth of its power. Middle Eastern power dynamics, rather than military intervention, can be relied on to block Iranian Hegemony.
- The West and Russia must seize to use the region as its bait to rival against one another and extend the cold war by using these countries which they give support as proxies. They must seize to fuel the crisis in the region by creating – whether overtly or covertly – tensions amongst these states with an existing fragile relation.

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