

The Truth About Sectarianism

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Rather than postulating alternatives to centuries-old sectarian doctrines, Washington should focus on preventing exploitative actors from institutionalizing their violent vision through schools and bureaucracies.

Sectarian identities were supposedly formed in the Middle East centuries ago, and yet they seem to breed the region's bloodiest conflicts today. While Iran has thrown its support behind President Bashar al-Assad in Syria and the Houthi rebels in Yemen, Saudi Arabia has strategized on how to bring both of them down. Tensions deepened earlier this month after Saudi Arabia enraged Iran by executing a prominent Saudi Shiite cleric, whom the regime claimed was a terrorist. When Shiites protested in Iran and Saudi Arabia, sometimes violently, the Kingdom kicked Iran's diplomats out of the country.

But the conflict in the region is much more nuanced than a simple sectarian war. Saudi Arabia's rhetoric, for example, which is governed by a deeply entrenched Wahhabism, is very distinct from the Islamic State's (also known as ISIS) use of anti-Shiism to exploit political and economic grievances against both Assad's Shiite-Alawite regime and the dispossession of Iraq's Sunnis under the government of then-Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

In fact, there are three broad kinds of sectarianism at play. Some groups and states have integrated sectarian themes into the very fabric of their political, cultural, and educational systems. Sectarianism, in other words, has been institutionalized. The most prominent example is, of course, Saudi Arabia and its centuries-old antagonism towards Shiites. Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, known as the father of Wahhabism and who was present at the state's founding, made anti-Shiism a core component of his doctrine. Another example is Iran. Ruhollah Khomeini, leader of the Iranian Revolution and later Iran's supreme leader, developed a theory of Islamic government known as "governance of the jurists." He argued that Muslims should live under a regime overseen by legal scholars, and in particular, those trained in his Shiite tradition, who are skilled in interpreting Sharia law. His theory shaped the

founding tenets of the Republic.

Even some non-state communities, such as the Salafists, have institutionalized their sectarianism. Salafists claim that their conservative version of Sunnism adheres to a literal understanding of the faith that the Prophet Muhammad and his earliest followers practiced. They thus consider Shiites apostates. Although lacking (and in most cases even resisting) the call for a state, Salafists systematized their opposition to Shiites over the course of the twentieth century by promoting medieval theological treatises that support their theology. In the 1960s, they even began teaching Salafism at Islamic universities in Saudi Arabia and at Wahhabi institutes around the world.

At the other end of the sectarian spectrum, incidental sectarianism, as its name implies, does not involve a deliberate effort to implement a sectarian agenda. Sectarianism does not play a central role in a state or group's objectives, even if there are overtones of it. The most pertinent example is the Syrian civil war. It began as a conflict centered on regime change. In fact, the Assads have deliberately downplayed their Alawite affiliation precisely because it is seen as heterodox by the more dominant Twelver Shiism in Iran. To secure power and legitimacy, former President Hafez al-Assad, Bashar's father, therefore allied with other Shiite groups within the region, such as in Lebanon. Although there is certainly a sectarian dimension to the Syrian conflict, it is not an institutionalized part of either the war or the actors involved; it has been incidentally ascribed. The same is true of the Houthi rebels in Yemen, who belong to the minority Zaydi sect, but are not fighting the regime for sectarian reasons.

Finally, there is exploitative sectarianism, a category that characterizes the tactics and nature of many of the most violent actors in the region. ISIS, for example exploits the local power vacuum in order to build up its capabilities and amass territory. A number of Syrian opposition groups, such as Ahrar al Sham and al Nusra Front, also push a sectarian narrative in order to achieve their political goals, whether it's to turn Syria into their version of a stable Sunni state or simply overthrow Assad. To be clear, these groups are all equally committed to their sectarian principles, but not all of them have gone as far as, say ISIS, in institutionalizing their beliefs, politically and socially.

This three-tiered classification system is also a useful guide for understanding how players in the region behave. Institutional sectarians such as Saudi Arabia and Iran can also act exploitatively, that is, inject a layer of "incidental sectarianism" into an otherwise non-sectarian conflict, as we've seen in Syria and Yemen. Saudi Arabia also exploited its penal code to amplify the sectarian dimension of regional geopolitics by executing a high-profile Shiite figure. While precise motives are hard to identify, Saudi Arabia likely sought to elicit an aggressive Iranian response just as sanctions were being lifted or, as some have acutely suggested, remind the United States that it can stand up to Iran on its own, particularly when Washington refuses to do so.

Exploitative players might also learn to institutionalize their behaviors. We see this with ISIS. It is actively seeking to establish a system of governance -- whether it's issuing edicts on how to treat minorities or designing educational curricula. This process builds channels for ISIS to apply and perpetuate its doctrines, as well as gain credibility from those around the world who share its vision. The same is true of Syrian opposition groups. Al Nusra Front and Ahrar al Sham have set up courts and judiciary bodies that mete out their version of justice. It is worth noting that, like ISIS today, the first Saudi state, which was founded in the eighteenth century, also emerged out of a political vacuum by taking advantage of territorial opportunities created by regional neglect.

Understanding the dynamic nature of sectarianism will enable the United States to respond more effectively to emerging sectarian challenges. For starters, Washington must understand that it is not constructive to disrupt institutionalized sectarianism. The United States, for example, is not able or welcome to change Saudi or Iranian societal norms, however disagreeable. A better allocation of U.S. attention and resources is to deter exploitative acts by institutional sectarians such as Saudi Arabia or Iran. This can only be done by assuming an engaged leadership role in the region -- for example, working with local societies in rebuilding their infrastructure so that they do not turn to sectarian alternatives.

The same method can be applied to fighting exploitative groups such as ISIS. Although U.S. counterterrorism has recently embraced the concept of "countering violent extremism," these efforts will eventually drag Washington down an ideological rabbit hole because it is not within the physical, legal, or political purview of the U.S. government to counter extremist narratives, which often have historic roots; for example, Sunni hostility towards Shiites for venerating their imams (and thereby, according to Sunnis, violating the principle of God's oneness) is a polemic that can be traced back to Sunnism's formative period. How would the United States even begin to counter that narrative?

A more reasonable initiative involves taking note of how exploitative actors use sectarian themes to their own advantage. Although Salafist literature is chock full of hatred for Shiites, it is jihadi-Salafist groups like al Qaeda and ISIS that use it to justify violent actions towards Shiites and other non-Sunni Islamic groups. Rather than proposing alternatives to these sectarian doctrines, Washington should focus on preventing these delinquents from institutionalizing their violent vision through schools and bureaucracies that perpetuate these ideas. If left unchecked, the tone and type of sectarianism that will likely be institutionalized will be ever bloodier and, perhaps, more attractive to potential recruits. That is why developing a long-term strategy for sectarian conflicts requires understanding that not all sectarianism is the same.

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