Beyond Nationalism and Religion: From Sunni Grievances to the 'Sunni Nation'

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Brief Analysis

It may still be possible to elevate political discourse in the region beyond communitarianism, as the need for such discourse persists even if the Sunni population's receptivity to it has declined in the aftermath of recent false starts.

From Iraq to Lebanon, through Syria, with clear echoes into the Gulf, Yemen, and Egypt, the Arab political and cultural scene is witness to a new language of "Sunni grievances." Such language may be viewed as a deliberate mobilization intended to further segregate its target societies along factional lines. It may, however, also be assessed as the result of existing communitarian divisions that are exacerbated by provocations anterior to its emergence, and that had already exhausted the common narratives -- whether based on nation-states or transcending them.

Until this discourse has its dynamics of production and traction on society and culture clarified, the primary beneficiary of its emergence is the "Islamic State" in Iraq and Syria. ISIS has succeeded, albeit sporadically, in overlaying grievances of a political and social character with a sectarian cover. There is no consolation in the almost certain expectation that ISIS is limited in its ability for such exploitation, in light of the objective contradiction between its destructive project and the concrete demands of those responsive to the proposition of Sunni grievances. While waiting for this contradiction to reify, ISIS would have caused irreversible losses in death and destruction.

Thus, Arab culture today faces the serious challenge of the confused emergence of a discursive content that approaches Sunnis as part of a whole that exceeds the local and national settings, and that elevates them to the status of a nation in the regional context. In a proposition that is open to exploitation, Sunnis are no longer thus merely a national community or a religious sect. Arab political culture, which is dominated by ideological narratives that diverge in their convictions but converge in their paternalism, may not be equipped to rise to the challenge of safeguarding the Sunni milieu against such exploitation. In fact, the evolving Sunni nation proposition undermines the bases of each of the two dominant narratives of Arab political culture -- the Islamist narrative based on faith and

religion, and the Arabist narrative based on nation and nationalism.

The "Sunni Nation," if such discourse were to sharpen, is based primarily on identity and belonging, not ideology and faith. It is as such in direct competition with Arabism, with which the Sunni Nation overlaps considerably in its geographic extent while remaining open to other ethnicities deliberately excluded by Arabism, most notably the Turkish Sunnis, and while engaging in vertical segregation locally against other communities. In implicitly positing identity ahead of belief, it is also a fundamental challenge to the Islamist narrative which rose from the demise of Arabism but failed to mobilize the popular base for its totalitarian project, due to its lack of attention to the concrete demands of this base.

The factors that contributed to the formation of a discourse of a Sunni proto-nation in the region are multiple. However, this discourse coalesced in the aftermath of the uprisings of the "Arab Spring." Erupting successively in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, Syria, and Iraq in 2011, these uprisings were not primarily either explicitly or implicitly factional in character (the Iraqi case excepted). Their failure or subversion, however, pushed them toward factionalism.

The readings of the Arab Spring uprisings by jihadists, both Takfirists and non-Takfirists, are revealing. Takfirists expressed outrage toward these demand-oriented actions for their lack of religious content. Participants in these uprisings were thus not deemed Muslims, having acted for mundane interests and not for the implementation of divine law, sharia. Non-Takfirist jihadists conceded that these uprisings reveal a disconnect between the demands of the Sunni populations and the jihadists' own ideological propositions. This assessment paved the ground for the "Ansar al-Sharia" approach through which Sunni society is supposed to be ushered toward ideologization.

The Takfirist reading shapes the behavior of the Islamic State, while the non-Takfirist assessment frames the line of al-Qaeda and associated organizations. Both approaches aim at placing sharia at the center of Sunni concern at the expense of concrete demands.

Some hoped that the Muslim Brothers could provide the most credible expression of a centrist Islamist stance by reconciling ideology and concrete demands within Egypt and serving as a champion for Sunni grievances outside of it. Instead, the ascent of the Muslim Brothers to power exposed the deficiencies within their organization in political, economic, social, and international relations capacities. Their short mandate was thus replete with confusion and missteps, paving the way and almost openly calling for a counter revolution.

The decline and fall of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt was essentially a self-inflicted defeat. The same cannot be said about Iraq. The self-styled "Great Iraqi Revolution" was an uprising conceived by its initiators as part of the "Arab Spring," itself re-christened as a "Sunni Spring." References to a "Sunni Spring" were already in circulation, albeit discreetly, in Syria and beyond. Its open use in Iraq, however, was still cast in the form of concrete demands to address material grievances for a Sunni population. The reaction of the Iraqi government was, however, one of oppression. Iraq today has seen demands on concrete issues replaced by an alleged Islamic Caliphate that unabashedly promises genocide against the whole Shiite population. The transition from the former proposition to the latter was not the result of an innate factionalism in the Sunni psyche, as occasionally claimed by supporters of the Iraqi government's policy of repression. Instead, the opportunity to bring Sunni Iraqis to the national fold was dismissed, allowing a homicidal project to determine the fate of many of them.

The region has thus been the theater of uprisings populated by many "Sunnis" with no consistent character to their "Sunnism" -- some Islamists, some pious, and some secular. The discourse of the uprisings later retreated into factionalism, with presumed collective Sunni demands, before degenerating into a quasi-Sunni nationalism confused in its expression of grievances and open to exploitation.

Sunni grievances are expressed primarily as a reaction to a presumed Shiite-led oppression -- in Iraq, Syria,

Lebanon, and Yemen -- or to the fear of Shiite proselytism and Iranian expansionism across the Arab world. Seeking the origins of the Sunni-Shiite confrontation in historical enmity stretching to early Islamic times or in arcane theological discord may not be warranted. Even though Salafists and later jihadists have sought to frame Sunni grievances as caused by the dereliction in the application of the sharia and in the laxness toward Shiites, the source of the grievances for most in the Sunni milieu remains the oppression and humiliation faced by the individual and the collective and not considerations of faith and religion. Yet the confusion and amalgamation of these aspects has been and remains possible due to the absence of a political proposition capable of aligning discourse and interest and of avoiding factional explanations for the failure to achieve concrete interests.

The framing of the evolving "Sunni Nation" proposition is bolstered by two intricate aspects of the taboo question in political discourse and culture in the Arab world, that of communitarianism: the distinction between communitarianism and sectarianism, and the opposition between majoritism and minoritism.

Arab political culture is implicitly tasked by its own stated ideals with highlighting and enabling the shared common identity while managing and containing factional identities. However, the failure of states and cultures in the Arab world in realizing this common identity has reduced it to a mere thin cover that barely hides the fragmented factional. The primary expression of factionalism in the Arab world, notably in its eastern part, is communitarianism. Yet an important transformation has affected the character of Arab communitarianism as it slides toward sectarianism.

Communitarianism (*taifiyyah*) is a bond based on religious identity, independently of religious engagement. Similarly, religiosity does not necessarily promote communitarianism (except in the Salafist reading of the concept of allegiance and dissociation, *al-wala wa-l-bara*). A "communitarianist" (*taifi*) is an individual who elevates his or her community while denigrating others for various considerations -- generally of a tangential or incidental character, even if occasionally including a disparaging of their religious beliefs. On the other hand, sectarianism (*madhhabiyyah*) is a bond based on religious convictions. The in-group is thus not the community defined by nominal religious affiliation as in communitarianism. Members of the community not committed to the precepts of the religion are explicitly excluded. The denigration of the other is based primarily on the differences in faith.

In the past, Sunni-Shiite tension in the region was communitarian in character and low in intensity. Today, it is leaning toward a high-intensity sectarian character in many of its manifestations.

Sectarianism can be traced back to Islamism. The Islamist narrative is by definition exclusive in placing non-Muslim identities outside of the common bond -- a process that anticipates intra-Islamic sectarianism. Still, Islamism as promulgated by its "golden age" ideologues included a solemn rejection of both communitarianism and sectarianism, calling instead for Islamic unity. Intentions and desires notwithstanding, this call is incompatible with the radical project of deriving rules for society and politics from religion. While preaching the unity of the Islamic *umma* (the global community of faith), the Islamist narrative was unable to formulate a reconciliation between the Sunni and Shiite conceptions of religion. Furthermore, with the increased influence of Salafism over Sunni Islamism, the Islamist narrative became incapable of reconciling the many religious orientations within the Sunni realm. Salafism is thus posited as Sunni orthodoxy, with a panoply of derogatory designations attributed to non-Salafist Sunni orientations.

The assumption of goodwill in the Islamist call for Muslim unity has not been a constant. In many Sunni settings, Islamist and non-Islamist alike, the conviction is that the call for unity stemming from Shiite Islamist Iran is insincere. Iran preaches religious entente openly while surreptitiously seeking to strengthen Shiite bonds for mobilization purposes. In the eyes of Iran's detractors, while the public discourse was one of reconciliation of religious orientations, armed Shiite militias emerged to impose their will in more than one locale, and Shiite proselytism centers took roots in Sunni societies. A counter vision is also current in Shiite circles, with the rise in

Salafist mobilizations in Sunni settings, and with the systematic denigration of Shiite religious practices.

In parallel with the intensification of sectarian tension in both the Sunni and Shiite contexts, another polarization coalesces, albeit in a more nuanced expression -- a polarization between majoritist and minoritist propositions in many Arab societies.

Majoritist propositions stipulate that the majority -- religious, ethnic, and apolitical -- is entitled to sovereignty over state and resources. Its right, however, is denied or bypassed under the insincere cover of patriotism and nationalism, or is subject to ongoing attempts to deplete it. The culprit in all cases is the minority, the enemy within, which serves as a Trojan horse for the enemy without.

Examples of majoritist expressions abound in virtually all Arab societies. In Syrian opposition circles, the regime is often branded as "Nusayri" (the pejorative designation of Alawis), and Sunni grievances are highlighted to the exclusion of others. This is deployed irrespective of the fact that the Damascus regime has not been capable of absorbing the totality of the Alawi community, and its supporters are not limited to that community.

Majoritism is not the exclusive domain of Sunni narratives, as can be witnessed in Iraq. Upon the fall of the Baath regime in 2003, graffiti appeared across Baghdad proclaiming, "We are the majority, and we will not accept the rule of the minority again." The majority in this statement is understood to be Shiite Iraqis as a monolithic collective.

Even in Egypt, where the Coptic minority is cornered away from any participation in political power, the majoritist proposition laments an alleged Coptic stranglehold over the economy and promotes the notion of the victimization of Muslims.

In opposition to majoritism, minoritism stipulates that minorities in the Arab world are the locus of achievement and civilization, while the majority is steeped in backwardness and savagery. The distinction is thus one between quality and quantity. "We rule, they lament" was a minoritist slogan brandished once on behalf of Sunni Iraqis against their Shiite compatriots, while supporters of the Free Patriotic Current, a Christian formation in Lebanon, unabashedly label their counterparts in a Sunni-dominated secular movement as "Dawaish" (a pejorative reference to ISIS terrorism) in confirmation of the contradistinction between civilization and savagery in an openly minoritist proposition.

Prior to the information revolution that was generated by the advent of new media technologies in the 1990s, political culture in the Arab world observed a strict differentiation between the public and the private. The former was the domain of the shared common narratives, while factional discourse was restricted to the latter.

No such discipline remains today, with the proliferation of partisan satellite channels bluntly engaging in sectarian polemics, and with the ubiquitous recourse to social media as sites of communitarian competition. The rising availability of these means of divergence has coincided with the erosion of the objective bases of the narratives of commonality. This is evident at the nation-state level, with the evolution in the behavior of national elites, particularly in the self-styled republics, from their previous discretion in the exploitation of their nations' resources to a quasi-absolute monarchy style, notably in seeking power succession for the ruler's son, a feat accomplished in Syria in 2000 and attempted in Iraq, Egypt, Yemen, and Libya.

The resulting disintegration of the shared national discourse left a deep vacuum, aggravated by the severe decline of Arab nationalism, the grand narrative that dominated the longest stretch of the twentieth century. The invasion of Kuwait by the Iraqi regime in 1990 amounted to the knock-out punch to this grand narrative. Islamism, as the successor prime grand narrative, was nevertheless unable to break beyond its status as a language of rejection and dissent.

While dominating the Arab cultural space, Islamism as a grand narrative was limited in performance and

production. Its many years of soliciting popular support did not remotely yield a response equivalent to the spontaneous popular outburst following the self-immolation of Muhammad Bouazizi in late 2010. The attempts at usurpation and exploitation by various Islamist orientations, aimed at appropriating the political potential of the Sunni base, have similarly resulted in only partial and confused success.

These attempts, however, did damage the political discourse of the Sunni population by ushering it toward open majoritism and sectarianism. Majoritism was previously restricted to the private sphere, and the recourse to sectarian language was incidental and variable.

The Sunni degeneration toward majoritism has further empowered the emergence of a new "collective minoritism" -- not limited to the aggrandizement of one particular minority community, but positing an opposition between all regional minorities and the Sunni majority. Collective minoritism has been called upon, rather discreetly and in the form of an implicit "alliance of minorities," as part of the mobilization toolkit of parties supportive of Iranian regional hegemony, despite the counterproductive effects of this proposition on the Iranian pursuit of influence at large.

The majoritist and sectarian elements of the evolving discourse toward a "Sunni nation" predate the Iranian effort at expansion and influence in the Middle East. Antecedents for these elements can even be sought in the era preceding the century of the grand narratives that was the twentieth century in the Middle East. However, the amplification of these elements and their growing domination of the Sunni political discourse are evidently linked to the reaction to the Iranian quest. This, however, is no efficacious reaction. Majoritism and sectarianism confuse the emerging discourse and diffuse it away from a sound representation of the interests of its population base.

There may be a positive aspect to such confusion, as it indicates that it may still be possible to elevate political discourse in the region beyond communitarianism, as the need for such discourse is still present, even if the receptivity of the Sunni population to it has declined in the aftermath of recent false starts.

The emergence of a "Sunni nation," as an exclusive bond, is no historical certainty, nor is its definition clearly delineated. Reducing the partisan passion that consume the interests of its underlying public, through the deconstruction of majoritism and sectarianism, is possible in light of the objective interests of its public.

The materialization of this potential requires the emergence of a discourse capable of constructively framing the current conditions of the Sunni-majority societies. It also requires addressing the prime source of provocation and instigation of both majoritism and sectarianism -- the Iranian role in the Arab region. ❖

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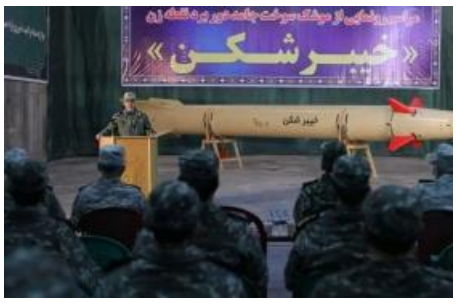

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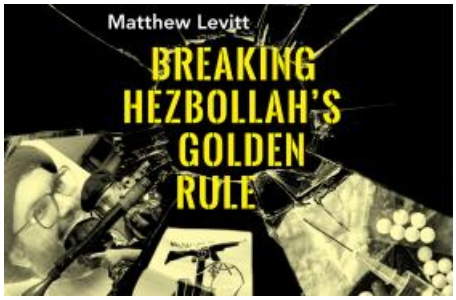

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