

The Vocabulary of Sectarianism

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Articles & Testimony

Many players in Syria are pursuing a long-term sectarian dehumanization strategy because they view the war as an existential religious struggle between Sunnis and Shiites, indicating that peace conferences are unlikely to resolve the conflict.

As the conflict in Syria continues to spread throughout the Levant and adopt a broader sectarian tone -- Sunni Salafis on one side and Iranian-backed, ideologically influenced Shiite Islamists on the other -- it is important to know how the main actors have cast one another. Unlike the rhetoric during the Iraq War (2003), sectarian language on both sides is regularly finding its way into common discourse. Fighting between Sunnis and Shiites has picked back up in Iraq, is slowly escalating in Lebanon, and there have been incidents in Australia, Azerbaijan, Britain, and Egypt.

The utilization of these words in militant and clerical lingo reflects a broader and far more portentous shift: A developing sectarian war and strategy of dehumanization. This is not simply a representation of petty tribal hatreds or a simple reflection on Syria's war, but a grander regional and religious issue. If language serves as a guide to how a conflict will develop and how participants view it, a number of key terms must be understood.

Sunni Islamists, particularly Salafis, have used six main terms to describe those that support, are on the side of, or are fighting with the Assad regime: Nusayri, rafidha, majus, Safawi, Hizb al-Lat, and Hizb al-Shaytan. Their Shiite Islamist foes have also adopted their own titles for their Sunni opponents, some of the main terms include: Nasabi,

Takfiri, Ummayyad, and Wahhabi. For both sides, these terms serve to paint their enemies as nothing more than infidels bent on destroying Islam. Consequently, there can only be one punishment: Death.

When Sunni Islamists use "Nusayri," it is in reference to Abu Shuayb Muhammad Ibn Nusayr, the founder of the Alawite religion during the eighth century. It is used to frame the Alawite religion as following a man and not God and therefore not divinely inspired. While the term Nusayri has been used by global jihadis going back years as a derogatory term toward the Assad regime and the Alawites more generally, the majority of Syrians, let alone Sunnis in another country, did not partake in such terminology. However, it has become normalized within the mainstream rebellion as well as outside among religious scholars and others.

It is easy to find supporters of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) using Nusayri when talking about the people they are fighting. Further, in June 2013, Hassan Aboud, leader of the Islamic Front's strongest faction, Ahrar al-Sham, in an interview on Al Jazeera Arabic stated: "What is happening in Syria is that the country has been ruled by a Nusayri idea, a Shi'a group that came to power and started discriminating against the Sunni people. They prevented them from practicing their religion and painted a picture of Islam that is far from what Islam is, with traditions and practices that are not Islamic at all. It wanted to wipe true Islam from the country."

What has really pushed terminology such as Nusayri into broader discourse has been its use by towering clerics, often branded as "moderate," like Yusuf al-Qaradawi. In a conference in June 2013 in Cairo (that called for jihad in Syria and was attended by the Grand Imam of al-Azhar), Qaradawi called Nusayris bigger infidels than even the Jews or Christians. These examples highlight how at different levels of this conflict a number of actors are pushing these narratives to stoke sectarian tension as well as brand the enemy. It could also be one of a number of reasons why Syria has seen such a large Sunni foreign fighter contingent.

Another result of this dehumanization effort has been crimes against humanity perpetrated by rebel forces, including non-Salafis, documented by Human Rights Watch, against Alawite civilians in August 2013. Demonstrating the pull of this rhetoric, the offensive in Latakia had been fully supported by many Kuwaiti donors. Shiite Islamist groups have also been implicated in potential war crimes. In an October clip released on YouTube, fighters executed what were reported to be captured Syrian rebels while claiming to do it due to religious justification. During the executions one of the shooters said, "We are performing our taklif [religious order] and we are not seeking personal vengeance."

Another term becoming more popularized in the regional lexicon is "rafidha" (pl. rawafidh) in reference to Twelver Shiites, the largest of the Shiite sects. Unlike Nusayri, rafidha was not fringe prior to the Syrian conflict since it has been used in mainstream Saudi religious discourse as well as education.

Rafidha means rejectionist and refers to the Shiites because, according to those who use the term, they do not recognize Abu Bakr and his successors as having been legitimate rulers after the death of Islam's Prophet Mohammad. In the Syrian context, rafidha has been used to denote Iran (a majority Shiite country) due to its support for the Assad regime.

In late 2012, when torching a Shiite "temple" (even the use of this term attempts to remove the Shiite connection to Islam), Syrian rebels used rafidha repeatedly. Another way Sunni jihadis in Syria have attempted to instill this anti-Shiite worldview onto local populations is through murals in villages and cities they have over taken. One Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) painting in Aleppo says, "Fighting Nusayri apostates and the rafidha is an obligation." Leaders and groups within the Islamic Front have also utilized this term in the context of a religious war with Shiites. In one case, in July 2013, Zahran Alloush, the military commander of the Islamic Front and leader of Jaish al-Islam stated: "The mujahidin of al-Sham will wash the filth of the rafidha and the rafidha from al-Sham, they will wash it forever, if God wills it, until they cleanse Bilad al-Sham from the filth of the majus who have fought the

religion of God. So go oh mujahidin to support your brethren, go to support your brethren, we, in Liwa al-Islam [former name of Jaish al-Islam], welcome the mujahidin from all over the world to be an aid and support for us, to fight in our ranks, the rank of sunna [traditions of Mohammad], the sunna of the messenger of God, which raise the banner of tawhid [pure monotheism] high, until the humiliation and destruction is upon the majus, the enemies of Allah."

Nevertheless, just because rafidha is a regularly used derogatory term for the Shiites, this does not mean that Shiite jihadis and their supporters have not picked their own unique ways of dealing with the title. At times they have adopted a form of re-appropriation, taking the term rafidh and using it as their own. This mirrors how some groups have turned slurs into more positive terms or as a form of self-identity. On social media catering to the many Iranian-backed Shiite Islamists operating in Syria, some administrators go by handles utilizing rafidha as a sign of mocking defiance against their foes. One post by an Asaib Ahl al-Haq linked-page, an Iranian-backed Iraqi Shiite group with forces in Syria, proudly self-identified its fighters as rafidha. There is even a Rafidha News Agency.

If rafidha is a go-to term for Sunni Salafi Islamists, then "Nasabi" (pl. Nawasib) is the favored term in the Shiite political lexicon to describe Sunni foes. The word itself is a descriptor for those who hate the family of Mohammad. As Shiite Islam researcher Christoph Marcinkowski notes, in Shiite jurisprudence those cast as nawasib, "are considered non-Muslims." Though, unlike the Shiite adoption of rafidha, many Sunni Islamists would vehemently disagree with this title.

The usage of the term also highlights that Shiites fighting in Syria are following religious fatwas calling for religious holy war, which are coming from primarily Iranian-backed clerics. On November 5, 2013, Grand Ayatollah Haeri issued the first publicly available fatwa to cast Syrian rebels as "infidels" and called on followers to fight them in a jihad. Yet, the Haeri fatwa highlights an ironic incongruity. Another popular term used by Shiite jihadis for their Sunni enemies has been "takfiri." A takfiri is a Muslim who declares another Muslim as an infidel. This declaration allows for the accused to be killed.

Lebanon's Hezbollah chief Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah has regularly used the term to describe groups that have attempted to attack Hezbollah and its allies fighting in Syria. In part, the narrative behind this attempts to show Iranian-backed Islamist groups as believers in true Islamic unity and not infighting. Nonetheless, the term is regularly used in conjunction with Shiite imagery and overtly Shiite oriented sectarian messages.

Charging their enemies with being takfiris has also allowed for Iranian-backed Shiite Islamist organizations to further their own conspiratorial narrative. The most commonly repeated claim states that Israel, the United States, Saudi Arabia, and the takfiris are in league to destroy Hezbollah, Syria, and Islam.

In addition to vitriol against the Assad regime and Iran on religious grounds, many Sunni Islamists have taken Hezbollah to task, calling it "Hizb al-Lat" (the party of Lat) and "Hizb al-Shaytan" (the party of Satan). The latter is self-explanatory, while the former is in reference to the pre-Islamic Arabian goddess al-Lat, who was believed to be a daughter of God, thus branding Hezbollah as a group of polytheists and not true believers, who must be smashed similar to the idols during the time of Mohammad.

In Doha in late spring 2013, Qaradawi monumentally condoned jihad in Syria and later described Hezbollah as Hizb al-Shaytan: "The leader of Hizb al-Shaytan comes to fight the Sunnis...Now we know what the Iranians want...They want continued massacres to kill Sunnis...How could 100 million Shi'a [worldwide] defeat 1.7 billion [Sunnis]? Only because [Sunni] Muslims are weak." This statement was later praised by Saudi Arabia's Grand Mufti Abdul Aziz al-Sheikh.

Further, some of these terms have become enmeshed within the culture of the war that there are even nashids (a cappella chants sanctioned by Islam) used as rallying cries against their enemies. The nashid online production

outlet Masama al-Khayr l-l-Inshad in June 2013 released an anti-Hezbollah nashid titled "This is Hizb al-Lat, a Club of Short Indulgences." They have also shown up in political cartoons. Some have refashioned Nasrallah's name to Nasr al-Lat, including the popular Kuwaiti cleric Sheikh Shafii Ajmi. Nasrallah's enemies have even depicted him as an Israeli vampire pirate, further highlighting the conspiratorial nature of how individuals have viewed the Shiite's non-existent alliance with Israel against Sunni Muslims.

Referencing the seventh to eighth century Ummayyad Empire is another popular theme for both sides. Featured in Alloush's speech was his urging that, "The glory of the Ummayyads will return to al-Sham despite you [despite your noses] and it's not up to you to allow it or not." Shiite jihadis are hardly nostalgic when it comes to the "glory of the Ummayyads." In fact, they often use the titles of "Ummayyad" or "bani Ummayyad" ("sons of the Ummayyads") as insults.

For these combatants, memories of past historical injustices by the Ummayyads are a central piece of their *raison d'être* regarding their involvement in Syria. The first announcement of a militant Shiite Islamist presence in Syria was wrapped up in the claim that these forces were defending the Sayyida Zainab Shrine located in the south of Damascus. Their motto, "Lan tusba Zainab murtayn" or "Zainab will not be captive again" recalls the story of Zainab, the granddaughter of Mohammad and daughter of Ali, the first Shiite Imam. Following the pivotal seventh century Battle of Karbala she was unveiled and paraded on foot by Yazid. The battle itself is viewed as the moment when the Sunni-Shiite split truly took on a life of its own. Yazid was the first of the Ummayyad leaders and considered by Shiites to be a personification of evil and deceitfulness.

One photo posted to active Badr Organization and Asaib Ahl al-Haq Facebook groups claimed the person in the picture had gone into "the mosque of the Ummayyads [located in Damascus and where Yazid's court once stood] and cursed them" while holding what was reported to be a Hezbollah flag.

Another way Sunni Islamists have painted Shiite Islam as not true Islamic beliefs, is by calling them "Majus." The term is a reference to Zoroastrianism (also sometimes called Magianism), which posits Shiism as a mask for a deviant religion of the past. Alloush also utilized this term, though it has not been as popular as others.

Another sometimes-used term is "Safawi," which recalls the Safavid dynasty that ruled Iran from 1501 to 1736. It is most known for the Shiite-ization of Iran, which used to have a Sunni population. Sometimes the term is used as a neologism of Sahiyyu-Safawi (Zionist-Safawi) to denote that there is a conspiracy between Israel and Iran against Sunni Muslims.

In Ahrar al-Sham's first video released in April 2012 -- which has since been taken offline, but described by International Crisis Group -- notes the nature and stakes of the uprising against the Assad regime. Ahrar al-Sham "described the uprising as a jihad against a Safawi plot to spread Shi'ism and establish a Shi'ite state from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon and Palestine. The statement claimed that were the plot to succeed, it would be a triumph for Zionism, 'because it's well known that al-Rafidha don't fight the enemy; they only turn their swords against Sunnis.'"

Similarly, in August 2012, Bahraini Member of Parliament Abd al-Halim Murad, when visiting Suqur al-Sham -- which at that time was not yet in the Salafi camp and was for a civil state and some form of democracy -- found in Suqur al-Sham it was possible to achieve victory over and against the slaughter of the "rancorous" Safawis. This highlights the potency of the amplified sectarian nature of the Syrian conflict, when a group such as Suqur al-Sham, which has been avowedly anti-ISIS (which really ignited the sectarian flame last decade), is viewed as a key cog in the fight to extinguish the attempted "Shiite crescent."

Shiite Islamists have adopted their own type of response to the charge they are little more than modern-day Safavids by calling their enemies "Wahhabis." The word is directly affiliated with those who follow the teachings of Sunni Salafi Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the lead theologian who influenced Iran's foe across the Persian Gulf, Saudi

Arabia. The utilization of Wahhabi as a negative moniker is not new. Following the 2010 terror attack in Zahedan Province in Iran, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei went so far as to blame the, "evil and criminal hand of prejudiced and misguided Wahhabis." With Syria exploding and direct Saudi and Iranian involvement obvious, this title helps brand all of their Sunni foes as little more than schismatic ideological proxies of Riyadh.

The nature of these titles and those adopting them should present a sobering and worrying picture when attempting to understand the escalation of the Syrian conflict. This highlights the stakes for many of the key actors inside and outside of Syria who are not even among the global jihadis. Many players are pursuing a long-term dehumanization strategy because they view this as an existential cosmic religious battle between Salafi Sunnism and Khomeinist Shiism, indicating that peace conferences are not likely to solve the Syria problem.

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