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# The Complexities of Sectarianism: Exploring Religious Identity, Political Dynamics, and Social Divisions

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**Abstract**
This study delves into the intricate nature of sectarianism, examining the multifaceted factors that contribute to its emergence, sustenance, and consequences. Drawing upon a wide range of interdisciplinary research, including social psychology, political science, and cultural studies, this investigation sheds light on the complex interplay between religious identity, political dynamics, and social divisions.

**Keywords:** Sectarianism, religious identity, political dynamics, social divisions.

## Introduction

The abstracted findings reveal that religious identity serves as a powerful catalyst in the formation of sectarianism, as individuals tend to align themselves with specific religious groups and adhere fervently to their doctrines. The intertwining of religion with politics further exacerbates tensions, as sectarian interests often become entangled in power struggles and ideological conflicts. Such circumstances can foster social divisions, fueling animosity and hostility between different religious communities.

Moreover, the study underscores the detrimental consequences of sectarianism on societies and individuals. It highlights the erosion of social cohesion, the hinderance of democratic processes, and the escalation of violence and conflict. The repercussions extend beyond religious boundaries, affecting economic stability, educational opportunities, and overall societal progress.

Recognizing the significance of these findings, the study emphasizes the importance of fostering interfaith dialogue, promoting tolerance, and addressing the root causes of sectarianism. It proposes comprehensive strategies to mitigate sectarian tensions, including education initiatives, intergroup engagement, and inclusive governance structures.

By delving into the complexities of sectarianism, this study seeks to deepen our understanding of the intricate dynamics at play and provide a foundation for informed interventions aimed at fostering harmony, coexistence, and societal progress

**Defining the terms' sect and sectarianism**

Sectarianism is a political order founded on religious sectarianism and communal sovereignty, according to me. It goes hand in hand with religious groups' political inequity. As a result, sectarianism is a system in which religious allegiance has political ramifications, putting people and social groupings in a hierarchical structure. (Cheterian,2021)

While one sectarian identity is recognized as having the right to political monopoly, others are considered politically subordinate, even excluded from sovereignty, and consigned to other social roles. It is vital to have a comparative and geographical dimension to be able to examine various expressions of sectarianism within the same methodology to frame sectarianism philosophically. For the Cheterian definition of sect and sectarianism, there is no essential difference between what is "religious" and what is "confessional," as long as the body of religious belief produces social organizations with political stratification – just as the Ottoman Sultans recognized the Greek Orthodox and Armenian Apostolic churches as autonomous millets, two Christian denominations, as well as Jews, a religious community as a recognized mille. ( Maurits & Boogert 2012 ) A sectarian political regime is a set of rules that governs a group of people.

Sects are distinguished from sectarianism by Cheterian (2021). Sects are social networks founded on religious confessional identities that occupy space and act as a conduit between the state and the individual.

Sects can be influenced by the state and its institutions, yet they can also exist outside of the state and even official institutions. It's easier to comprehend if we think of Ottoman millets, religious communities with semiautonomous status in running their affairs. This comprised

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religious freedom, as well as education, social assistance through religious foundations (such as awqaf), and millet courts and jails at times. Even bathroom towels in Ottoman Aleppo, where a Muslim majority coexisted with many Christian confessions and Jews, plainly recognized one's "religious faith." (Masters,2013,651) This concept of sects is superior to the nonsensical arguments that sectarianism exists but sects do not. (Bishra,2016) It defines sects as a distinct sort of social group and grounds sectarianism in the daily behaviors of social organizations, which reproduce sectarian imagination, group identity, and ideology. Based on this, Cheterian described sects as a social entity that exists outside of the political arena and is sustained by a variety of institutions that allow them to function semi-autonomously. He envisions sects as independent social entities that operate unequally side by side in the context of a common polity but by producing segregated, sectarian public spheres by turning Medhi 'Amel's arguments upside down – who rejected the existence of social foundations of sectarianism – and Jürgen Habermas' concept of the public sphere on its head.( A'mel ,2016,27)It's important to distinguish between sect and sectarianism; the former is social, while the latter is political.( Salloukh & Barakat & ets ,2015,3 )By using the terms' sect and sectarianism, we can deduce that we are dealing with a phenomenon that is shaped by the vertical political ranking of religious communities, but also a feature that exists outside of state and political institutions and has origins in social organization. Sectarianism establishes a hegemonic position for one of the many sects, while the others are excluded from political power. (Ghalioun,2018,8) As a result, a modern sectarian system has difficulty defining sovereignty and determining whether the "people," a subset of it or none at all, may be considered the sovereign. Sectarianism has difficulty acknowledging sectarian equality, sharing executive authority, and rotating leadership of the state, but it does put those sects - religious groupings – hierarchically inside the political order pyramid. Sectarian consociationalism, like in the example of Mutasarrifiyya on Mount Lebanon, or Sunnism in Turkey are state identities, but the Rum millet – or Orthodox identity in the Ottoman Empire – or contemporary political Islam in its Sunni and Shia varieties are both supranational identities. (Beydoun,2009) Furthermore, each community plays a unique role in the state and its institutions: in post-war Lebanon, the Shiite community self-proclaims the right to "resistance" and even "national defense," the Sunni community that of reconstruction and economic development, and the Maronites that of national sovereignty restoration(Cheterin,2021).

**The moment of sectarianism**

Religious conflicts in the Middle East are far from new or rare, even in the previous century. Ibn Saud's takeover of the Kingdom of the Hijaz in the 1920s, Lebanon's 15-year civil war, and the 1979 Islamic Revolution all resulted in sectarian violence. (Barnard and Schmitt,2013)

Shi'ites and Sunnis disagree on who the Prophet Muhammad's true heir is, with the Shi'ites – like the Alawites – thinking that Ali, the Prophet's cousin, and son-in-law, assumed leadership of the Muslim community. As a result, the two Islamic sects now have significant doctrinal differences. Additionally, their jurisprudence and ceremonies vary. Salafis, or puritanical Sunnis, are particularly critical of Shi'ites for what they see to be apostasy in their reverence for Ali and shrine worship, among other things. (Makdisi,2000)

Nevertheless, these distinctions have frequently been insignificant, and tolerance has been far more prevalent in recent decades than violence. Suspicion, discrimination, and segregation were widespread, but for the better part of the twentieth century, Arab nationalism, power politics, ethnicity, and even regional and class divisions were more prominent than religious affiliation. Religious identification was frequently fluid even between sects. (Mansfield 2013).

A middle-class Iraqi Shi'ite's identity can be shaped in a variety of ways, depending on the context: by country, ethnic origin, family, and social class. Even so, there were signs of development. Numerous governments attempted to create an illusion of equality by employing communal preference behind the scenes while emphasizing national unity in public. Even in

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Saudi Arabia, which has a long history of hostility against its Shia minority, King Abdullah made apparent gestures toward the Shia community, permitting dissidents to return and attempting to co-opt former opposition figures. This advancement has now been reversed. (Welch 2010).

**Sectarianism and non-compromise between Shia and Sunni Muslims**

Can we speak of different Sunni and Shi'a identities that are doomed to incompatibility in Iraq, Pakistan, Lebanon, or even cyberspace? Indeed, how useful are Sunni and Shi'a words in social and political contexts? Faleh Abdul Jabbar has persuasively argued against using such terms to designate sociological categories, arguing that they constitute "a loose cultural designation that may distinguish one group from another religiously but never specifies social, cultural, or political distinctions within this "group." (Haddad, 2011)

In other words, 'Shi'i' and 'Sunni' are not monolithic groups but are themselves subdivided by a variety of social, economic, and political factors that may unite 'Sunnis' and 'Shi'as' based on class or political ideology, for example. (Marr, 2012)

Shi'as and Sunnis (as religious groups) do exist in Iraq and abroad. The significance of this religious identification varies across individuals and over time, depending on broader circumstances. For example, a non-practicing Shi'a may fiercely identify with his/her conception of Shi'ism if it is perceived to be under threat or during emotionally charged religious occasions. The obvious point to highlight is that the individual's relevance to Shi'a or Sunni identity will vary depending on the context. Thus, while the significance of sectarian identity varies by individual 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 target of verbal or physical attack; in other words, the validity of using 'Shi'a' and 'Sunni' as analytical categories is contingent on their salience at any given time. (Visser, 2008) ( Haddad, 2011)

The Middle East is currently divided along ethnic, religious, and geopolitical lines, worsened by competition for oil and natural gas and the region's colonial partition following World War I (de Blij, Muller, and Nijman 2014). Sunni Muslims account for approximately 87 percent of the global Muslim population, while Shias account for approximately 13% (Moore,2015).

Iraq's Sunni-Shia divide erupted with Saddam Hussein's removal, and the long-oppressed Shi'a have been involved in overt and covert activities against the Sunnis since 2003. (Mansfield 2013). Sectarian and tribal divisions, which were previously suppressed by the brutal Hussein dictatorship, resulted in the virtual disintegration of Iraq, which is now under attack by ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), a violent Sunni faction that is beheading, enslaving and conquering large swaths of territory in an attempt to re-establish the Sunni Caliphate under sharia law (Mansfield 2013; Wood 2015). ISIS will assassinate Shi'ites, Sunnis they deem insufficiently pious, Christians, and others who stand in their path; ISIS poses a significant threat to the entire area and presents the US with difficult policy choices. Iraq was never a country bound by a strong national bond; sectarian and tribal identities consistently eroded any sense of national unity (Mansfield 2013).

Iran is the world's most powerful and populous Shi'ite state, accounting for 90–95 percent of the country's 75 million people (Pew Research Center 2014). Sunni countries, such as Saudi Arabia—a country that adheres to Wahhabism, the most fundamentalist version of Sunni Islam, and considers Shi'ites to be heretics—have a long-standing animosity toward Shi'ite Iran and have welcomed American support (Rossi 2008).

**Sectarian Identity's Motivators**

How can sectarian identity become active? Sectarian identity can be mobilized by a variety of variables, ranging from state policy to conversational stimulus – the frequently heard claim that all Shi'as are loyal to Iran is likely to provoke a response from the majority of Shi'as, regardless of their religious commitment. However, it would be more beneficial to prioritize group mobilization over individual mobilization. (Haddad,2010)

How is sectarian identity mobilized and how does it gain prominence among a broad cross-

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section of Shi'i or Sunni populations? By examining many cases, four critical variables become apparent: external influence, economic competition, conflicting myth-symbol complexes, and disputed cultural ownership of nations. I would argue that while the first two criteria are less directly related to sectarian dynamics, they are critical as facilitators of the last two. (Visser,2005)

**Influence from the outside**

Foreign influence is a critical aspect in comprehending sectarian dynamics that are frequently ignored or exaggerated. (Haddad,2010) It is all too easy to overlook the impact of foreign influences when attempting to focus on sociocultural variables and micro-level features of sectarian interactions. Similarly, a possible soothing explanation for sectarian tensions would be to exaggerate the foreign factor, which all too frequently results in conspiracy ideas (Haidari,2006).

that outside influence can work as a catalyst for sectarian unification; nevertheless, history demonstrates that this is a rare occurrence. As depicted in the poetry of the time, the Wahhabi sack of Karbala and raid on Najaf in 1802 shocked Iraqis, both Sunni and Shi'a. More recently, as Iraqi nationalists never tire of repeating, the British presence in early twentieth-century Iraq was a force for unification between Shi'as and Sunnis, a fact British officials expressed anxiety over. Even more recently, the Iran-Iraq war was, in general, a source of Iraqi solidarity. (Al Wardi,2005).

Significantly for the period under review, post-1990 Iraq, the 1979 Iranian revolution was to have a lasting effect on sectarian relations in Iraq. Iran's revolutionary Shi'a movement galvanized an already active Shi'a Islamism in Iraq, straining the state's relationship with Shi'a Iraqis. As we will discuss later, claims of links between Iraqi Shi'a and Iran have dogged sectarian ties throughout modern Iraq's history. This was worsened in 1979; as Ghassan al Attiyah put it, "sectarian relations have always been a source of contention in Iraq, but they became uncontrollable during 1979" (al Attiyah,2008,128)

The Iranian revolution polarised views and mobilized sectarian identities throughout the Islamic world. Regional regimes, fearful of revolutionary Iran, sought to discredit it in any manner imaginable. (Al Kawaki,2008) Perhaps the simplest way to ensure that young Sunni Muslims were turned off by the Iranian example was to undermine the basic basis of their religion: Shi'ism. Ali al Mu'min has documented a deliberate anti-Shi'i discourse emerging predominantly from the Gulf States in the post-1979 period. (Khalil,2008)

**Competition in the Economy**

Economic dimensions of the conflict have been explored in conflict and civil war theories. Political and economic configurations, it appears, will play a significant role in sectarian tensions throughout the Islamic world, particularly if Shi'a and Sunnis cohabit in the same nation-state, as they develop a sense of victimhood and strengthen sectarian self-definition. However, seeing society through an economic lens of 'haves' and 'have-nots' risks reducing both the larger society and its constituent groups to a one-dimensional entity devoid of variation beyond or within broad categories such as Sunnis and Shi'as. (Kedourie,1988,250)

To summarise, while we must recognize that lines of economic and political discrimination are not rigid, we must also recognize that co-opted members of an out-group, or members of an out-group who have adopted dominant values and structures, may well retain awareness and sense of injustice toward sectional discrimination against those of their cultural background. (Haddad,2010)

In a nutshell, these individuals may be on the 'haves' side of the political or economic spectrum but may feel excluded. associated with the 'have-nots' end of the cultural divide. (Eitani,2009) I would argue that the distinction between these individuals and actual have-nots is that the former is extremely unlikely to engage in any sort of action geared at redressing this perceived imbalance. (Al Khafaji,2004)

**Myth-Symbol Complexes that Compete**

The myth-symbol complex' is at the heart of ethnic identity; it is the collection of stories, memories, values, and symbols that determines not only who is a part of the group, but also what it means to be a member. (Kaufman,2003)

Thus, the group's survival, status, and security are contingent on the status of group symbols,

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which explains why individuals are willing to fight and die for them – and why they follow leaders who exploit those symbols. In Iraq and elsewhere, Shi'as and Sunnis are not homogeneous, nor are they necessarily self-defined in such terms. When a group or its identity is perceived to be discriminated against, attacked, or suppressed (physically or symbolically), the importance of these self-definition forms increases. (Haddad,2010)

Therefore, during times of heightened sectarian strife, even the most devoutly secular Muslims may identify as members of a sect before other kinds of identification. The point to emphasize is that these emotions are not static; they are in constant movement and are influenced by broader situations. (Haddad,2010) While the sincere believer places a premium on sectarian identification, cultural Shi'as and Sunnis place a premium on sectarian identity during times of sectarian tension, which is frequently created by a clash of symbolisms. (Smith,2003)

The ethnic central d's tenet Chosen glories are not nearly as difficult as traumas unless they are obtained at the expense of another. In contrast to glories, traumas "carry with them profound perceptions of loss and feelings of humiliation, revenge, and hatred that activate a variety of unconscious defense systems aimed at reversing these experiences and feelings." This was evident in post-2003 Iraq, where Shi'as saw the new political context as an opportunity to redress perceived wrongs. Sunnis also developed a broader assortment of symbols, traumas, and triumphs in post-2003 Iraq in response to postwar changes that relegated them to minority status. (Al Khayoon,2008)

Myths and symbols are the raw material of group identification, providing members with the landmarks necessary to construct a reassuring story about their place in the larger society, one that incorporates traumas, triumphs, and a sense of uniqueness. In a nutshell, it provides what is frequently referred to as ontological assurance. (Haddad,2010) Groups can confer legitimacy and 'truth' on such narratives if they possess greater privileges and resources that can be utilized to sustain self- and state-centered narratives. (Pelham,2008)

**Nationwide Cultural Ownership Is Disputed**

Essentially, as a motivator of sectarian identity, cultural ownership of the nation presents itself in a push by sects to have their myths and symbols incorporated into state narratives of the nation as a reflection of their embodiment of the nation, as members of the sect would say. In other terms, it is a struggle to become the Staatsvolk of the nation. (Wimmer,2004) It should be emphasized once more that this is not a perpetual conflict, nor are nations home to Sunnis and Shi'as doomed to become cultural battlegrounds. (Al Wardi,2007) Rather than that, and as will become evident, this battle is only meaningful when the importance of sectarian identity is exaggerated. (Haddad,2010)

To illustrate, Shi'as may well have grumbled in 'normal times' that the Shi'a call to prayer was not broadcast on Iraqi state television without feeling meaningfully excluded; however, during times of heightened sectarian tension and group insecurity, Shi'as may expect a slew of symbols to be incorporated into public spaces and a slew of historical wrongs to be rectified as a way of validating Shi'ism's 'Iraqite's Divergent narratives will always exist; however, with a strengthened Iraqi nationalism, these narratives will be limited to the fringe. (Haddad,2010) When an overall sense of nationalism gives way to an exclusivist nationalism, a growing number of individuals will embrace what was formerly the preserve of a small minority. The myth-symbol complex' is an entity – the union of myth and symbol. (Wolff,2007)

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the study has explored the multifaceted phenomenon of sectarianism, highlighting the intricate interplay between religious identity, political dynamics, and social divisions. It has revealed that sectarianism is often fueled by the alignment of religious and political interests, leading to social tensions, animosity, and violence between different religious communities.

The consequences of sectarianism are far-reaching and detrimental to both societies and individuals. It undermines social cohesion, hampers democratic processes, and perpetuates cycles of violence and conflict. Moreover, it impedes economic stability, restricts educational opportunities, and hinders overall societal progress.

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To address sectarianism effectively, it is crucial to promote interfaith dialogue, foster tolerance, and address the root causes of divisions. Education initiatives that encourage empathy, critical thinking, and understanding of different religious perspectives can play a pivotal role in reducing prejudices and stereotypes. Additionally, creating opportunities for intergroup engagement and collaboration can help bridge divides and promote mutual respect.
Furthermore, inclusive governance structures that ensure equal representation and protection of all religious communities are essential for mitigating sectarian tensions. By promoting inclusive policies and actively involving diverse voices in decision-making processes, societies can work towards building more harmonious and cohesive environments.
Ultimately, tackling sectarianism requires a concerted effort from individuals, communities, religious leaders, policymakers, and international organizations. By acknowledging the complex nature of sectarianism and implementing comprehensive strategies, societies can aspire to achieve lasting peace, coexistence, and societal progress that transcend religious boundaries.

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