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Sectarian Divide in the Middle East and Politics

by *Hakim Khatib*

Religion in the Middle East seems to define allies and enemies inside and outside the political borders. On the one hand, Shiite Iran is allies with the Iraqi government, the Houthi rebels in Yemen, Hezbollah in Lebanon, revolutionary forces in Bahrain and the Syrian regime. On the other hand, Sunni Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States, Egypt, Turkey and Sunni elements in the region form an alliance against what they call the expansion of the Iranian influence. There is an unmistakable pattern of alliance in the Middle East, in which states, monarchies and forces seem to define their allies and enemies based on sectarian dimensions, and by which we witness a minority oppressing a majority when it is possible and vice versa across the Middle East including Israel.

Divisions in the Middle East are relatively based on sectarian dimensions, yet the political rifts among contesting actors are not quite religious. What fuels the sectarian divide in the Middle East is not per se religion, it is rather the prevalent authoritarian form of governance and the concentration of power in the hands of a few in each Middle Eastern country. Ideology, a transcendent religion in this case, proves to be useful for the already contesting parties to mobilise the people, legitimate and consolidate power and influence and eliminate any political opponents.

Based on these patterns, a misconception has emerged about the nature of the relationship between politics and Islam in the Middle East. On the one hand, it has been assumed that Islam, based on specific features in the Islamic religion and culture, had dominated politics in the Middle East, consequently, driving the region towards authoritarianism and protracted conflicts. On the other hand, it is widely accepted in the Middle East to see Islam as a moral framework for politics. Therefore any separation between religion and politics necessarily leads towards more authoritarianism and conflict.

We witness that the prominence of religion in political contexts in Iraq, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Yemen, for instance, doesn't owe to specific features of the Islamic religion and culture but rather to the exploitation of religion in mobilisation, contestation and outbidding processes. Political instrumentalisation of Islam leads to a political vicious cycle, which increases radicalisation, deepens division and hampers political development towards democratisation.

Middle Eastern states share, among others, two common factors: Authoritarian form of governance and concentration of power in the hands of few individuals in each country. Therefore, in an ethno linguistic fractionalised region such as the Middle East, religion is an effective means to mobilise the masses, preserve power for the ruling elites and keep the public in check. Religious divisions contribute to creating political and social structures that enforce the status quo in the Middle East. According to Language Fractionalization Index, Iran, UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon are the most linguistically fractionalised countries in the region, whereas Lebanon, Kuwait, Bahrain, Iraq, and Syria are the most religiously

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fractionalised.

In Iraq, Saddam Hussein, who hails from a Sunni minority, oppressed the Shiite majority along with the Kurdish minority to preserve power. He ruled Iraq with a fist of iron between 1979-2003 when he was defeated by the American invasion. Since 2003, thanks to the American assistance, the Shiite majority has taken over power putting the Sunni minority under a political, social and economic pressure. The marginalisation the Shiite majority suffered under the rule of Hussein has been inflicted on the Sunni minority since 2003.

In Syria, the Alawite, Shiite and Christian minorities were marginalised and oppressed under a majority Sunni population before and during the Second World War. After the Baath party had succeeded in seizing power in 1964, the scale tipped in favour of the Alawite minority in Syria. Hafez Al-Assad consolidated his power in 1970 and remained in power till his death in 2000. His rule fostered patterns of preference based on sectarian dimensions in a highly fractionalised population. Hafez Al-Assad and his son Bashar Al-Assad allied with Iran and Hezbollah to form the so-called resistance axis against global conspiracies and western imperialism. The Sunni majority were marginalised, oppressed and significantly reduced from sensitive positions in the country. These patterns of preference crystallise even more when we look at the aftermath of the Syrian uprising in 2011, which turned into a civil war.

On the one hand, most Syrian refugees and opposition forces hail from the Sunni majority. On the other hand, many Christians, Shiites and Alawites still support the Syrian regime despite its brutality and authoritarian form of governance. In case of changing the power structures in Syria, there is little or no evidence that the Christian, Shiite and Alawite minorities will enjoy the same rights and security as the victorious Sunni majority. Adding more complications to the Syrian imbroglio, Saudi Arabia supports Sunni but hard-line elements in Syria, while Qatar and Turkey support Sunni elements allied with the Muslim Brotherhood, whereas Iran and Hezbollah have supported the Syrian regime since day one.

In Yemen, a coalition including Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Jordan, Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, Sudan and "Pakistan" launched an airstrike called „The Storm of Resolve“ against Houthi rebels claiming to defend the „legitimate Yemeni government“ of Abdrabbu Mansour Hadi. Houthi rebels are a Shiite minority in northern Yemen accused of being backed by Iran. Many Yemeni civilians including children were killed by the airstrikes similar to what we see in Syria. The capabilities of Houthis, the main enemies of Al-Qaeda in Yemen, are significantly diminished now and directly engaged in a war with Saudi Arabia and its allies. Noam Chomsky described the latest airstrike against Yemen as an „extreme form of terrorism“. „Yemen has been the main target of the global assassination campaign—the most extraordinary global terrorism campaign in history— it is officially aimed at, as in this last strike, people who are suspected of potentially being a danger to the United States,“ said Chomsky on Russia Today last month.

In Saudi Arabia, the majority Sunni population oppresses Shiite minority rhetorically and constitutionally, while the Sunni royal family in Bahrain, backed by their Gulf allies, oppresses the Shiite majority. On the one hand, Shiites, who explicitly or implicitly show their faith, might face imprisonment in Saudi Arabia, according to Human Rights Watch (HRW). „Official discrimination against Shia encompasses religious practices, education, and the justice system. Government officials exclude Shia from certain public jobs and policy questions and publicly disparage their faith,“ according to 2011 Report on Saudi Arabia.

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Bahrain on the other hand called for Gulf backup to crack down protests by using live ammunition in Shiite-majority villages. „Bahrain has brutally punished those protesting peacefully for greater freedom and accountability while the US and other allies looked the other way,“ said Joe Stork, deputy Middle East director at HRW.

The choice of Sunni-majority states to support revolutionary demands in Syria but to deny them in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Yemen is nothing but sectarian. Accordingly, the choice of Shiite majority Iran, Hezbollah and their allies to support revolutionary demands in Yemen and Bahrain but to deny them in Syria and Iraq is also sectarian. There is no evidence that Islam, as a religion, solely enforces such practices, it is rather a combination of inter alia three factors, authoritarian system, concentration of power and ideology. Religion remains an identifying factor (not identity). A Shiite person is more likely to support Houthi rebels in Yemen, for instance, while a Sunni is more likely to support Syrian rebels.

In the past, Jews suffered from discrimination, oppression and termination especially in the beginning of the 20th century because they constituted a minority in non-democratic systems. However, nowadays in Israel, there are authoritarian practices against Palestinian non-Jewish communities. There is no evidence that Judaism, as a religion, solely enforces such practices, it is rather an identifying factor i.e. politics.

Authoritarianism is not a characteristic of one specific ethnic or religious confession, but rather a factor, which could be shared by liberals, secularists, communists, leftists, Islamists, Salafists and dare to say Zionists in the Middle East. Neither authoritarianism, nor concentration of power or religion could be the only main reason for such patterns of alliance and majority-minority repressive relationship. It must be a combination of inter alia authoritarian forms of governance, concentration of power and instrumentalisation of ideology.



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Tags: **Authoritarianism, islam, middle east, Religion, Sectarianism**

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