

# THE MIDDLE EAST'S GREAT DIVIDE IS NOT SECTARIANISM

By Hussein Agha and Robert Malley March 11, 2019



*Wrongly defining the struggles gripping the Middle East encourages misguided remedies.*

Photograph by Karim Sahib / AFP / Getty

The spectre of sectarianism haunts the Middle East. It is blamed for chaos, conflict, and extremism. It defines what is seen as the region's principal fault line: Sunni versus Shiite. It has the power and elegance of a grand theory that seemingly explains all. Sunnis, embattled and embittered by Shiite ambitions, radicalize in large numbers, join Al Qaeda, or enlist in ISIS. Shiites, moved by the anxiety of a minority, overstep and seek power far in excess of their numbers.

Past and present tensions between the two main branches of Islam inarguably play a part in the region's dynamics. But the vast majority of recent violence that has brought desolation and ruin to large parts of the Middle East has little to do with those strains. The bloodiest, most vicious, and most pertinent struggles occur squarely inside the Sunni world. Sectarianism is a politically expedient fable, conveniently used to cover up old-fashioned power struggles, maltreatment of minorities, and cruel totalitarian practices.

The region's most ferociously violent Sunni actor, the Islamic State, for all its anti-Shiite discourse, claims Sunnis as the overwhelming majority of its victims. The fierce battles for the Iraqi city of Mosul or the Syrian city of Raqqa pitted Sunni against Sunni. ISIS attacks in Egypt, Somalia, Libya, Nigeria, and elsewhere almost always have Sunnis as prey. There are few examples of wide-scale killings of Shiites by the group.

The Arab uprisings, the most momentous political upheaval to have shaken the Arab world in a generation, typically involved Sunni-on-Sunni battles: in Tunisia, where the uprisings began; in Egypt, where they grew; and in Libya, where they persist. The same was true of the extraordinarily brutal and bloody Algerian civil war in the nineteen-nineties. Each episode of unrest featured violent confrontations and shifting alliances, among the Muslim Brotherhood, neo-Ottomans, Salafis, Wahhabis (in both their Saudi and Qatari versions) and jihadis. More moderate forces—Al-Azhar in Cairo, Jordanian Hashemites, and

the vast majority of peaceful Sunnis—helplessly stood by, hoping for the tumult to pass, and waiting anxiously for an opportunity to be heard.

In the Syrian tragedy, the Sunni-Alawite divide is routinely presented as a subset of a broader Sunni-Shiite confrontation and as central to understanding the violence. Yet the Assad regime is not exclusively Alawite, having been built around an alliance among Alawites, Sunni middle classes, and an array of religious minorities. It is hard to imagine the regime having survived without at least some backing from mainstream Sunnis: for much of its history, it relied on financial and political support from Sunni Gulf monarchies, Saudi Arabia first and foremost. During the early stages of the U.S. occupation of Iraq, the Syrian regime enabled the transit of radical Sunni Islamist fighters to the country, where they targeted Americans and mostly Iranian-backed Shiites.

Iran's and Hezbollah's rush to Assad's defense is political and strategic, not an embrace of common sectarian identity. Indeed, Syria's regime is about as distant in its religious orientation from that of the Islamic Republic as can be. To a large extent, the war in Syria became a battle among Sunni Islamist groups of assorted persuasions and patrons that spent more time, life, and treasure on fighting one another than on fighting the regime.

To focus solely on an overriding Sunni-Alawite conflict in Syria ignores other salient facts. Sunni rebel groups targeted more Sunnis than Alawites. Islamist groups besieged Christian communities, desecrated their symbols, pillaged their villages, murdered their religious leaders, and drove them out of their ancient homelands. When Russia rescued the regime in Damascus—killing a large number of Sunnis in the process—Sunni Arab leaders did not spurn Putin; they instead embarked on repeated pilgrimages to Moscow with offers of arms and trade deals and strategic alliances. Egypt, the most populous Sunni Arab country and the seat of the most respected center of Sunni learning, maintained channels to the Assad regime and kept a distance from the opposition. Cairo saw not a

Shiite or Alawite threat from the regime but an Islamist menace from the opposition. Algeria, the largest state in the Maghreb, acted in a similar manner. It is unsurprising that, as the war winds down, the U.A.E. and Bahrain have decided to restore diplomatic relations with the Syrian regime. Both are preoccupied with the struggle against Turkey and Qatar and share a fear of Sunni Islamism. Saudi Arabia may not be far behind.

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Yemen's complicated story has sectarian aspects, but it would be misleading to describe its civil war as a straightforward Sunni-Shiite split. The Houthi rebels are driven in large part by their conviction that their identity is threatened. The Iranian Revolution helped provide a model to emulate and an ally to curry. But at the core of the Houthis' grievance are social issues: they resent their loss of status and the increased neglect of the northern part of the country, their stronghold. The conflict morphed into a Saudi-Iranian proxy war not because of ancient or durable sectarian identities. Once they gained limited Iranian support, the Houthis—facing a Saudi-led assault—increasingly sought Tehran's backing. Iran, presented with an unexpected opportunity, obliged. This is geopolitics more than sectarianism, strategic rivalry more than religious competition. The conflict

between the Houthis and the Saudi-led coalition is only one of many tearing at Yemen's seams. When that war ends, tensions surrounding southern secessionists, Al Qaeda, ISIS, and Salafis, all Sunnis, will likely rage, exacerbated by Saudi-Emirati ambitions, divergence, and rivalry.

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The latest, most covered, and vivid act of violence, the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, is also an internal Sunni affair. The slain journalist was Sunni. The perpetrators were Sunni. Turkey, the country in which the assassination took place and that played an instrumental role in leaking information about the culprits, is predominantly Sunni as well. The backdrop to the killing is the tug-of-war among variants of Sunni Islam: the ascetic Wahhabis, the activist Muslim Brotherhood, and the statist neo-Ottomans, each competing for leadership. Conspicuously missing from this crowded drama is Iran, the region's principal Shiite country.

The list goes on. The Lebanese Prime Minister detained by Saudi Arabia, in

2017, was a Sunni. Hezbollah actually increased the number of Sunni allies it has in Parliament and in the Lebanese government in the aftermath of its intervention in the Syrian civil war against Sunni rebels. Shiites are not involved in the bitter inter-Palestinian rift between Fatah and Hamas. Shiites are not involved in the Algerian-Moroccan conflict over Western Sahara, the ongoing Saudi-Jordanian tensions, Saudi-Moroccan strains, Saudi-Qatari feud, or the scramble for influence between Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the U.A.E. in the Horn of Africa. The Turkish campaign against the Kurds, likewise, is an intra-Sunni affair. The continued chaos in Libya, where there is no relevant sectarian fault line, stems from ethnic, tribal, or regional rivalries among Sunnis, as do clashes in western Iraq and geographic tensions between the Tunisian coast and hinterlands.

In Iraq, intra-Shiite tensions define the political space today and may play a more important role in shaping future politics than the sectarian divide. Shiite Iran—not Sunni Turkey or Sunni Gulf countries—was the first to supply weapons and abet the predominantly Sunni Kurds when they were threatened by ISIS. Saudi Arabia's attempt to build ties to Shiite elements in Iraq and Iran's robust relations with some Iraqi Sunnis do not fit neatly in a binary sectarian dynamic. Nor does the refusal of Pakistan—which has one of the world's largest Sunni populations—to heed Saudi Arabia's call to arms in Yemen. Amid the recent upheaval in Iraq and Lebanon, the Shiite enclaves in the south of both countries, although bordered by Sunni communities, experienced no major attacks or threats from their Sunni neighbors.

There is, of course, a Sunni-Shiite divide. It is constantly put to use by Saudi Arabia and Iran to mobilize their respective constituencies in the struggle for regional influence. Al Qaeda and ISIS also attack Shiites in Iraq, Pakistan, and Afghanistan to foment sectarian strife from which they hope to profit. But these are tactics of war, not its causes. In a region and religion whose glorious days lie in the past, history becomes a potent tonic to mobilize the masses. Political

leaders evoke distant quarrels to revive memories of more salubrious and magnificent days. Unable to appeal to higher values such as freedom and tolerance, they resort to narratives of ancient conflict to whip up fervor and loyalty.

There is an explanation for why fighting occurs more often among Sunnis than between Sunnis and Shiites. Sunnis know that, at roughly eighty per cent of the region's population, they are an undisputed majority and that there is scant threat that they will be overrun by their Shiite brethren. Shiites have long recognized that they will remain a minority in an overwhelmingly Sunni region. Sunnis of various persuasions vie for supremacy and control over their branch of Islam; there is little to gain in that tussle from fighting Shiites.

Wrongly defining the struggles gripping the Middle East encourages misguided remedies. Talk of “moderate Sunni Arab states,” a remarkably entrenched lore in American foreign-policy circles, is drivel. Those who advocated military support for the armed Syrian opposition typically argued that this was necessary to avoid alienating the “Sunni world.” The decision to arm and aid the Syrian opposition, however, did not mean siding with Sunnis against non-Sunnis; it meant taking part in a fierce intra-Sunni fight. It was a choice based on the mistaken conviction that ordinary Syrian Sunnis hoped the Islamist opposition would prevail over the Assad regime because of its atrocities.

Western misreading also led to a failure to anticipate how Iran, the most powerful Shiite state, and Turkey, the most powerful Sunni one, would agree to not allow their very real differences to prevent understandings from being reached. It led to misjudgment of the dynamics underpinning relations between Iranian and Iraqi Shiites, driven less by sectarian solidarity than by common anxiety over the role of the United States. Should American troops withdraw from Iraq, the differences between the two—between Iranian and Iraqi nationalism, and between the dominant Iranian and Iraqi variants of Shiism—

will likely come to the fore. It also caused Washington to miscalculate the impact of Russia's support for the Syrian regime. Far from damaging its relations with Sunni Arab states, Moscow reestablished and legitimized its presence throughout the region.

Today, the Sunni-Shiite prism prompts illusory pursuits. The attempt to establish an Arab NATO, designed to bring together Sunni Arab states in opposition to Iran, has been mired in intra-Gulf squabbles. Sunnis in the region still perceive Iran as a strategic threat. But the American belief that bellicose U.S. rhetoric can unite Sunni Arabs in an anti-Iranian alliance comes at a time when Sunni regimes are increasingly absorbed by the challenge posed by Turkey. The neo-Ottoman dream is a competitor in a way that Iran is not. The historical roots of the struggle between Ottomans and Arabs date back hundreds of years: the Ottoman Empire ruled Mecca and Medina for four centuries; Persia never did. Longings for a resplendent past do not fade easily. The embrace of simplistic theories has real consequences. It misses the real struggles shaping what the Middle East will become.

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# Video

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*Iraq's Post-ISIS Campaign of Revenge*

*Ben Taub discusses his reporting on the corruption and cruelty of Iraq's response to suspected jihadis and their families, and how that will likely lead to the resurgence of the terror group.*

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