The question of sectarianism in Middle East politics

Sami Zubaida

Sectarianism seems to be central to current Middle East politics, with its internal divisions and regional alignments. It has led many commentators to see this situation as another manifestation of a historical schism between Sunnis and Shi’is going back to early Islam and perennial in the conflicts of the ‘Muslim world’ over the centuries. This is not entirely correct: sectarian differences change and mutate over the centuries, and they are politicised in diverse fashions and situations when they become political. I try here to trace the determinants of the current forms of politicisation.

The schism dates to contentions and battles in early Islam, relating to the succession to the leadership, the caliphate or imamate, of the Muslim community at the death of the Prophet. The Shi’as are those who favoured Ali bin Abi Taleb, the Prophet’s cousin, husband to his daughter and father of Hassan and Hussein, the only male issue in the Prophet’s line. The imamate, henceforth, was to be in this line of succession. The Sunnis are those who accepted the legitimacy of imams/caliphs designated by consensus of the community. In reality, very soon after the Prophet’s death, the caliphate became hereditary and dynastic. The dynasties in Muslim history were predominantly Sunni, with the exception of the Fatimid, Shi’i/Ismaeli Caliphate (909–1171), brief periods of Shi’i sultanic dynasties, and the Zaydi Imamate in Yemen. The major exception was the rise of the Safavid dynasty in Iran in 1500, which established Shi’ism as the religion of the country, which continues to the present day.

This is the bare bones of the story. Over the centuries there have been many variations and mutations in the ‘orthodox’ as well as the sectarian formations, and the divisions only broke into conflicts when they were politicised in struggles for power or resources. For the most part, various Shi’ite sects lived quietly under Sunni rule, and were, mostly, left alone. Like elsewhere in the pre-modern world, communities were, typically, isolated in separate localities, except in the main cities where they often occupied different quarters. Politicisation came with social conflicts, rebellions and geopolitical confrontations. Some rebellions borrowed legitimist claims to holy lineage from Ali and the Prophet. Confrontation and battles between the Ottomans and the Safavids over the centuries involved sectarian symbols. Iraq, with its Shi’ite population and holy shrines, was often the battleground between the two. On the eve of modernity it fell to the
Wahhabis of Arabia to wage a jihad against Shi`a, in the Peninsula and in Iraq, and their hostility continues to the present.

From the outset, Shi`ism and the adulation of Ali split into many sects, cults and parties, with esoteric, mystical, militant and shamanic variants. Some of these survive to the present day, as we shall see presently. Imami or ‘twelver’ Shi`ism emerged as the established majority Shi`ism, enhanced by its establishment in the holy shrine cities of Iraq and in the Safavid state of Iran. It traces the imamate through twelve descendants from Ali, through Hassan and Hussein, till the mystical ‘disappearance’ of the twelfth Imam al-Mahdi in 941, in Samurra in Abbasid Iraq. He continues to be the Hidden Imam, whose eventual manifestation is awaited by the faithful as a messianic event. Clerics and mystics hint at some form of communication with the Imam: ex-president Ahmadinejad more than hinted. Messianic claimants appeared throughout that history, heading cults or social movements, the most recent significant being Babism in nineteenth-century Iran, culminating in modern-day Baha`ism.

Ismailism was one of the early offshoots, following the dispute over the succession to the sixth Imam in 765. Another early offshoot over succession was Zaydism, now existing mainly in Yemen and other parts of Arabia. Ismailism played a central part in the politics and wars of medieval Islam, and was embraced by the Fatimid Caliphate in Egypt and North Africa. It also split into many fragments; the notable surviving sects include the Druze of Syria/Lebanon/Palestine and the Nizari branch of the Agha Khan community from India, which is now worldwide. There were many other Alid (veneration of Ali) religions which emerged in different parts of the Middle East and the Balkans, with various syncretistic amalgams with local folk religions, old Persian religions and even elements of Christianity. Prominent examples involved in the present sectarian conflagration in the region are the Alawites of Syria and the Alevis of Anatolia.

‘Mainstream’ twelver Shi`ism (as well as Zaydism) is quite distinct from these other forms, and considers them heretical. In religious belief, ritual and law, twelver Shi`ism is more akin to Sunni Islam: they share the pillars of worship of the Quran, prayer, fasting, alms and pilgrimage, and differ in detail over the law/shari`a. The principal divergence is in religious authority, culture and ritual. The Shi`ite rituals and calendar revolve around the cult of martyrdom of Hussein and his family and companions, and the commemoration of births and deaths of the other members of the holy lineage. Oddly, this veneration of the holy lineage is shared by some Sufi orders, who are formally Sunni.

The other offshoots of Shi`ism are more or less remote from what is considered the core of Islam. The Quran is marginal or absent for most, some, like the Druze, having a different scripture of their own; they follow different patterns of prayer and fasting; they do not attend mosques, but have their peculiar locations of worship and ritual. Crucially, these religions are typically esoteric, with their scriptures and ‘inner’ truths only accessible to a class of the initiated, a class which is often hereditary. The Druze have a hereditary caste of ‘sages’, uqal, who are the exclusive keepers of the book. The Alawites of Syria and the Alevis of Turkey were typically peasant, mostly illiterate, communities in mountain areas who were led by their elders and holy men. General literacy, coming with modernity, has posed challenges to these religions: typically, they have been re-shaped as ethnic communities of solidarity, especially in the face of Sunni hegemony and hostility. In Syria, it was this previously marginal and poor Alawite community which acquired power and rule through recruitment and rise in the army, through policies first initiated by the French Mandate regime that promoted minorities.

These differences have important implications for the conception of sectarianism and politics. The concept of the ‘Shi`ite crescent’ from Tehran to Lebanon, first raised as a warning to the Sunni world by the Jordanian King Abdullah, appears to include the Alawites of Syria, allied to...
Iran, and the Lebanese Hizbullah. Yet this inclusion is not in terms of common faith: Alawite religion is just as alien to and disapproved of by twelver Shi’a as it is by Sunnis. Yet, the official Iranian ruling, by Khomeini himself, is that they are included in the Shi’ite fold, a judgement more to do with geopolitics than with religion. Equally to do with geopolitics are the fluctuating policies of the Sunni states of Saudi Arabia, the Gulf and Turkey towards Syria. Until the start of the rebellion in 2011, all these states were more or less friendly towards Syria. Turkey was especially friendly, establishing close diplomatic and trade relations. Saudi, at various points, had been a financial benefactor of the regime, despite its Iranian alliance, having a degree of influence over its actions in the region, especially in Lebanon. The Syrian Sunni bourgeoisie had, for the most part, supported or acquiesced in the Assad regime, benefitting from the stability and economic climate it provided. It seems, then, that it was not sectarianism that led to the hostilities, but rather the events themselves and the geopolitics of the region which have politicised sectarian divisions.

Another interesting aspect in this respect is the attitude of the Turkish Alevis (with an estimated population of 10 to 15 million) to the alignments in Syria and the policy of their government in supporting the opposition there, especially the Islamic elements. Alevis have long been marginalised and subordinated. Many supported Kemalist secularism, partly as a counter to Sunni hegemony. Yet, even under a secular constitution, the implicit qualification of full citizenship identity included Sunni Islam, and Alevis continued to be marginalised, with episodes of persecution, notably a massacre in Sivas in 1993. Many embraced liberal and leftist politics. Their marginalisation became more open under the pro-Islamic Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi (AKP) government. The naming of the projected third Bosphorus Bridge after Yavuz Sultan Selim (1465–1520) has been particularly controversial in this regard. The said Selim, nicknamed ‘the Grim’, conducted a notorious massacre of Alevis in 1514, which claimed 40,000 victims, as part of the establishment of Sunni hegemony against ‘infidels’. Many Alevis have been vocal in their opposition to AKP support for the Syrian opposition. Syrian-style Alawites do exist in southwestern Anatolia, close to the border with Syria, and they have been vocal in their opposition to government policy. But, while there may be overlaps of sectarian groups in Anatolia, the mainstream Alevis are geographically and doctrinally distinct from Alawites. Yet, they see the battle against Alawites as part of a Sunni hegemonic campaign to which they are common victims. Again, these alignments are not based on religious belief or sentiment on the part of Alevis or Alawites, but on political fears of communal victimisation. This is not always the case on the Sunni side.

The Sunni sectarian antagonism to Shi’is, especially in its Salafi and Wahhabi forms, does derive from a deep conviction that the Shi’a are heretic dissidents and a danger to the realm of Islam and its unity. These sentiments were politicised into action by key developments in the region: the first was the Iranian Revolution of 1979; the second was the allied invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the removal of the Sunni ruling clique in favour of the majority Shi’a of the country.

Iran was always a geopolitical rival to Iraq and Saudi. But under the Shah this rivalry was with a secular and West-friendly Iran, its Shi’ism muted in regional relations. This was totally transformed under Khomeini and the Islamic Republic. Khomeini’s call was pan-Islamic, revolutionary and populist, and it appealed to many radical Arabs, nationalist and Islamist. It also emboldened the considerable Shi’i population in Iraq and Arabia into political claims against their subordination. Iran was rightly perceived as a threat and a challenge in both geopolitical and religious terms. It sharpened and activated the anti-Shi’i ire of the Sunni sectarians. The Iran–Iraq war of 1980–9 exacerbated these sentiments and actions, with Sunni sectarianism superimposed on Arab nationalism. Saddam was never popular with Saudi and the Gulf, but when it came to confrontation with Iran he was fully supported. Only Syria among the Arabs
became an Iranian ally and was its conduit to the Lebanese Shi’a, and eventually to Hizbullah. Saddam’s next adventure, the invasion of Kuwait in 1990–1 was a blow to his erstwhile Arabian allies, who appealed to the USA and the West, leading to the allied rescue of Kuwait and the first destruction of much of Iraqi wealth and infrastructure. In Iraq it gave a further twist to the sectarian divide.

**Iraq**

The sectarian division in Iraq has had various social and political expressions over the course of its history. For the most part, the tensions, when they existed, were political and religious, with mutual denigration at times, but mostly mild. Classes, ideas, institutions and cultures which emerged in the processes of modernity from the Ottoman reforms of the later nineteenth century, reinforced with the formation of the modern state, fostered a sense of common identity – national, pan-Islamic, pan-Arab or liberal/secular – which rejected sectarian, tribal or communalist solidarities. Shi’i clerics declared jihad on the side of the Sunni Ottomans during World War I, then led southern tribes in the 1920 uprising against British occupation, alongside Sunni nationalists. Iraqi Shi’i intellectuals were prominent in the Arab cultural renaissance, and were participants in the common national struggles. The modern, educated middle classes participated in a common milieu of civil society and cultural fields, education, media and the arts. Within these classes cross-sect intermarriage was not uncommon. The Iraqi Communist Party played an important part in the creation of this common milieu, with generalised participation of members from different religious and ethnic backgrounds. This situation continued in the early days of the Ba’th regime, through the 1970s, despite the violent repression of dissent and the Sunni nature of the ruling clique. It started to shift after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, and continued to do so after the war with Iran, 1980–9. It was then that the Shi’i political organisation challenged the regime, which responded with characteristic total violence. The public ideological discourse was rarely an attack on the Shi’a as such, but always expressed through a denunciation of enemies with Iranian connections. Saddam did not target the Shi’a as such (though there was plenty of sectarian prejudice and discrimination). The regime was dominated by Sunni clans because those were Saddam’s kin and allies: they did not represent the Sunni totality, which, in any case, did not exist. Individual Shi’a held high positions in the regime, though not in the sensitive security apparatus. It was the Shi’ite institutions and organised activity, especially those with political import, that were the particular targets for regime pressure and violence. The Ba’th had succeeded in eliminating or incorporating all centres of power, organisation and revenue in Iraqi society. The Shi’ite institutions of mujtahids, schools, pilgrimage, husseiniyas (prayer and assembly halls) and rituals are all financed via independent channels of religious revenues, some of which originate from outside the country (Iran, the Gulf, India). While under constant pressure, surveillance and harassment, these institutions have never been successfully eliminated.

Many prominent Shi’a figures, notably Baqer al-Sadr and his sister, were imprisoned and executed in 1980. Large numbers of Shi’a communities and families were rounded up and expelled into the desert borders with Iran in several waves, while their young men were incarcerated. The ideological rationale of these persecutions was phrased in terms of combating the Persian enemy: the Shi’a victims were Iranians, not Arabs or Iraqis, and not even Muslim. The racist abuses against Persians included questioning their faith and calling them ‘majus’, ‘magians’ and fire-worshippers. These designations related to their Shi’ism, and could be (and was) read as including all Shi’a. The explicit attack on Shi’a, however, was to come during the uprisings in the south following the Iraqi defeat in the Kuwait war in 1991. The tanks that entered Karbala
and attacked the shrines, massacring countless inhabitants, bore the slogan *la shi`a ba`da al-yawm* (‘no Shi`a after today’).

The 1990s through to the 2003 invasion were years of great hardship for Iraqis, and of weakening regime grip on society. It was then that the initially secular Ba`th and Saddam turned to tribe and religion to reinforce social control. Saddam launched *hamlet al-iman*, the faith campaign, which favoured Sunni ulama and institutions. Iraqis, in their distress, turned increasingly to religion, with a sharpening of the sectarian lines. Salafi networks, influences and finances played an important role in this re-Islamisation, and was sectarian in character, connecting Iraqi sentiments with those in the region with increasing polarisation relating to Iranian power and the increasing confidence and activism of the Shi`a in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, as well as the rise and prestige of Hizbullah in Lebanon. This sectarianism was to be enhanced and sharpened after the American invasion, the removal of the Sunni regime and the rise of Shi`a power. We are now familiar with the sectarian carnage that followed the invasion.

The standard view of many commentators was that the removal of authoritarian control exposed the sectarian and ethnic fault lines of Iraq. I, and many others, have argued that it was precisely the authoritarian regime, its violence and impoverishment of many Iraqis under the sanctions regime that drove those Iraqis to seek security and livelihood in local and communal networks and authorities, which were patriarchal, religious and sectarian. The civil society of earlier decades had withered, millions of its surviving personnel had been dispersed in neighbouring countries or in the West, and those that remained were isolated and impoverished. These were the progenitors of the equivalent of the current Tahriri generation that has emerged in many Arab countries that has been largely absent in Iraq. Iraq is now in a desperate state of sectarian, corrupt and failing government: large oil revenues are shared out between ministries and contractors, the lion share under the control of Prime Minister Maliki, consolidating his personal power. He is instrumentalising sectarian sentiments and fears to maintain control over a Shi`i population, most of whom are poor, lacking basic facilities and services and threatened by daily violence and random killing. Poor people continue to seek security and livelihood in survival units of kin, religion and patronage, all of which reinforce sectarian solidarity in the face of regular attacks by Sunni jihadis. A similar quest for survival drives Sunni sectarian solidarity in the face of an openly sectarian government. The Sunni regions of western Iraq are now finding common cause with their Syrian neighbours, thus adding to the sectarian confrontations on a regional scale. Iraqi Shi`a fighters have also entered the Syrian civil war alongside Hizbullah, some, ostensibly, to defend the Shi`i shrines.

### Sociological aspects

An important aspect of the sociology of sectarianism is that of communitarianism, revived and reinforced by the withdrawal and fragmentation of state institutions and services in the latter decades of the twentieth century. The transformations of the second half of the twentieth century can be seen through the changes in what may be called the ‘survival unit’. Historically the survival unit was that of particularistic attachments and solidarities of kin, tribe, religion and community and the networks of patronage and dependence. Every man/woman had a master and patron, and his/her security and livelihood depended on the units in which these relations were embedded. The processes of modernity, to various extents, liberated individuals from this collective dependence, through the creation of impersonal labour markets, forms of association and solidarity deriving from interests and ideologies and socio-political movements in the manner already elaborated. These processes of course were more or less limited, depending on
time and place, and the role of primary solidarities continued to play a part, but were often transformed and reconstructed by the new processes. Survival was now related to different spheres and units, in which the modern state, especially in its welfare phase, played an important part, insofar as its organs ensured a degree of physical security, providing education, employment and social goods and services. These provisions were sometimes dependent on informal connections and patronage, but they nevertheless functioned more or less individually. The effect of neo-liberal economic policies, state withdrawal from social provision and intensified repression and corruption was to push back many individuals and families into survival units consisting of new or reconstructed communal and personalistic networks, in which religion and sect often played an important part.

Nowhere is this process clearer than in Iraq. The 1970s was a relatively favourable decade for the country. The barbarity of the Ba`th repression at the inception of the regime in 1968 had moderated, and, indeed, Saddam drew the communists into a coalition government (which was to be a great disaster for that party a few years later when they had outlived their usefulness for the regime, and were massacred again). The hike in oil prices multiplied revenues and allowed generous avenues of welfare services, education, health, housing and elevated pay for the middle classes and the intelligentsia, all within a developmentalist and nationalist rhetoric. Legislation and policy favoured women in the family and society, amid measures to curb religious authority and patriarchal controls, part of the Ba`th programme to control social allegiances and life chances. Repression of any dissent or challenge continued to be violent and arbitrary, but those who kept within the system, including, for a while, the communists, were relatively secure. For considerable sectors of the population the state became an important source of survival, for livelihood, status and public services. The regime explicitly attacked primordial units of tribe, kinship and religious community: except, that is, for the ruling clan and its entourage.

All this came to an end with the decades of military adventures of the regime, starting with the Iran war in 1980, then the Kuwait war in 1990/1, followed by the UN sanctions, lasting till the US invasion of 2003. During these decades, the regime, with increasing scarcity of resources and the devastation of war, drastically reduced its public services, impoverished the population, including the middle classes and the intelligentsia, and intensified its violent repression. It became ever more sectarian and tribal. Resources were channelled ever more in the direction of control and loyalty. People were pushed increasingly into the protection of communities, networks and bosses, and lines of patronage to the regime and the party became avenues of survival. In the process, the state and the party were hollowed out and bypassed by personalistic networks of clan and faction. Even the lines of military command were subordinated to informal links: low ranking officers with the right connections could defy their superiors. The ‘secularism’ of the regime was reversed into an official ‘faith campaign’, *hamlet al-iman*. Family legislation was ignored in favour of communal and religious authority; ‘honour crimes’ were recognised and treated leniently if at all. Under those conditions, the only possible politics were those of kinship and connections, with a heavy dose of religion. Shi`ites were targeted largely because their religious institutions and revenues could not be totally eliminated, despite much violence and assassinations, and Shi`ite institutional and personal networks went beyond the borders of Iraq, notably to Iran. When the regime was removed by the invasion, this politics of community and religion was the only one to have popular constituencies and resources. The ideological politics of the earlier decades of the twentieth century had been all but eliminated: the once popular Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) had been reduced to the shadows, and was mostly in exile, especially after the collapse of the Soviet world.

It would seem, then, that ‘tribal’ and religious politics are not peculiar to the region, but are historically general. Political modernity was engendered in the Middle East, and, like in most...
other regions, this co-existed with reconstructed forms of patrimonialism and religion. The dominance of the latter forms is not an aspect of some essential character of the region, but the product of particular social and political conditions. During their statist ‘socialist’ phase, the totalitarian nationalist regimes eliminated or incorporated all political organisations and socio-economic centres of power. With their decadence into dynastic rule and crony capitalism, their ideological pretences and populist appeals became hollow and they depended increasingly on repression and personalistic networks of patronage, kinship and religion. The removal of these regimes, notably in post-invasion Iraq, creates a political vacuum in the absence of organisations and institutions that can step into the breach. Communal, tribal and religious bosses and authorities step into the vacuum, aided by the invading power desperate for a native leadership, and exploited by neighbouring states for their own ends. Groups and individuals working for political programmes of citizenship and economic reforms have little or no constituency, organisation or resources. In Iraq, government and economy is divided between contending sectarian parties, each in control of ministries, engaged in an open process of pillaging the country and its petrolic revenues. The challenge from political groups, media and protestors have so far made little impression, and these bodies are precariously holding on to the free spaces established after the invasion that are now under constant threat and harassment.

It is important to note that ‘democracy’ defined in terms of elections, however free, contributes to the legitimacy of this situation. Elections mobilise primordial and sectarian constituencies and legitimise the sharing of power and resources between corrupt politicians presiding over ministries which become resource centres for the factions and networks. Elections without institutional frameworks and legal safeguards reinforce communal and majoritarian authoritarianism.

Arab transformations

The generation that started (and continue) the Arab uprisings in 2011 are not sectarian, and their demands are for universal values of bread, liberty and dignity. Everywhere they have been confronted by entrenched vested interests of old regimes and its associates, the so-called ‘deep state’ in Egypt, and by Islamist populism. They have been most successful in Tunisia, which features no sectarian divisions. Egypt, another largely Sunni country, with a Christian minority, has seen limited success, threatened by ongoing struggles and turbulence. In Syria and the other countries, this ‘Tahriri’ generation has been thwarted and sidelined by sectarian and jihadi forces with opposite objectives. The alignment of regional powers, following geopolitical interests, has sharpened the sectarian lines. I have argued that these alignments are not somehow essential in the history and society of the region, but are the product of particular situations and interests.
This page intentionally left blank