



The Politics of Sectarianism

November 13, 2013

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The Project on Middle East Political Science

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The Entrepreneurs of Cynical Sectarianism

A group of Syrian-Americans arrived at an academic conference at Lehigh University last week in Bashar al-Assad t-shirts and draped in Syrian flags adorned with Assad's face. They repeatedly heckled and interrupted speakers, and one told an opposition figure that he deserved a bullet in the head. When a speaker showed a slide picturing dead Syrian children, they burst into loud applause. When another speaker cynically predicted that Bashar would win a 2014 presidential vote, they cheered. In the final session, they aggressively interrupted and denounced a Lebanese journalist, with one ultimately throwing his shoe at the stage. The panel degenerated into a screaming match, until police arrived to clear the room.

This spectacle might seem notable in that it unfolded at a U.S. university, but otherwise it would pass for an alarmingly normal day at the office in today's toxically polarized Middle East. Such intense mutual hostility, irreconcilable narratives, and public denunciations are typical of any number of highly polarized political arenas across the region. A similar scene between supporters and opponents of Egypt's military coup is all too easily imagined — just add bullets. That's why the disproportionate focus on sectarian conflict as the defining feature of the emerging Middle East seems dangerously misplaced. Sunni-Shiite tensions are only one manifestation of how a number of deeper trends have come together in recent years to give frightening new power to identity politics writ large.

The explosion of Sunni-Shiite conflict in recent years has very little to do with intrinsic religious differences or with 1,400 years of Islamic history. It should instead be understood as an entirely typical example of identity politics, one in which sectarian differences happen to be the most easily available to politicians hoping to exploit them for cynical purposes. It looks much the same as the ethnic and religious polarization that ripped apart the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. The sectarian polarization in Bahrain or Syria has followed very similar patterns to the Islamist-secularist polarization in Egypt and Tunisia. Responding to these sectarian tensions by embracing authoritarian states, focusing on religious authorities or exegesis, or promoting cross-sectarian reconciliation will miss the point. Today's sectarianism is political to the core — even if it increasingly seems at risk of racing beyond the control of its cynical enablers.

Interpreting Sunni-Shiite conflict as just another manifestation of a millennia-old conflict repeats a broadly essentialist position which tends to be the first resort every time ethnic or sectarian violence breaks out. Such approaches tend to focus on intrinsic, deeply rooted, and irreconcilable cultural differences between groups which can always pose a risk of escalation to violence (think Robert Kaplan's *Balkan Ghosts*, which supposedly convinced Bill Clinton of the inevitability of Yugoslav ethnic slaughters). Evidence of decades of coexistence or intermarriage rarely impresses proponents of an essentialist approach. These differences might be latent for long periods of

time, but given the opportunity — electoral mobilization, state failure, sudden explosions of local violence — people will tend to fall back on these deep identities. Such arguments tend to lead toward solutions involving the heavy hand of authoritarian states to suppress these supposedly inevitable violent tendencies, or toward partition into ethnic enclaves if state collapse has gone too far.

That's just what authoritarian regimes would like us to believe. But much more frequently, ethnic or sectarian violence is driven by either regimes themselves or by elites who cynically exploit identity for their political aims. These leaders might or might not truly believe in these differences, but they are perfectly happy to take advantage of them when it suits their goals. Often, it is the authoritarian regimes themselves that are most responsible for stoking and shaping the identity divisions. The Saudi regime, most obviously, systematically uses sectarianism in order to intimidate and control its own Shiite citizens at home and to combat Iranian influence regionally. Saudi leaders may or may not genuinely hate Shiites, but they know that sectarian conflict is a useful strategy. In Egypt, the Mubarak regime tolerated significant levels of intimidation and attacks on Coptic Christian citizens, while Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's government actively stokes the demonization of Islamists to generate support for the new military regime. In Iraq, a stronger state under the control of Nouri al-Maliki is too easily used to protect Shiite privilege and repress Sunni opponents. Strong states are often the problem, not the solution.

The strategic mobilization of identity politics typically involves some common moves. Electoral systems can be designed to maximize sectarian or ethnic competition, force voters into identity-defined voting blocs, and hinder cross-identity coalition formation. Discrimination in state institutions, military recruitment, and patronage can entrench hostility along particular lines and not others. For sectarian entrepreneurs from Slobodan Milosevic to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi to triumph, intermarried families must be ripped apart, the possibility of coexistence undermined, and moderate counterparts knocked down in favor of more frightening extremists. Televised slaughter, rumors of sectarian or ethnic targeting, and the wide circulation of hostile rhetoric are a benefit, not an unfortunate side product of their efforts.

Often, the real purpose of such strategic identity mobilization is intra-group competition, as ambitious leaders see sectarian or ethnic extremism as a useful way to attack their political rivals as weak, naïve, or duplicitous. Attacking Shiites is often a product of competition among different Sunni factions as much as it is driven by larger religious struggles. More venom is often directed toward moderates within one's own group than toward the putative enemy; as the dwindling cohort of true Egyptian liberals can attest, anyone who might try to seek the middle ground and critique both sides will be viciously shouted down. That, in turn, pushes more and more people to either silently accept or even to vocally repeat the mythologies supporting this mobilized identity, no matter how absurd.

Uncertainty, fear, economic hardship, and violence often create the toxic conditions for identity mobilization to gain traction. It's endlessly useful to demagogues and dictators to have some minority to blame for problems, to deflect outrage from their own failures, and to bind an otherwise fractious community together against a common enemy. And that's where the proliferation and entrenchment of sectarian rhetoric over the previous decade have been especially destructive. The sectarian incitement which pollutes official and private media outlets alike, and which floods through politicized mosques and religious networks, provides the master frame which increasingly makes sense to people who a decade ago would have angrily waved such rhetoric away. And after a decade of civil war in Iraq and propaganda about an Iranian-led "Shiite Crescent" threatening the Sunni Muslim world, those narratives are now deeply entrenched and hard to change. Language and terms that once sounded exotic and strange now find wide public circulation and resonance.

The Arab uprisings introduced such uncertainty and fear not only within countries such as Syria, but across the entire region, as do recent memories of very real slaughters, displacements, and outrages — such as those that have scarred Iraq. Syria provided endless opportunity for local entrepreneurs to use sectarian language and imagery to build support and raise money for the insurgency. Increasingly polarized, insular media clusters within which only information supportive of sectarian narratives tends to circulate, reinforces and intensifies identity conflicts with every YouTube video. And those atrocities have been experienced vicariously across the region, with Egyptian or Tunisian Sunnis identifying with the suffering of their Syrian or Iraqi counterparts even if they did not themselves have much direct contact with Shiites.

Highlighting the role of cynical politicians in the mobilization of identity conflict points to very different policy advice, of course. Fighting sectarianism thus requires changing the incentives and the opportunities for such political mobilization. Were electoral rules changed, official media and state institutions purged of sectarian language, and hate speech and incitement punished rather than encouraged, identity entrepreneurs would suffer political defeat. Elites who want to cynically manipulate sectarianism need to have the raw material with which to work or the right conditions within which to work their evil magic. Taking the oxygen out of the room is not impossible: Kuwait, for instance, turned away from sectarianism in its last elections, in part as the costs of such conflict began to really sink in.

But such political responses to identity conflict become far more difficult after they have been successfully mobilized — especially under conditions of state failure, uncertainty, violence, and fear. It is far easier to generate sectarian animosities than it is to calm them down. This ratcheting effect is the reason for the deepest concern about the trends of the last few years. Identity entrepreneurs may think that they can turn the hatred on and off as it suits their interests, but at some point these identities become self-sustaining and internalized. Blood matters, a lot: There will be no reconciliation in Iraq or Syria for a long time, not with so many individuals who have

watched people they love slaughtered or raped or displaced over their ascribed identities. How could anyone expect an Iraqi Sunni to forgive or happily coexist with Shiite neighbors who only recently killed his children because of their religion? Those memories are only reinforced by the endlessly circulating videos and images which today provide unavoidable documentation of additional atrocities. Even ending the violence and restoring a modicum of stability in Syria, Iraq, or Bahrain is not likely to erase these inflamed hatreds and memories, leaving well-fertilized terrain for the next identity entrepreneur who comes along.

The political approach to sectarianism makes painfully clear that it did not have to be like this. Sectarian conflict is not the natural response to the fall of a strongman. The Bahraini activists who demanded political reform and human rights did not have to be tarred as Iranian assets and smeared as Shiite separatists. Syrian non-violent activists could have developed and enforced a compelling vision of a non-sectarian post-Assad alternative. Gulf Islamists and regimes could have opted not to use sectarianism to generate support for the Syrian insurgency. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and its enemies could have opted for cooperation and inclusion rather than spiraling polarization and confrontation. But this approach also offers little optimism about the future. The painful reality is that sectarianism proved too useful to too many powerful actors, and too compelling a narrative in a violent, turbulent, and uncertain time, to be avoided.

*Marc Lynch, Director of POMEPS
November 13, 2013*

The Sectarian Gulf vs. the Arab Spring

By Toby Matthiesen, October 8, 2013

I first visited the Eastern Province in 2008 while on a fieldwork trip. Traveling on a railroad built by the Americans for King Abdulaziz al Saud, the founder of the modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, as a favor in return for the right to explore Saudi oil reserves, I left the shiny skyscrapers and crowded streets of the capital Riyadh and arrived in Hofuf in the al-Ahsa oasis, which together with Qatif is the main center of Shiite settlement in Saudi Arabia. In these towns and surrounding villages, some side streets have no pavement, old city centers are decaying, and youth unemployment is high. For decades, Shiites have also complained of sectarian discrimination in religious practices, government employment, and the judicial system, all of which contributes to the feeling that they are being treated like second-class citizens.

When faced with rising political challenges in early 2011, the Gulf states — Bahrain and Saudi Arabia in particular — mobilized sectarianism in order to suppress domestic calls for reform, a strategy that I analyze in my recent book *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab Spring that Wasn't*. I saw first-hand how the invention of a “Shiite threat” narrative unfolded, standing on the now demolished Pearl Roundabout in the Bahraini capital Manama in mid-February 2011. Initially, tens of thousands, mainly Shiite (but also some Sunni), protesters poured into the streets to demand political reform. After the first protesters were shot, a part of the protest movement became radicalized, and started calling for the removal of the ruling family. Bahrain has a Shiite majority population (between 60 and 70 percent) and the ruling family is Sunni, so the ruling family used official and semi-official media to try to portray this as a “sectarian” uprising of one sect against the other.

Just as President Bashar al-Assad is doing in Syria, this strategy of sectarian polarization was aimed at delegitimizing the opposition, and scaring the minority Sunnis of a possible alternative political system and into

total allegiance with the ruling family. A month after the protests started, on March 14, 2011, Saudi troops rolled over the causeway that links the Saudi Eastern Province with Bahrain. The king of Bahrain imposed a state of emergency, and a campaign of arrests, torture, mass dismissals and extrajudicial killings started, mainly directed against members of the Shiite sect.

At the same time, the Saudi media empire, which controls much of the pan-Arab media, started taking up the Bahraini narrative and accused all the Shiites in the Gulf states of planning an uprising at the behest of Iran. This narrative was as much directed against the Bahraini Shiites, as against the Saudi Shiites, of whom there are between two and three million mainly concentrated in the oil-rich Eastern Province. Galvanized by the Bahrain uprising, they started a protest movement of their own, and were the only Saudis to go out into the streets when social media sites called for a Saudi chapter of the region-wide Arab Spring in March 2011. Other Saudis have since taken to the streets to demand the release of political prisoners but by and large the protest movement in the Eastern Province failed to spill over to the rest of the country.

Rather than addressing the real grievances of their Shiite citizens or instituting some political reform, as the Bahraini protesters were demanding, the Gulf states reacted with an “iron fist,” as the Saudi Ministry of Interior put it. They spearheaded the regional counter-revolution and spread a vicious sectarian hate speech that would shape the discourse and actions of the rebels in Syria, while preventing Shiites and Sunnis at home from uniting in calls for reform. The Gulf countries’ demonization of the Shiites has led to a virtual “sectarian Gulf.” Local Shiites (and foreign Shiites such as Lebanese or South-East Asians) are collectively marginalized and brandished as a fifth column. This has led to a breakdown of the cross-sectarian social fabric in the Gulf and beyond, with many Sunni Islamists

from the Gulf funding the rebels in Syria, while the loyalties of many Gulf Shiites lie with the Assad regime and Hezbollah. Syria has then become a locus for yet another proxy-conflict, one that sets a dangerous precedent for Sunni-Shiite relations in the Gulf and beyond.

If the Gulf states are really concerned about the loyalty of their Shiite subjects, they should accept them as full and equal citizens. The current policy of stigmatization and collective punishment is alienating many Gulf Shiites and is driving small groups of opposition activists back into the Iranian nexus, a connection that had existed after the Iranian Revolution of 1979 but had been largely capped since most Gulf Shiite oppositionists returned from exile throughout the 1990s. While Iran does not have the kind of influence over Gulf Shiite political movements it had in the 1980s, and the Shiites in the Gulf do not protest because of affinity with Iran, there are signs that Iran and Lebanon's Hezbollah are again trying to reach out to Bahraini and Saudi Shiite opposition activists. A realignment of some Gulf Shiite opposition groups with Iran or Shiite militias across the region would come as a response to the Gulf states' sectarian counter-revolution and their vicious crackdown on any form of dissent. This would be a self-fulfilling prophecy that should be avoided.

The Gulf states' sectarian strategy also puts a new light on the Gulf's shifting relationship with political Islam and its support for the crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. While popular wisdom usually sees the Gulf states as promoters of political Islam, they have a very ambiguous relationship with Islamist movements across the Middle East, and apart from Qatar, no Gulf state is backing the main Arab Sunni Islamist group, the Muslim Brotherhood,

unconditionally. Some Gulf states were the main supporters of the recent military coup against the Muslim Brotherhood-dominated government: Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait immediately pledged \$12 billion of aid to the new government. This was, in part, because the Brotherhood and its Qatari backers did not fit comfortably into the anti-democratic and sectarian agenda that these regimes view as essential to their own survival. The rise of an alternative Sunni Islamic model of politics was to be avoided at all costs and the hate speech directed against supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood both in Egypt and in the Gulf, denouncing them as the enemy within, is similar to the hate speech directed against the Shiites.

But if the Gulf states are serious about long-term stability in the region, they should enable the inclusion of pro-democracy Islamic movements in the political process both at home and in the wider region. The West should not again pick sides in these intra-Islamic feuds (the intervention in Iraq in 2003 was one of the key events that paved the way for the current sectarian polarization). Rather than backing Sunni Islamist rebels in Syria and buying into the "Shiite threat" narrative emanating from Gulf capitals, the West should urge its allies in the Gulf to tame down sectarian rhetoric and negotiate a new social contract. Barring that, the sectarian civil war that is now effectively stretching from Beirut to Basra may come back to haunt the Gulf states and their Western supporters.

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The war for the Arab world

By Marc Lynch, May 23, 2013

A video of a rebel commander eating the lung of an enemy fighter and the horrific scenes of children massacred by forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad are only a few of Syria's ever-growing catalog of atrocities. This stuff of nightmares has raised fears that Syria's civil war is spreading Sunni-Shiite sectarian conflict across the Middle East — fears galvanized by the escalating body count in Iraq, the dismal standoff in Bahrain, and the seemingly uncontrollable tensions in Lebanon.

Many now see this sectarianism as the new master narrative rewriting regional politics, with Syria the frontline of a sectarian cold war permeating every corner of public life. The Sunni-Shiite divide, argues Brookings Institution fellow Geneive Abdo in a report released last month, “is well on its way to displacing the broader conflict between Muslims and the West ... and likely to supplant the Palestinian occupation as the central mobilizing factor for Arab political life.”

Perhaps. But think about how little deep Arab sympathy for the Palestinian cause has actually produced effective or unified Arab official action in its support. Will Sunni solidarity be any more effective?

The sectarian master narrative obscures rather than reveals the most important lines of conflict in the emerging Middle East. The coming era will be defined by competition between (mostly Sunni) domestic contenders for power in radically uncertain transitional countries, and (mostly Sunni) pretenders to the mantle of regional Arab leadership. Anti-Shiism no more guarantees Sunni unity than pan-Arabism delivered Arab unity in the 1950s. Indeed, if the vicious infighting among Arab regimes during Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser's years is any guide, the competition between “Sunni” regimes and political movements is likely to grow even more intense as the sectarian narrative takes hold.

That certainly seems to be the story thus far. Sunni identity is hardly unifying Egypt, Libya, or Tunisia — just look at the raucous political debates occurring in each of these countries. The rise of Islamist movements since the Arab uprisings, especially the public emergence of Salafi trends with noxiously anti-Shiite prejudices, has certainly introduced a new edge to the region's sectarianism. But that's nothing compared to how it has affected intra-Sunni politics. Muslim Brothers and Salafis are at each other's throats in Egypt, while Tunisia's *Ennahda* Party has just cracked down hard on its own Salafi challengers.

Islamist governments in Egypt and Tunisia have also divided the Arab Sunni world more profoundly than they have united it, antagonizing Saudis and Emiratis rather than unifying them around a Sunni identity. Newly open political arenas, like the war in Syria, have provided new opportunities for the region's would-be leaders to compete with each other. Qatar similarly faces a fierce Saudi and Emirati-driven backlash despite their common Sunni identity, partly because of its alleged support for the Brotherhood, but mostly due to the long-standing competition for power between these Arab Gulf states.

The sectarian narrative radically exaggerates both the coherence of the “Sunni” side of the conflict and the novelty of a long-standing power struggle with Iran. It is better understood as a justification for domestic repression and regional power plays than as an explanation for Middle Eastern regimes' behavior. Arab autocrats, particularly those in the Gulf with significant Shiite populations, find Sunni-Shiite tensions a useful way to delegitimize the political demands of their Shiite citizens. Shiite citizens of Saudi Arabia in the kingdom's Eastern Province and the Shiite majority of Bahrain who attempt to protest their systematic dispossession are demonized as an Iranian fifth column because this is useful to the ruling regimes.

Similarly, Arab leaders (and Washington) often found labeling their rivals as “Shiite” a valuable way to undermine the popular appeal of the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah “Resistance Axis.” This isn’t to say that some leaders don’t genuinely dislike Shiites — Saudi King Abdullah famously distrusted Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki as an Iranian agent — but their personal beliefs aren’t really necessary to explain their behavior.

For this reason, a “Sunni” conquest of Syria is unlikely to turn the country into a reliable ally of other Sunni regimes in the region unless such alliances happen to serve the self-interest of the new leaders. The traditional rivalry between Qatar and Saudi Arabia has reasserted itself in Syria — competition between their networks of rebel groups has been one of the major factors hindering the unification of the Syrian opposition. Should a Sunni coalition of some sort take power in Syria, it will likely be the object of similarly fierce battles for influence among ambitious external players.

Remember, we’ve been here before — and recently. Today’s sectarianism looks very much like that of the mid-2000s, when Iran and Hezbollah seemed ascendant, Vali Nasr warned of the “rise of the Shia,” Jordan’s King Abdullah fretted about a Shiite Crescent, and the sectarian cast of the execution of Saddam Hussein infuriated even those Sunnis who felt no love for the fallen dictator. Particularly during George W. Bush’s administration, Washington appeared to view such sectarianism as useful to policy goals such as containing Iran, undermining Hezbollah, and cementing its alliance of “moderate” Sunni dictatorships.

The sectarian rages of the mid-2000s had faded by the end of the decade, however, along with the worst days of the Iraqi inferno. But the anger, resentment, and political

identities which were forged during those days didn’t disappear entirely, and proved all too easy to mobilize when Syria’s conflict escalated. The great mass of Syrians or Iraqis may have rejected sectarianism at first, but such restraint grows harder in the face of massacres and massive displacement based on the victims’ Sunni or Shiite identities. Local horrors travel quickly in the new Arab media environment, as images of sectarian massacres and the rhythms of sectarian rhetoric too often go viral online and satellite television stations too eagerly adopt sectarian frames. Arab regimes then happily use the horrors of Syria to justify their refusal to reform — “look how bad it could get!” — and deploy sectarian language to demonize any political mobilization by their Shiite citizens.

The fact that sectarianism is being ginned up for political ends does not mean that the hatreds won’t be internalized over time — to deadly effect. The shift toward a sectarian worldview among Arab publics, evident not only in Syria’s bloodbaths but in bigoted banners in Egypt and the burning down of a Shiite residence in southern Jordan merits more attention than power politics dressed up in sectarian drag. The cultivation of these sectarian animosities could consolidate dangerous fault lines constantly available to ambitious, unscrupulous elites that would prove very difficult to reverse.

Preventing the conditions for pogroms against Shiites in Sunni majority countries, not cultivating another Axis of Sunni Moderates against Iran, should be at the top of the agenda. And the key to that may be accepting an imperfect political solution in Syria and de-escalating its horrific violence.

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The language of anti-Shiism

By Fanar Haddad, August 9, 2013

The recent wave of anti-Shiite rhetoric and sectarian polarization has caused profound concerns across the Middle East. Sectarian tensions are not new, of course, but the *vocabulary* of anti-Shiism in the Middle East has changed dramatically over the last 10 years. Shiites who used to be accused of ethnic otherness are now being cast as outside the Muslim community itself. Exclusion on doctrinal grounds was a mostly Saudi exception in the framing of Shiism. It is now increasingly becoming the regional rule.

Prior to 2003, anti-Shiism in Iraq was perhaps best encapsulated in the term *ajam*. *Ajam* (singular *ajmi*) is an Arabic phrase meaning non-Arab; however, in the modern Middle Eastern vernacular, particularly in Iraq, “the *ajam*” is usually understood as “the Iranians.” Throughout the 20th century this term was used to discredit Shiite activists and political opponents by casting doubt on their national loyalty and Arab pedigree. Sectarian otherness was framed in distinctly national and ethnic terms with scant, if any, reference to sectarian dogma, doctrine, or beliefs. In other words, prior to 2003, Middle Eastern Sunni-Shiite dynamics were more often manifestations of nationalistic and ethnic rather than religious expression.

Ethnic markers mattered, of course, in an age dominated by anti-colonialism, “progressive revolutionary” ideologies and above all by pan-Arabism. Arab conceptions of “us and them” in most of the 20th century elevated Arab identity to the prime marker of belonging. As such, Shiite opposition in Iraq — from Mahdi al Khalisi in the 1920s to exiled oppositionists in the early 21st century — was discredited by successive governments on *ethnic* grounds of national inclusion rather than religious ones. Iraqi Shiite oppositionists — even violent Shiite militants such as those of the 1970s — were attacked for being allegedly pro-Iranian or even for being Iranian themselves — *ajam*. Few bothered, for example, with their somewhat ambivalent views toward Aisha or the first three caliphs — *rafidha*. Even the Iraqi regime’s denunciation of the 1991 southern uprising largely stuck to the prism of ethnicity

and only gingerly approached elements of faith, ritual, and doctrine.

The overthrow of Saddam Hussein changed all that. Since 2003, *ajam*, a term that was ubiquitous in what was regarded as anti-Shiite sentiment in Iraq and beyond, has all but disappeared from public usage. In its place has emerged a style of anti-Shiism that was largely the preserve of clerical circles of the Saudi Arabian variant. This is a discourse of exclusion primarily based on *religious* otherness that is embodied by the word *rafidha*. This new form of sectarian animosity frames the Shiites as suspect not because of the allegedly ambiguous national loyalties of some nor because of the so-called “ethnic impurity” of others but because of the beliefs that define the sect as a whole.

There is a qualitative difference between stigmatizing the Shiites as *ajam* and stigmatizing them as *asrafidha*. Its potential repercussions on stability and social cohesion explain why authoritarian regimes in Iraq and elsewhere employed the former and repressed the latter. Multi-sectarian states like Iraq need a convincing veneer of inclusivity to survive. Iraq can afford to treat its miniscule Baha’i community the way Saudi Arabia treats its religious minorities, but its internal stability is hardly served by the explicit, unabashed, and ideological exclusion of culturally or demographically competitive sections of the population such as the Sunnis or Shiites. In dealing with Shiite opposition, *ajam* was a far more useful tool than *rafidha* for successive Iraqi regimes, as it allowed for selective exclusion: the state line throughout the 20th century was that some Shiites may be *ajam* but that does not detract from “our brothers” the “noble Arab Shiite tribes.” This starkly contrasts with exclusion on the basis of doctrine which would place *all* Shiites beyond redemption until they renounce their beliefs and their adherence to Shiism.

The shift in how sectarian discourse is framed and the effect that authoritarianism had in shaping public

discourse can be easily gleaned by comparing pre and post-2003 Iraqi Salafi discourse. In pre-war Iraq, even the most ardently anti-Shiite Salafis had to navigate their message within the state's red lines that seemed to forbid any explicit wholesale condemnation of Shiites. Come 2003 and the removal of state restrictions and the accelerated politicization of sectarian identities, those same Salafis modified their message and adopted previously restricted frames of reference — a shift that was immediately noticeable in the vocabulary used. The most notable change was the adoption of *rafidha* at the expense of *ajam* and the use of more wholesale doctrinal issues rather than just ethnic ones to condemn and exclude all Shiites. Needless to say it can scarcely be doubted that this discrepancy reflects the changing pressures of state rather than changes in beliefs or changes in a preacher's views regarding Shiites and Shiism.

A most illustrative example can be found in Iraq's most well known anti-Shiite Salafi polemicist, Taha al Dulaimi, a man whose vitriol is such that he recently advocated the formation of a Sunni region in Anbar on the upper Euphrates — as it is, “free from Shiite filth,” — and contemplated this proposed region's ability to cut the Euphrates' water flow in order to, “kill the [Shiite] south.” Dulaimi's endeavors almost exclusively revolve around anti-Shiism; however, prior to 2003, and in line with Iraqi and, to many extents, regional trends, his pre-war public preaching framed the issue in terms of ethnicity with anti-Iranianism thinly cloaking doctrinal hatred. In essence, his undoubtedly genuine anti-Iranianism provided a vehicle through which to express sectarian Salafi beliefs by wedding Arab-nationalist chauvinism to sectarian bigotry without crossing the censor's red lines.

For example, in a sermon from 1998, Dulaimi launched into a tirade against central tenets of Shiite practice, ritual and belief; however, this otherwise standard Salafi sectarian discourse was peculiar in that it was done as part of an expose of Iranian enmity toward Arabs rather than Shiite enmity toward Muslims. In other words, the problem is the *ajam* not the *rafidha* who remain unmentioned throughout. As such, Dulaimi presented the *khums* as a form of *jizya* exacted from Arabs by

Iranians; turbans as a Persian displacement of Arab identity (incidentally, so too for some reason is the ancient book of fables *Kalilah wa Dimnah*); temporary marriage (*mut'ah*) as nothing more than a Persian attack on Arab honor; even the word *sayyid* as not an Arab word but an Iranian word signifying the first Persian state; and so forth. The anti-Shiism was palpable but due to state restrictions, and perhaps due to pre-2003 boundaries of political correctness, never once were the Shiites condemned for being Shiites; on the contrary, the sermon, and others from the 1990s, were filled with hollow obligatory disclaimers such as, “Iran bears no relation to original Shiism ... the original Arab Shiism is innocent of Iran.”

This chimes with the ambivalent, even confused, view of many Arabs regarding Shiism prior to 2003: that there is essentially a bad Shiism and a good one with emotional and intellectual proximity to Iran being the arbiter differentiating between the two. This allowed the myth of a non-sectarian Arab world, in addition to myths of unity and uniformity, to be perpetuated and which allowed for a selective rather than wholesale exclusion of Shiites. In Dulaimi's pre-2003 words: “There is a difference between noble and true Shiites who have a noble and true Shiism and that alien Shiism. We are not talking about ... our dear brothers. These are our dear brothers ... beware the infiltrating *ajmi*.” As is obvious in his voluminous writings since 2003, there is no doubt that the concluding sentiment would today be rephrased as the infiltrating Shiite or *rafidhi*.

These pre-2003 niceties, superfluous as they might seem to most Shiites, have long since been discarded. While Shiites' Arab pedigrees continue to be questioned, anti-Shiite discourse today is overwhelmingly concerned with *religious* otherness. It is the post-2003 sectarian landscape and the inflammation of a religiously inspired sectarian entrenchment that has shaped the sectarianization of Syria's civil war in stark contrast to how the Hama massacre of 1982 was framed. Likewise, it is this new sectarian landscape that is facilitating Hezbollah's unabashedly Shiite posture of late. Just as it is the post-2003 environment that has led to the spread of Sunni-Shiite tension beyond its usual geographic hotspots — who could have predicted the public lynching of Shiites in Egypt

of all places? Most strikingly perhaps the new sectarian landscape is illustrated by openly sectarian acts of violence and the genocidal rhetoric often accompanying them. Prior to 2003 seldom, if ever, was sectarian identity in and of itself the explicit rationale of discrimination or violence be it the deportation of tens if not hundreds of thousands of Iraqi Shiites in the 1970s and 1980s or the Hama massacre or even the violence of the Lebanese civil war.

Today it is no longer shocking to see violence framed and justified in terms of sectarian identity in and of itself as part of a wholesale condemnation and exclusion of the other. In such cases, *ajam* seems antiquated and hardly up to the task of vilifying the sectarian other. Sectarian extremists no longer pay lip service to the idea of unity and uniformity and state control has lost the ability — and in some cases the interest — to enforce the more selective and ambivalent sectarian discourse of the 20th century. Since 2003, a sectarian discourse marinated in religious dogma has emerged that leaves little room for compromise and even less room for “good Shiites” as was previously the case. The *ajam* were the “bad Shiites” whose *ethnic* impurities nevertheless potentially implicated the whole; however, the portrayal of Shiites as *rafidha* is a *religious* condemnation of all Shiites for the fact that they are Shiites.

The newly invigorated emphasis on doctrinal as opposed to ethnic otherness has been internalized by some Shiite groups. In these circles, the term *rafidha* has been adopted and turned into a badge of honor. One group of activists proudly calls themselves *al shabab al rafidhi* (the *rafidha* youth) and publicly revel in those elements of Shiism that are most offensive to Sunnis. Similar Shiite groups compose poetry and anthems in which they refer to themselves as *rafidha* in an aggressive assertion of a very belligerent Shiite identity heavily infused with sectarian dogma. While this phenomenon remains relatively limited, it is reminiscent of the evolution of the “N”-word’s usage over the 20th century. Also striking is the contrast between such forms of Shiite expression and the more apologetic, low-profile Shiism that was more prevalent in the Arab world prior to 2003.

These changes speak volumes about Middle Eastern states

and societies and how they have been transformed by the changes and pressures of the past 10 years. Far from being an issue of mere semantics, the disappearance of *ajam* and the ubiquity of *rafidha* in sectarian discourse reflects profoundly consequential transformations in how sectarian relations, the nation-state and the criteria for inclusion are viewed in the post-2003 Middle East. While the long-term ramifications and trajectories of these changes cannot be predicted with certainty, developments thus far raise serious concern for sectarian relations in the immediate future.

Throughout the 20th century sectarian relations in Iraq — and to varying degrees in Lebanon, Syria, and Bahrain as well — were framed through the prisms of the nation-state, ethnicity and national rather than religious inclusion or exclusion. A glaring exception, as already mentioned, was Saudi Arabia where sectarian identity and sectarian exclusion has always been, first and foremost, an issue of religion and religious doctrine.

Since 2003 however, the “Saudi exception” seems to be increasingly turning into the Middle Eastern rule. Today sectarian otherness in the Middle East is no longer framed in primarily ethnic or national terms but in starkly religious ones: where previously an Arab nationalist-influenced anti-Shiite discourse questioned the Shiites’ ethnic and nationalist pedigree by referring to them as *ajam*, today a Salafi-influenced discourse questions Shiites’ doctrines, religious beliefs, and ultimately their belonging to the Islamic world by referring to them as *rafidha*. This shift from ethnic or national exclusion to religious exclusion can potentially turn sectarian competition — never pleasant even at the best of times — into something far more divisive and intractable than anything witnessed in the history of the Arab nation-state.

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It's not about us

By Christian Caryl, February 20, 2013

Most Westerners have heard that there's a difference between Sunnis and Shiites, but there are very few of us who can say what it is. I hate to be the one to bring this up, but it's probably time to start getting educated. Like it or not, the 21st century will be dominated by the political reverberations of the rivalry within Islam. The so-called "war on terror" pales in comparison.

If anyone had any doubt about this, just take a look at the recent headlines. Earlier this week, 89 Shiite Hazaras were killed in a bombing in the city of Quetta in Pakistan. Pakistani's 30 million Shiites (the second-largest population in the world, right after Iran) are increasing targets of persecution by the country's Sunni majority. Another attack five weeks earlier killed 100 other Shiites in the same city.

The very same day as the Quetta bombing, six car bombs and three roadside explosions killed 21 people in Baghdad. All of the attacks targeted Shiite neighborhoods. Some 60 percent of Iraqis are Shiites, but that only seems to fuel the sectarian violence there, which has been going on now for almost seven years. Most of the attacks have been staged by terrorist groups like al Qaeda, who regard Shiites as heretics and claim to speak for the Sunni minority that has dominated the political system for much of the country's modern history. Many Sunni Iraqis still haven't reconciled themselves to being ruled by Shiites, people they often don't consider to be "real" Muslims. Sunnis are now vowing to organize politically to defend their claims.

The Shiite-Sunni split is also a major factor in Syria's continuing civil war. President Bashar al-Assad belongs to the Alawite sect, which practices a distinct version of Islam that is close to Shiism. Even though the Alawites amount to a mere 15 percent of the population, they have long been a pillar of Assad family rule. This sectarian factor has reinforced the Assad regime's close alliance with the

Shiite regime in Tehran — and also fuels the hatred felt by members of the conservative Sunni majority toward the regime in Damascus.

So why should non-Muslims care? Because the dynamic of mutual hatred and distrust between the two camps shows every sign of intensifying — and given that one billion believers are caught up within this theological and demographical battle, the rest of us are bound to feel the shock waves. (The United States, for example, continues to prop up the Sunni royal families in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, both of which are still suppressing lingering Shiite rebellions by the most brutal of means. And let's not forget Iran's efforts to build the first Shiite nuclear bomb.)

The differences between Shiites and Sunnis go back almost to the dawn of Islam itself. The crucial distinction has to do with the nature of religious authority. Sunnis essentially believed that the leader of the Muslim community, the caliph, should be chosen from among its members. (In the early days, they were usually selected from the original group of companions of the Prophet Mohammed.) Shiites insisted that the leader could only come from the line of Mohammed's direct descendants, and they soon came to challenge the caliphs' right to leadership. The dispute took a fateful turn for the worse when Hussein ibn Ali, the Shiites' leader and the prophet's grandson, refused to pledge allegiance to the caliph Yazid, and died at the hand of the caliph's troops in the battle of Karbala in 680 — igniting an intensely emotional narrative of injustice and martyrdom that still infuses Shiite thinking today. (Take a look at this video for a taste.)

Yet until just a few decades ago these differences didn't seem to matter much (not least because Shiites only make up a tenth or so of the world's Muslims, and tend to be dispersed across many countries, often as relatively small minorities). That changed dramatically, however, in 1979, when the Islamic Revolution in Iran suddenly installed

a militant Shiite regime in one of the Middle East's most populous countries.

“This fundamentally upset the regional balance of power,” says Olivier Roy, a leading scholar on Islam at the European University Institute in Florence, Italy. By profiling itself as the new vanguard in the fight against Israel, says Roy, Iran was in a position to challenge the claims of hitherto dominant countries such as Egypt or Saudi Arabia. The Iranians also began sponsoring their sectarian cousins in places like Lebanon and Iraq. “So the Shiites became politicized,” notes Roy. The trend accelerated after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, which toppled Saddam Hussein and finally put representatives of the majority Shiites in power there for the first time (though the result can hardly be described as a triumph for democracy, given the authoritarian drift under current Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.)

The other trend is what Roy calls “the Salafization” of Islam. The Salafis — staunch religious conservatives who have much in common with the puritanical outlook of the Wahhabis in Saudi Arabia — have been steadily rising in influence around the Middle East over the past decade, a trend more recently reinforced by the Arab Spring. In 1959, Roy points out, a leading Sunni scholar published a fatwa that described Shiism merely as one of the recognized “schools” of Islam. Even the members of the Muslim Brotherhood have generally had relatively few negative things to say about Shiism. “But now we have a new generation of Salafi preachers who consider the Shiites to be heretics, who say that Shiites are not mainstream Muslims,” says Roy. “And this is new.”

Though all Salafis aren't necessarily militants, the anti-Shiite sentiment is one that they share with Sunni jihadist movements. No one hates the Shiites more than al Qaeda or the Taliban. And, indeed, the Iraqi branch of al Qaeda

duly claimed responsibility for the recent bombings in Baghdad. (Iran, for its part, has seized upon the killings in Quetta to assail Islamabad for its failure to protect Pakistani Shiites.)

Now, it's certainly true that we shouldn't accept all narratives about Shiite-Sunni polarization at face value. In places like Iraq, sectarian distinctions are often blurred by intermarriage. Members of the opposition in Bahrain are fond of stressing that their fight against the monarchy is motivated less by religious sectarianism than by a longing for greater political rights — an aim they share with many Sunnis in the country. (And yes, there's no question that the Bahraini royal family — like certain other authoritarian regimes in the region — has been happy to play up the sectarian card, eagerly ascribing any legitimate dissent to Iranian scheming.)

In the larger scheme of things, though, it's clear that sectarian polarization is a genuine and intensifying trend. Roy sees only two scenarios that might derail it. Reform of the revolutionary regime in Iran could theoretically moderate Tehran's role in fomenting Shiite activism abroad. And collapse of the Assad regime, followed by a “smooth transition in Syria,” would deprive the Iranians of one of their most important regional partners and cut them off from access to their Hezbollah allies in Lebanon, thus forcing them to scale back their ambitions. Needless to say, neither of these possibilities appears especially likely any time soon. So we're probably well-advised to expect the worst.

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Talking about reform in Bahrain

By Geneive Abdo, April 10, 2013

A two-day conference at the University of Bahrain in the capital Manama last week was intended to show the United States and the region that the Bahraini government is making progress toward democratic governance and addressing the grievances of the country's majority Shiite population. But the discussions were less than convincing because there was no empirical data or other direct evidence to support the participants' claims.

Many participants — Bahraini academics, some government officials, and even U.S. Congressmen — declared that there has been real progress in the ongoing national dialogue, which began anew this winter between the government and factions within the opposition. The majority Shiite opposition is demanding political and economic rights. The dialogue first began in the spring of 2011, after an uprising by the Shiite-led dominated opposition erupted, and has come and gone since then.

At the conference, while participating on a panel about Bahrain's political situation, I asked several participants to describe in detail the progress they were referring to between the government and the opposition. None of them provided any substantive answers. After the conference was over, I checked in with a few opposition leaders who told me that there have been approximately 10 sessions with relatively low-level government participation, but the government has offered no concessions to meet the opposition's demands and the dialogue has been virtually ineffective.

A second topic that dominated the conference involved whether opposition groups, such as al-Wefaq National Islamic Society, has close ties to, or is even manipulated by, Iran. The consensus was that the group takes orders from Iran when organizing demonstrations against the Bahraini government; some participants even accused some Shiite opposition factions of attempting to establish an Iranian-style theocracy in Bahrain with a cleric as the head of

state. At least one participant claimed the opposition was collaborating with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards to try to overthrow the Bahraini government.

Congressman Dan Burton, a Republican from Indiana, and former diplomat John Bolton chimed in to warn of the Iranian threat. "Iran is trying to undermine the government of Bahrain and we need to make sure Iran's aims are not achieved," Burton said. Bolton warned that the threat from Iran is not only Tehran's potential to develop a nuclear weapon, but "the regime has made it clear it aims for hegemony" in the region. A Bahraini participant said he did not blame al-Wefaq for its actions because it "gets its instructions from Iran."

There is little doubt that for more than 30 years Shiite Iran has tried to assert its influence through military force and soft power throughout the Middle East. And nearly every week, leading figures in Iran, including Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, chastise the Bahraini government for its repression of its Shiite population and call for the regime to be toppled. And true, there were attempted, but failed, coups plotted by Iranian agents in the 1990s against the Bahraini government.

But to date, there is no evidence — at least based upon public information and my own research of the country — that Iran is working to topple the Bahraini government, even though Tehran would welcome a change in Manama. A member of the royal family agreed with me that a distinction needs to be made between Iran's direct intervention in countries such as Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen, and its indirect influence in Bahrain. For example, Iranian state-owned media broadcasts its programming into Bahrain on an estimated 30 media outlets in Arabic. The message is generally that the Sunni Bahraini government represses the Shiite population, and Iran is the guardian of all Shiites.

A distinction should also be made between Iran's religious influence on the Arab Shiites, not only in Bahrain but across the Arab world, and its political influence. Many Shiites, including some in Bahrain, follow the teachings of clerics in Iran as well as those in Lebanon and Iraq.

In addition, even if Iran were trying to destabilize Bahrain, this has nothing to do with the grievances of the opposition. The Bahraini government should not try to cast aside the legitimate demands of the opposition by playing the card of the Iranian threat. If the Bahraini government wants to convince Washington and the region that reforms are underway, officials should provide details instead of focusing on Iran, which only sidelines this discussion.

As part of an attempt to show the Bahraini government is enacting reforms in order to address the marginalization of the Shiites, conference participants stated that most of the 24 recommendations in the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI), an over 500-page report authored by the renowned international law expert, Cherif Bassiouni, have been implemented. In fact, Congressman Burton said that 18 of the recommendations have been enforced, but he did not say where he got his information.

The BICI report, issued in November 2011, confirmed that thousands of people were detained and tortured during the heat of the uprising in 2011, and some were killed by government security forces. The report also confirmed that many Shiite had been removed from their jobs for discriminatory reasons. The report called for sweeping reforms, including a restructuring of the police and security forces, an independent media (which in Bahrain is controlled by the state), and an end to repression.

Looking for confirmation on Burton's statement, I asked at the conference if anyone knew which of the BICI recommendations have been implemented. According to

U.S.-based human rights organizations — which have been very vocal about Bahrain's reluctance to take the report seriously — only a handful of the 24 recommendations have been implemented.

There is much talk these days in Washington of progress between the Bahraini government and opposition groups toward reaching reconciliation. The promotion of the crown prince, considered the reformer in the family, to deputy prime minister has made some in the United States hopeful that the reform process will pick up speed.

Stability in Bahrain is of great importance to the United States. Manama is the home to the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet, whose presence in the Gulf ensures the flow of oil and other energy exports through the Strait of Hormuz, the waterway connecting the Gulf to the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. Because of significant U.S. strategic and economic interests in a stable Bahrain, the Obama administration has declined to adopt a hard line on the Bahraini government's human rights abuses and institutionalized discrimination.

If the conference was any guide, the Bahraini political elites do not want to be perceived as presiding over a repressive state. Therefore, the moderates within the Bahrain government — those in the crown prince's inner circle — should seize upon the moment and push for reform. This would be far more effective at improving Bahrain's image and showing a commitment to reform than conferences in which there is little or no talk about addressing the grievances of the opposition.

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All talk

By Elizabeth Dickinson, October 31, 2013

For two years, the talk in Bahrain was all about talks. The island country's political crisis that started amid the Arab Spring could be solved, it was reckoned, if everyone could sit down at the same table. Just starting the discussion seemed to be the biggest obstacle.

But, over the last seven months, many in Bahrain seem to have lost faith in the power of negotiation. The country's long-awaited National Dialogue opened in February and, after a holiday break, resumed on Oct. 30. But it has so far failed to produce much consensus. There isn't even an agenda yet, because participants haven't agreed on one. "We didn't move one inch forward," said Ahmed Alsaati, a member of parliament and delegate to the dialogue, summarizing the talks to date. "We spent more than seven months discussing what is the definition of this word or that word."

To make matters worse, after a series of arrests among its supporters, the opposition boycotted the talks in September and has yet to return. The other parties have given it until Dec. 3 to decide whether to do so.

All sides still say they are committed in principle to the dialogue. But their constituencies, whose faith in the talks is waning, are adopting strategies of escalation that stand to destabilize Bahrain and perhaps permanently cripple the idea that there is a political solution for the country. The opposition continues to bring demonstrators to the streets, day after day and week after week. Government supporters are pushing for tighter security to calm the unrest. And a small group of radical opposition youth has been targeting the police more frequently and aggressively with makeshift weapons and bombs.

Bahrain's current crisis dates to 2011, when protesters took to the streets with demands and grievances against the country's ruling monarchy. Many of them came from the country's Shiite majority, which has long argued that it is

politically and economically marginalized by the Sunni-led government. Security forces dispersed the protests, but they didn't stop — they simply fragmented, popping up in Shiite villages and towns.

Eager for change, the opposition was ready to negotiate, arguing that only political concessions would appease protesters on the streets. The government also wanted an end to the unrest. So, in spring 2011, the country opened talks. But the opposition pulled out in the summer, arguing that an ongoing crackdown against its supporters showed that negotiations would not yield real reforms.

With talks out of the picture, protests continued, and the government continued to disperse them. In the country's Shiite villages in particular, a daily cat-and-mouse game emerged between young demonstrators and the police — a ritual that scared away foreign investors, froze everyday life, and left a trail of human rights violations. Each afternoon, small lines of demonstrators marched in opposition strongholds until security forces arrived to quell them, using tear gas and sound bombs. Sometimes the protests ended there; other times, demonstrators were beaten or police officers assaulted.

More than 90 people have died in clashes since 2011, according to the country's public prosecution.

Everyone from politicians to diplomats to the crown prince argued that re-starting the dialogue was the key to breaking this cycle. Street protests couldn't offer redress for opposition communities who felt disenfranchised, for example, by what they say are gerrymandered voting districts. Security forces couldn't alone bring the quiet that Bahrain's suffering businessmen demanded. Meanwhile, the country's allies were eager to find a solution that avoided the tectonic change that had destabilized countries such as Egypt and Libya.

With anxiety about Bahrain's future running high, there was cautious optimism when the king announced that the National Dialogue would finally begin in February. "Achieving genuine resolution to many key issues can only be achieved through national consensus among all participants in the dialogue," Bahrain's Justice Minister Sheikh Khaled Ali Abdullah al-Khalifa, one of two government representatives at the National Dialogue, said in response to questions from **FP**.

Yet the discussions quickly proved contentious, beginning with their very composition. Just over two-dozen delegates sit around the table, one-third from a coalition of five opposition groups, one-third from a coalition of pro-government groups, and one-third from parliament and appointed by the king. The government is represented by two ministers, but no one from the ruling family is present, causing groups to question what decisions can actually be made. With this in mind, the opposition has insisted that any decision from the dialogue be put to referendum, an idea other delegates reject. (For a while, the opposition figures engaged in the national dialogue remained hopeful that a member of the ruling family, probably reformist Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, would negotiate with them directly. But it hasn't happened.)

Simultaneous to disagreements about the nature of the national dialogue itself — which also includes the yet-to-be-set agenda — tensions on the street have made it even harder for delegates to make concessions.

Over the summer, the parliament proposed a series of new anti-terror laws, later approved by the king, giving security forces sweeping powers to detain and charge suspects. New rules also forbid political groups from having contact with foreign embassies and governments without the foreign ministry's consent. These developments have fueled complaints and accusations of human rights abuses similar to those that first galvanized protests almost three years ago. Human rights groups have reported hundreds of house raids and arrests without warrant since the summer and say detainees still face torture, despite government promises of reform.

Meanwhile, a string of small-scale car bombings has rocked the capital, Manama. The government blames youth from a leaderless opposition group named for the date protests began in 2011: the Coalition Youth of the 14 February Revolution. The government has arrested dozens of suspects thought to be involved in the bombings. Whether these individuals are actually implicated or not, February 14, as the group is known, is certainly leading a campaign of tire-burning and Molotov-cocktail throwing that scares many in the Sunni community.

After several months of slow-paced discussion, the talks hit their most serious road block in September as a result of what was happening outside: Opposition groups pulled out after the arrest of Khalil Marzooq, the deputy leader of the opposition Shiite political bloc al-Wefaq. Marzooq has since been released from prison on bail, but the charges of terrorism brought against him have not been dropped.

"The decision to suspend our involvement was not only due to the arrest of Khalil, but that was the tip of the iceberg of a series of events in recent months," said Ali Alaswad, a former opposition MP who resigned at the height of the unrest in 2011. "Even now, despite Khalil's release... we have seen more negative indicators of how the authorities are treating the opposition." Sheikh Khalid, however, pointed a finger back, saying that the opposition has "failed to show willingness to engage with other political players nor to denounce violence."

Against this backdrop of escalating tension, supporters of the National Dialogue insist that the process still offers the promise of a more stable future. On Wednesday, in a communiqué, the remaining delegates called for the opposition to return to the process: "[T]he existing table set up specifically for the dialogue is the only place to achieve the national consensus. Therefore, the so-called 'suspension' of the participation underlines the lack of appreciation and seriousness of the [opposition] towards the call to complete the National Dialogue."

Yet many of the questions that have so far paralyzed talks remain unanswered. For instance, opposition groups have

always insisted that political issues — such as re-districting for parliamentary representation and electing a prime minister (the position is currently appointed by the king) — be on the table. But pro-government constituencies have viewed the forum as a venue to mend fences. They have preferred to focus on questions like how to re-start the stalled economy. With the opposition eschewing talks altogether, it will be virtually impossible to find a compromise on these matters.

Should the opposition return, however, the talks may still be moribund. Even if leaders at the table are willing to forge ahead, their constituencies may already have moved on. According to Justin Gengler, professor at Qatar University's Social and Economic Survey Research Institute, many Bahrainis have soured on the very idea of a negotiated outcome to their country's woes. "Given how

things have deteriorated, especially as the dialogue doesn't seem to push things forward, the argument for reform is getting harder to make," Gengler said.

Perhaps expectations were set impossibly high. The idea of negotiation took on a mythical quality in Bahrain by the time talks actually began. It would be the solution, the end of the trouble, the way out. But, as time has passed, it's become clear that talks will only work if all sides in Bahrain make big compromises. No one has yet been willing to do so.

Until the talks are more than talk, little will change.

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Kuwait takes a breather

By Kristin Smith Diwan, August 5, 2013

On July 27 Kuwaitis turned out for their second parliamentary election in a year and sixth in the seven-year reign of the Emir Sabah al-Ahmed al-Sabah. This election came amidst deepening concerns about the viability of Kuwait's parliamentary system. The past few years have seen the small emirate buffeted by street protests, electoral engineering, electoral boycotts, judicial interventions, and the growing sociopolitical polarization that is challenging all Arab states in this time of dramatic political change. Voters seemed torn between dissatisfaction with the performance of the ruling government and worries about the toll political conflict is taking on Kuwait's social solidarity. Most admit disappointment in the current system which has failed to deliver economic diversification and a strategic vision comparable to the neighboring sister

city-states in the United Arab Emirates and Qatar. But political confrontation is looking a lot more frightening in light of the fragmenting political order and mounting bloodshed in Syria and Egypt.

The campaign, undertaken in scorching heat and Ramadan fasting, was subdued. Yet the results may give heart to those hoping for more civil politics and a de-escalation of the political struggle between government and opposition.

Voters punished more inflammatory sectarian politicians and rewarded pragmatists. They turned out some veteran politicians in favor of new and younger faces. The weakening opposition boycott called in protest of the emir's unilateral change in the electoral system admitted

wider tribal representation and some former opposition members into the National Assembly. The return of members of parliament (MPs) from the liberal nationalists and larger tribes has lessened the government's narrow reliance on the Shiite community: a position which was becoming politically untenable given the sectarian polarization shaped by Sunni-Shiite fault lines in Bahrain and Syria and the Gulf states' geopolitical competition with Iran. This more inclusive representation and marked increase in voter participation — up to 52 percent from 38 percent in the last “boycott” election — provides a more promising base for gaining the public's acceptance than the previous loyalist parliament.

The result reflects the dramatic decline in the fortunes of Kuwait's formidable opposition. Only a year ago the ruling family faced a strongly oppositional parliament, backed by an energetic youth movement, which was beginning to coalesce around the principle of a fully elected government. A significant step in that direction had been accomplished in November 2011 when the scandal-plagued Prime Minister Nasser al-Mohammed — a royal — was forced out of office over the objection of the emir by a combination of parliamentary pressure and street protests. An unprecedented alliance of liberals and Islamists, city dwellers and tribal populists, turned Kuwait's Gulf road orange, the color of the reform movement, in rejection of executive fiat, political buyouts, and growing autocratic measures.

The ruling-family-led government used diverse tools to contain this demand to surrender more royal prerogatives to an elected legislature. The emir adeptly enlisted the criminal and constitutional courts to build a legal case for the campaign against the parliamentary opposition, and against the youth activists who had dramatically expanded the scope for contentious politics in Kuwait using social networks and street protests.

In an uncanny echo of Egyptian political developments, two consecutive constitutional court rulings upended the opposition momentum. In June 2012 the court ordered the scandal-plagued 2009 parliament re-instated due

to procedural errors in its dissolution by the emir. This effectively nullified the December 2012 election and the oppositional parliament it produced. A year later a second constitutional ruling in June validated an “emergency” decree issued by the emir after the dissolution of the parliament, altering the voting system to the detriment of the opposition.

Youth were targeted, in more ways than one. Recognizing the need to win back this important constituency the Emiri Diwan initiated a campaign under the name “Kuwait listens,” to reach out to the younger generation. A National Youth Council was formed and given a prominent public platform to voice its concerns through a national conference attended by the emir and speaker of the parliament. The youth program focused on “quick wins” to establish credibility, identifying youth demands that could be met immediately.

At the same time, prosecutors embarked on an unprecedented campaign to criminalize dissent. According to Human Rights Watch since October 2012 there were 35 prosecutions for “defaming the majesty of the emir.” Former MPs were jailed for their speeches and hundreds of young activists were investigated for their critical tweets. As opposition campaigners spent their time assembling legal defenses, the political battle moved from the streets to the courts.

Then in April the ministry of information submitted to parliament a draft media law which proposed holding users of social media to the same standards as regular media. Fines of up to a million dollars could be imposed for rebelling against the ruling system, destabilizing the economy, undermining national unity or offending the constitution.

The government also sought to staunch their declining influence in the tribal areas. The rise of economic populism, led by the charismatic former MP Musallem al-Barrak, had driven this once loyalist constituency into the opposition camp. The ruling family thus undertook a successful campaign to peel away tribal support for the

election boycott, relying upon traditional ties with tribal leadership.

There is no question that the legal stratagem and political maneuvers undertaken by the ruling-family led government were effective. Deprived of the parliament through court order then boycott, hounded in the courts, the opposition fell prey to disagreements over tactics. Ideological differences, once managed with some skill, became more intractable as Kuwaiti society divided over Bahrain, Syria, and — significantly — now Egypt.

More fundamentally, the regional momentum for political change has collapsed. When the possibility of citizen-led transformation seemed high a broad swath of Kuwaiti society joined the opposition in the street. Today the street looks rather foreboding with state-backed killing and massed civil divisions in Egypt, and unspeakable death and destruction in Syria. The fears of political chaos and the genuine need to preserve national unity in such a foreboding environment plays to the advantage of the status quo powers in Kuwait: the ruling family, the elite business families, and the minority Shiite community which looks to the ruling family for protection.

In such an environment the opposition now faces a near insurmountable climb. The ability of the ruling family — backed by the courts — to change the rules of the political game has led much of the opposition leadership to escalate their demands to constitutional reform. But this essentially revolutionary position will not find broad acceptance as Kuwaitis seek calm and national unity. The extra-parliamentary strategy of popular mobilization through street protests is now viewed with more circumspection.

The hard opposition is further challenged by its reliance on the Muslim Brotherhood-backed Islamic Constitutional Movement. As elements of the liberal, Salafi, and tribal opposition returned to the parliament in this election, the Brotherhood stood with the boycott. Yet it has also been wrought by internal divisions among urban and tribal members, its traditional leadership and “revolutionary” youth. The dangers of being outside of the parliament are now clear as the Brotherhood movement is under assault in Egypt, and in the Gulf states of the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

Sensing the improvement in circumstance, the emir has opened the door for reconciliation by taking the important step of pardoning those sentenced under lese majeste statutes. There are indications that some parliamentarians sympathetic to opposition goals are acting as mediators to negotiate an amendment of the electoral law unilaterally promulgated by the emir — a move that might allow the opposition to end its boycott of the parliament.

While none of the underlying political demands that animated protests — an end to political corruption and ineffective governance, the expansion of elected government — have been met, the political center in Kuwait has shifted. Responding to regional developments, Kuwait is taking a step back from the revolutionary tumult of the Arab Spring.

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Gulf charities and Syrian sectarianism

By William McCants, September 30, 2013

Syria's civil war did not start out as a sectarian conflict pitting Sunnis against a Shiite-backed regime. Sectarian language was largely absent from the early nonviolent protests and its leaders deliberately tried to create a multiethnic, multi-confessional front. But as the conflict turned violent, extremists on both sides recast the conflict as a sectarian apocalypse to discourage Syrians from creating the broad, cross-cutting coalition of Syrians necessary to take down the regime.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's sectarian strategy — targeting Sunni civilians, labeling the opposition “al Qaeda,” portraying himself as the protector of Syria's religious minorities — is well known. Less well known is the sectarian strategy pursued by Sunni extremists, particularly the ultraconservative Salafis living in the Persian Gulf, who are sending “hundreds of millions” of dollars to ensure the worst factions of the revolt are ascendant — mostly under the guise of humanitarian relief.

Pundits in the West are quick to blame the Gulf countries for fueling the sectarian conflict but the governments of Kuwait, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar have shied away from backing the Salafi militias in Syria — the most sectarian factions in the conflict. Instead, they have either focused on humanitarian relief or backed their own non-Salafi proxies like the more moderate Muslim Brotherhood or more secular factions like those linked to Saad Hariri in Lebanon.

Nevertheless, the Gulf monarchies have not been able or willing to stem the tide of private money their citizens are sending to the Salafi charities and popular committees. Kuwait in particular has done little to stop it because it lacks an effective terror financing law and because it cannot afford politically to infuriate its already angry Salafi members of parliament. Qatar and Saudi Arabia have tried to crackdown on fundraising for the Salafi militias but their citizens just send their money to Kuwait.

One of the primary recipients of private donations from the Gulf is the Popular Commission to Support the Syrian people, associated with the wealthy Ajmi family. In a tweet from August, for example, the commission bragged it had received 130,000 riyals (\$34,663) in alms (zakat) from a woman in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The organization has funneled millions of dollars in funds and humanitarian aid to Salafi militias like Ahrar al-Sham, which is one of the most sectarian groups fighting in the Syrian conflict. Last year, Ahrar publicly thanked the commission for sending \$400,000. Salafi militias like Ahrar use the money to buy weapons and the humanitarian aid to build popular support.

Not every Islamic-oriented charity is behaving so irresponsibly in Syria. The president of Islamic Relief USA, Abed Ayoub, recently told a Brookings panel on foreign aid and sectarianism in Syria that his organization does not discriminate on the basis of “any political agenda, ideology, or even religion.” Rather, Islamic Relief claims to have provided aid to over half a million people in Syria, including Christians, and has partnered with a number of other Christian humanitarian organizations like Catholic Relief Services.

Another participant on the panel, Mouaz Mustafa, the executive director of the Syrian emergency Task Force, echoed Ayoub, arguing that aid agencies should combat sectarianism in Syria by focusing on supporting the many non-sectarian civil society institutions and governing bodies that have sprung up in Syria's major cities. According to the U.S. State Department's Maria Stephan, the same reasoning underpins the department's aid to the local councils, civil society organizations, and professional groups and unions.

The State Department and responsible religiously-oriented aid organizations have an uphill battle in Syria but it is worth the fight. Failing to do so leaves governance to the

militants, especially those who have the best financing like the Salafi groups. Indeed, Salafi militias have set up Islamic courts in captured territory where they dispense their conservative brand of justice as well as public goods. Entrenching themselves in this manner will ensure the country's sectarian divide endures long after the end of hostilities.

There is also a risk for Gulf countries that allow organizations like the Popular Commission to fan sectarian hatred abroad because those same organizations also advance a sectarian agenda at home. For Sunni-led

countries like Bahrain and Kuwait that have large Shiite populations seeking greater political rights, domestic anti-Shiite activism threatens to spark a conflict that would quickly rage out of control. Tightening restrictions on sectarian charities sending money abroad to Salafi militias will not only help calm the fires of sectarianism blazing in Syria but also ensure they do not spread to the Gulf.

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External support and the Syrian insurgency

By Thomas Pierret, August 9, 2013

Would arming moderate Syrian rebels reduce the influence of their radical counterparts? This question, which has been extensively debated by proponents and opponents of indirect military involvement in Syria, has perhaps become obsolete: backing the most pragmatic insurgent groups is what Saudi Arabia has been doing for months now, and it seems to work.

In the autumn of 2011, anti-regime demonstrators across Syria were praising a “Free Syrian Army” (FSA) whose leaders were predominantly defector officers. Although sometimes bearing Islamic names and using religious formulas in their statements, the FSA battalions were hardly putting forward any “Islamist” agenda at that time. By late 2012, however, the situation had profoundly changed. Use of the FSA label was increasingly rare among armed groups, many of which were abandoning the Syrian national flag in favor of the black banner of the Prophet. The rise of hardline Salafi factions like the al Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra and the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF)

led by Ahrar al-Sham, a faction with strong roots among Syrian veteran fighters of the Iraq war, was apparently irresistible, as FSA-affiliated battalions played the second roles in the rebels’ major conquests at the time (Taftanaz, al-Jirah, Raqqqa).

The radicalization of the Syrian insurgency has often been interpreted as a quasi-natural phenomenon, the inevitable outcome of a brutal sectarian conflict that has made Salafi-jihadi ideology increasingly appealing to Syrian Sunnis. This view is debatable, however, since the rise of radical Salafi groups throughout 2012 was in fact paralleled with the watering down of their rhetoric. In particular, although rejecting the Syrian flag, Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) increasingly emphasized the Syrian, rather than global, character of their jihad. When in April the leader of the Islamic State of Iraq, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, revealed that he was behind the creation of JN and announced the fusion of the two organizations into an “Islamic State of Iraq and Sham” (ISIS), he was rebuked by JN leader

Abu Muhammad al-Julani, who insisted on the need to preserve the “Syrian specificity” of his group, a stance that received the support of al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahri. Other major insurgent groups, including Ahrar al-Sham denounced both al-Baghdadi’s decision and al-Julani’s pledge of allegiance to Zawahri. Although this rejection was partly driven by the fear of rejoining JN/ISIS on the U.S. terrorist list, it also suggests that transnational Jihad had little currency among the popular base of the rebellion.

During their “golden age” that is, before the JN/ISIS split, Syrian Jihadis were thus abandoning part of their ideological specificity. They were therefore converging with FSA-affiliated insurgents, which at the same moment were undergoing a process of Islamization. The quasi-general rejection of JN’s November 2012 statement against the Syrian National Coalition was much less rooted in some disagreement about the Islamic character of the post-revolutionary state (be it called “civilian” by the moderates) than in diverging views about the exiled opposition and its state supporters. The recruitment by JN of a large number of Syrians, which by early this year vastly outnumbered foreign volunteers within the organization, also resulted in a more flexible approach to the enforcement of Islamic rules in the public space. As for anti-Alawite/anti-Shiite discourse, it was far from a Jihadi monopoly, as it was also gaining ground among mainstream rebel groups as a result of the increasingly sectarian character of the war. In that respect, it is interesting to note that the strongholds of hardline Salafi groups in Syria, namely the north and the east, are very predominantly Sunni areas where the sectarian issue is far less salient than in Homs and Damascus.

The one main reason for the success of hard-line Salafists throughout 2012 was a matter of superior material resources. As illustrated in numerous press reports at that time, such resources made them inherently more appealing but also more disciplined compared with groups that sometimes had to finance themselves through looting and other criminal activities. Contrary to the common wisdom, militant Islamists were not funded by Gulf states, which at that time were providing only limited quantities of material

help in an erratic and overly selective fashion, but rather by private donors.

The identity of JN’s silent partners remains totally obscure to this day, but the idea that Gulf monarchs may support the franchise of an organization — i.e. al Qaeda — that brands them as apostates and waged an armed insurgency on Saudi soil a decade ago does not make sense. As for Ahrar al-Sham, it has been funded from the onset by the politicized wing of the Kuwaiti Salafi movement. The latter’s ideologue Hakim al-Mutayri holds views that are particularly abhorrent to Saudi rulers, namely a curious mixture of political liberalism, Jihadi-like anti-Westernism, and hostility to Gulf regimes. Saudi authorities, which have banned private fund-raising campaigns in favor of Syrian insurgents, have also actively opposed attempts by politicized Kuwaiti Salafis at using their relatively liberal homeland as a hub for Saudi donations to their favorite armed factions in Syria.

The Islamic Front for the Liberation of Syria, a more pragmatic, FSA-affiliated Islamist alliance, benefitted from the fund-raising efforts of another foe of the House of Saud: Muhammad Surur Zayn al-‘Abidin, an Amman-based Syrian veteran activist who inspired the Sahwa (“Awakening”) movement that challenged the Saudi monarchy in the early 1990s. Attempts by the Muslim Brothers at co-opting certain groups through umbrella organizations like the Committee for the Protection of Civilians and the Committee of the Shields of the Revolution have made the Islamist insurgent scene even more repulsive in the eyes of Saudi rulers.

Saudi Arabia does not only despise the Muslim Brothers, but political Islamic movements and mass politics in general, which it sees as a threat to its model of absolute patrimonial monarchy. Saudi policies are not driven by religious doctrines, as is too often assumed, but by concerns for the stability of the kingdom, which translate into support for political forces that are inherently conservative or hostile to Islamist movements: these forces can be apolitical Salafis aligned with the Saudi religious establishment (the Ahl al-Athar Battalions in Syria, funded

from Kuwait by the quietist Heritage Association), but first and foremost non-religious forces such as the secular intellectuals and tribal chiefs Riyadh has recently backed against the Muslim Brothers and Qatar within the Syrian National Coalition. Of course, in Syria like in Egypt, these politically conservative forces also include the military. Riyadh has been the driving force behind several initiatives aimed at organizing the insurgency under the aegis of defector officers rather than of the civilian volunteers that run most Islamist groups: General Mustafa al-Sheikh's Revolutionary Military Council, General Hussein al-Hajj Ali's Syrian National Army, the Joint Command of the Military Councils, and General Salim Idriss's Headquarters of the Free Syrian Army. Revealingly, Saudi-aligned Syrian Salafi preacher Adnan al-Ar'ur enthusiastically promoted these initiatives and was invited as a guest-speaker at the establishment of the Joint Command.

Given this preference for the least Islamist component of the rebellion, the marked increase in Saudi involvement in the conflict over the last months has translated into a revival of the mainstream insurgency, and a decline in the relative weight of hardline Salafis. This pattern has been particularly clear in the southern province of Daraa, where Croatian weapons purchased with Saudi money were delivered by the Jordanian intelligence starting in November 2012. Although some of these weapons ended up in the hands of militant Islamists, they overwhelmingly empowered FSA-affiliates such as the Yarmuk Brigade, the Fajr al-Islam Brigade (not to be confused with the SIF-affiliated al-Fajr Islamic Movement), and the Omari Brigade. Albeit outdated, Croatian rocket-launchers and recoilless rifles have allowed insurgents to make significant inroads into an agricultural plain, which had hitherto been easily defended by the regime. After the setback they suffered in Khirbet Ghazale last May, the rebels resumed their advance and recently seized important loyalist positions in Inkhil, Nawa, and Daraa.

Arms deliveries from Jordan have also enabled the rebels to withstand the pressure of loyalist forces around Damascus. In that region too, hardline Salafis are minor players, with the insurgent scene dominated by FSA-affiliates like the

Maghawir Forces, the Shuhada al-Islam Brigade, the Sufi-leaning al-Habib al-Mustafa Brigade, and the Salafi al-Islam Brigade. A member of the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Syria, the latter has secured Saudi support despite its links with the aforementioned Muhammad Surur Zayn al-Abidin, probably as a result of its considerable military weight in Damascus's eastern suburbs.

Mainstream insurgents have also been on the rise in the north, where the sieges of the air bases of Abu al-Zuhur (Idlib), Minakh and Kwayris (Aleppo) have been dominated by groups like Ahfad al-Rasul, Shuhada Suriyya, the al-Fath Brigade, the Asifat al-Shamal Brigade, the Nur al-Din Zanki Battalions and the Abu Bakr al-Siddiq Brigade. Although members of the ISIS led the final assault on Minakh in early August, what brought the nine-month siege to an end was the destruction of the tanks defending the base with Chinese HJ-8 guided missiles provided by Saudi Arabia to moderate factions. The missiles, which are now also deployed in Daraa, had been introduced in the north in June following the fall of Qusayr and signs of an imminent loyalist-Hezbollah offensive west of Aleppo. The new weaponry allowed insurgents to neutralize the regime's armored units in the region and to launch a successful offensive on Khan al-Asal, a strategic location that commands the entrance of the regime-held part of Aleppo. Most of the battle for Khan al-Asal was conducted by the 9th and 19th divisions of the FSA, which are part of a nationwide order of battle which so far also includes the 1st, 2nd and 4th divisions in Damascus, the 3rd, 4th (bis) and 5th in Deir al-Zour, the 6th in Hama, the 11th in Raqqa, and the 13th in Idlib.

Other major recipients of Saudi-funded weaponry in the area are the Nur al-Din Zanki Battalions, whose successive affiliations illustrate the capacity of Saudi state funding to extract rebel factions out of the Jihadi nexus. The group was established as a branch of the radical al-Fajr Movement (now part of Ahrar al-Sham), then it rallied to the Tawhid brigade, and eventually affiliated with the Front for Authenticity and Development (FAD). The latter is a pro-Saudi coalition of early defector officers (Abd al-Razzaq Tlass, Ammar al-Wawi), tribal-based groups

(Basha'ir al-Nasr in Deir al-Zour), and apolitical Salafis (Ahl al-Athar). The FAD's political platform is strikingly unambitious and presents no distinctly Islamist feature. Tellingly, this coalition is regarded with suspicion among Jihadi circles, which have described it as a Syrian version of the Sahwa councils set up by U.S. troops in Iraq in order to fight al Qaeda.

Hardline Salafis certainly remain important players in Syria, as recently illustrated by their role in the capture of a dozen Alawite villages in the province of Latakia, but they are now faced with unprecedented difficulties. When JN was listed as a terrorist organization by the U.S. government in December 2012, it was defended by a broad spectrum of opponents on the basis of its military prowess and well-managed relief activities. Following the April JN-ISIS split, however, the "Iraqi" branch of the organization has been viewed with growing suspicion among Syrians. As the ISIS's very name indicates, the problem fundamentally lies in its idiosyncratic project of state-building — the leader Baghdadi modestly bears the title of "Commander of the Faithful." Focalization on this project has resulted in an unimpressive record of military confrontation with the regime, rigid and at times brutal implementation of an Islamic lifestyle upon the population, and increasingly tense relations with the proponents of competing projects of state-building, namely the FSA and Kurdish nationalists. By August, the ISIS was faced with hostile demonstrations in several towns, strong tensions with the FSA after the assassination of the latter's commander in Latakia Kamal Hamami by an ISIS member, and a full-fledged war with Kurdish parties in the northeast.

These developments have left the SIF as the most credible hardline Salafi opponent to the regime. The group seems to have benefitted from increasingly warm relations with Qatar recently, probably as a reaction to Saudi Arabia's success in buying FSA-aligned factions like Ahfad al-Rasul out of Doha's sphere of influence. In Idlib province, Ahrar al-Sham and its (loosely) FSA-affiliated Salafi partner Suqur al-Sham have made intensive use of Russian-made Konkurs, antitank missiles purchased in Libya by Qatar. Yet Ahrar al-Sham should probably be wary that the emirate is an unreliable partner characterized by inherently inconsistent policies, occasional receptivity to U.S. pressures, and chronic drive to mend relations with Saudi Arabia.

In any case, recent military developments show that Syrian insurgents have become increasingly dependent on state supporters for their logistics. Gone are the days when rebels could storm lightly defended regime positions with assault rifles and a few RPGs. The retreat of loyalist forces on heavily fortified bases last winter has required a major quantitative and qualitative increase in the opposition's armament. This is something only foreign governments, not jihadi utopians, can offer. Given Saudi Arabia's apparent determination to lead the way in that respect, this situation will probably continue to favor mainstream insurgents over their radical brothers in arms in the foreseeable future.

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Welcome to the Syrian jihad

By Marc Lynch, June 6, 2013

In a sermon on Friday, Islamist superstar theologian Yusuf al-Qaradawi called on all Muslims to launch “a jihad in Syria against Bashar al-Assad and Hezbollah, which are killing Sunnis and Christians and Kurds.”

Qaradawi declared that participation in a Syrian jihad was an individual obligation on every Muslim. He denounced Hezbollah, referring to it as “the party of Satan” and saying that it “want[s] continued massacres to kill Sunnis.” And he pushed deeper into sectarian hatred, labeling the Alawite sect, to which Assad belongs, as “worse infidels than Jews or Christians.”

What makes Qaradawi’s sectarian diatribe so disturbing is not that it represents some radical, new expression of extremism. It is that in today’s Arab world, there is nothing particularly distinctive about his comments at all. For many months, Arab and Muslim figures of all stripes have been loudly calling for support to the predominantly Sunni Syrian rebels, as have many Arab governments (and the United States and its allies, of course). The Muslim Brotherhood’s branches have strongly supported the Syrian opposition — acquiring too much power along the way, in the minds of some. Egyptian Salafis have described providing arms and funds to the Syrian rebels as “a form of worship” and killing Assad as a religious obligation. As the killing and destruction has escalated, such support for Syria’s rebels has rapidly morphed into extreme anti-Shiite and anti-Alawi rhetoric.

That’s the real problem with Qaradawi’s sectarian-inflected calls for a Syrian jihad. It reflects his well-honed calculation that, given the current Arab public mood, he will do better by joining the herd rather than trying to steer or stop its momentum. That hasn’t always been Qaradawi’s calling card: In January 2007, for example, he tried to use his influence to rein in spiraling sectarian rage following the execution of Saddam Hussein. At that time, Qaradawi was only weeks past a controversial appearance at a Doha

conference on Sunni-Shiite relations, in which he had made a number of controversial remarks viewed by many as overly provocative toward the Shiite. But at that crucial moment, Qaradawi invited former Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani on Al Jazeera to push back against the rabid sectarianism then roiling the Middle East.

That’s just one example of how Qaradawi has tacked back and forth amidst the major Sunni-Shiite controversies of the last decade. He has provoked controversy — but also played a mediating role when tensions reached dangerous levels. In the mid-2000s, for instance, he strongly supported the Iraqi resistance to U.S. occupation, but then sharply denounced al Qaeda in Iraq chief Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s attacks on Iraqi Shiites.

In September 2008, he sparked a major firestorm when he warned against Shiite proselytization in Sunni areas. It was not only Tehran that hotly criticized him; leaders of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, usually supportive Islamist intellectuals, and those who feared that sectarian attacks might weaken Hezbollah’s appeal and the “resistance” axis also objected. By the next month, Qaradawi took a more moderate tone: He described his warnings against the spread of Shiism as “a kind of preemptive action to prevent war taking place in the future among the followers of the same religion.” He then spearheaded a statement that denounced sectarian killing and calling for the protection of minorities, which attracted the signatures of both leading Saudi Islamists and Shiite figures. This time, however, he shows no signs of being prepared to hit the brakes.

Qaradawi has long been described as among the most influential clerics in the Sunni world. A savvy political opportunist, he has long been one of the best barometers for the mood of a major swathe of the Arab mainstream, uncannily attuned to shifts in the political mood. He cleverly triangulated Arab politics, adopting populist

positions on foreign policy while pushing for democratic reforms across the region and advancing a “centrist” Islamist ideology. In recent years, the Egyptian-born cleric has strongly supported most of the Arab uprisings, including a controversial late February 2011 appeal to Libya’s army to kill Muammar al-Qaddafi. In Egypt, he was welcomed the Friday following Hosni Mubarak’s fall to lead prayer and deliver a pro-revolutionary speech in Tahrir. But he disappointed many observers by describing Bahrain’s uprising as “sectarian,” in line with the Arab Gulf country’s collective stance intended to delegitimize it.

Qaradawi’s influence and political stances naturally brought him intense criticism, not only from anti-Islamist opponents and the West, but also from rivals for Islamic authority and influence. The Saudi media has been particularly critical over the years, delighting in attacking him for “political fraud or exploitation of religion,” using him as a proxy for Riyadh’s complaints with Qatar or the Muslim Brotherhood.

Team Saudi is now celebrating Qaradawi’s capitulation to its own anti-Hezbollah, anti-Shiite prejudices. No words could have been sweeter to Qaradawi’s Saudi critics than his recent reversal on Hezbollah: “I defended the so-called Nasrallah and his party, the party of tyranny ... in front of clerics in Saudi Arabia. It seems that the clerics of Saudi Arabia were more mature than me.”

But Qaradawi’s alignment with the Saudi position has less to do with his theology or his personal views on the Shiites than with his calculation of regional political trends. The Western debate over whether or not he was “moderate” always missed the point: Qaradawi’s strategy and thought have always been about defining and shaping the mainstream. His core doctrine of *wasatiyya* was always better understood as “centrism” than as “moderation” (whatever that might mean). Before the uprisings, Qaradawi’s perch on Al Jazeera and his pioneering Internet presence gave him a massively influential public presence, while his association with the broad Muslim Brotherhood trend gave some degree of organizational weight behind

his opinions. And like it or not, his broad themes — such as support for “resistance” from Palestine to Iraq, criticism of al Qaeda, calls for democracy, denunciations of most Arab regimes, and conservative social values — generally seemed to reflect mainstream Arab political views.

But many of the factors that once made him so influential have now lost some of their luster. Like Al Jazeera, Qaradawi’s stances now seem to more closely follow Qatari foreign policy, and his influence has waned along with his host station and Qatar itself, which has experienced a regional backlash. The Muslim Brotherhood has become a far more polarizing actor throughout the region, particularly due to its dismal performance in Egypt’s transition. And the Arab mainstream has divided dramatically not only over Syria — but also over democracy, internal politics, and so much more.

Qaradawi now finds himself speaking to a narrower, more partisan audience. What does it say about his influence that his preferred candidate in Egypt’s presidential election, the former Muslim Brotherhood leader and Islamist reformist Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh, won less than 20 percent of the vote?

Qaradawi can no longer claim to speak to a broadly unified Arab public because such a creature no longer exists. Indeed, it is worth asking whether anyone will again occupy his previously central position: The proliferation of media outlets and assertive new voices that define the new Arab public sphere tend to undermine any efforts to claim the center ground. So do the political polarization and the increasingly fierce power struggles that dominate regional politics. It just may be that nobody can fill Qaradawi’s old shoes — not even Qaradawi.

All of this makes the Islamist cleric’s latest intervention even more profoundly depressing. Qaradawi has opted to join the bandwagon rather than try to pull Sunni-Shiite relations back toward coexistence. He clearly calculates that anti-Shiite sectarianism in support of the Syrian insurgency is both strategically useful and a political

winner. And those in the Gulf and in the West eager for any opportunity to hurt Iran seem happy to go along.

With the decentralization of political authority and the likelihood of a long Syrian civil war, expect the competition among “Sunnis” to adopt the most extreme stances to accelerate. By the time more responsible figures realize

the destructive forces they’ve unleashed — or Qaradawi attempts his standard pivot toward reconciliation — it may be too late.

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Lebanon confronts civil war

By Randa Slim, August 27, 2013

Twin car bombs exploded outside packed mosques in Tripoli killing at least 47 people and wounding hundreds. This horrific attack came on the heels of a car bomb in Beirut’s southern suburbs on August 15 that killed 27 people and wounded more than 300. Lebanese are more fearful than ever that their country is being dragged into yet another civil war. A return to all-out civil war remains unlikely, but the prospects for stability and security in Lebanon have never been dimmer.

Alarmist messages have sounded furiously in recent days. Lebanon’s Minister of Interior Marwan Charbel recently warned of the danger of partition as religious leaders in Tripoli called for establishing vigilante groups to protect their neighborhoods and streets. Resident of Beirut’s southern suburbs, considered a Hezbollah stronghold, are now subject to a daily search of their cars at checkpoints manned by Hezbollah men, every time they exit from or return to their homes. There is fear of more explosions in the near future that could drag the country into an irreversible cycle of tit-for-tat retaliatory violence.

This violence occurs in the midst of a five-month-old political crisis that has left Lebanon in the hands of a caretaker cabinet since Najib Mikati, the former prime

minister, resigned after his divided cabinet failed to approve a commission to oversee parliamentary elections planned for June. Lebanon’s fragile state institutions have historically failed to contain and negotiate political conflicts; political communities that are organized around religion and sect; and the absence of a national consensus over Lebanon’s political identity. The regional competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and the surging war next door in Syria, have put unprecedented strains on these already struggling institutions.

The absence of a national consensus over Lebanese sovereignty looms large. In the mid-1970s, the absence of a national consensus about the Palestinian Liberation Organization’s (PLO) military presence in Lebanon was one of many factors that pushed Lebanon into a 15-year civil war. Today, there is no national consensus about Hezbollah’s weapons. In the 1970s, a majority of Christians saw in the PLO military arsenal an existential threat. Today, a majority of Sunnis consider Hezbollah’s military arsenal an existential threat. No matter how many public speeches Hezbollah’s Secretary General Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah makes touting Hezbollah’s resistance achievements in defending Lebanon and deterring Israeli aggression, he has yet to make a breakthrough in the wall

of fear and suspicion through which the great majority of Lebanese Sunnis now view Hezbollah's weapons.

Lebanon has been and remains an arena where regional struggles are played out. It makes little sense to separate out the domestic from the regional calculations of most local players. Take the impasse facing the formation of a new cabinet. Hezbollah circles blame the long delay on a Saudi veto placed on Hezbollah participation in the cabinet. Pro-Saudi March 14 circles blame the impasse on Hezbollah's reluctance to give up power at a time it is involved militarily in Syria at the behest of the Iranian regime. Five months later, Lebanon remains without a government at one of the most trying times in its history.

Add to this mix a deep Sunni-Shiite split over the war in Syria. Hezbollah's political and military support for the Syrian regime has antagonized the great majority of Lebanon's Sunnis who identify with the rebels' cause. Some followers of the Sunni Salafi groups are fighting alongside the rebel groups. For Hezbollah, the war in Syria is the first line of defense against a Saudi-U.S.-Israeli led project to crush them. For them, it is an existential struggle. For Lebanon's Sunni community, the fight in Syria is about reversing the political tide inside Lebanon in their favor. Bashar al-Assad's defeat in Syria will translate into a Hezbollah defeat in Lebanon. Since the assassination of Rafik Hariri on February 14, 2005 Lebanese Sunnis have felt their political prominence undermined by the rise of Hezbollah's political fortunes. The forced collapse of the last cabinet headed by Saad Hariri in January 2011 cemented these beliefs and contributed to a growing sense of alienation between the Sunni community and state institutions which many now feel are beholden to Hezbollah.

The Syrian conflict is testing the Lebanese parties' respective fears and beliefs: the Christians' existential angst of being a minority in a sea of Muslims (not reassuring given what is happening to Christians in Iraq, Syria, and Egypt); the Sunnis' long-held belief that the leadership arc in the Levant has always been Sunni and that today's Shiite arc is a historical aberration that must be corrected;

and the Shiites' historical feelings of social injustice and political marginalization along with their firm conviction that this is their time to redress historical injustice. Today, these fears and beliefs color the lenses through which these communities perceive each other.

Civil war a la 1975 is still unlikely primarily because of the vast imbalance between Hezbollah's military arsenal on one hand and the firepower at the disposal of all its political opponents combined on the other. Hezbollah has little desire to alter the political status quo. It wants to avoid Sunni-Shiite violence in Lebanon. It has kept its base under tight control and will continue to do so. No Sunni leader in the opposite camp wants to engage at this point in a military confrontation with Hezbollah, which he knows he will lose. The emerging Salafi leadership has yet to develop a mass following inside the Sunni community. It remains geographically limited to northern Lebanon and has yet to develop a compelling narrative that appeals to the urban Sunnis. The Sunni business class, which continues to be the political tempo setter for the community writ large, is deeply suspicious of Salafi groups and has yet to invest in the formation and training of Sunni militia groups for self-defense purposes.

The Palestinian groups in Lebanon have officially opted to stay out of the intra-Lebanese fights. Recently, Lebanese authorities accused two Palestinians, who are affiliated with Hamas, of firing rockets at the southern suburbs of Beirut. The recent incidents in Abra in southern Lebanon in which Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir, a Salafi preacher, and his followers fought the Lebanese army, point to a worrying trend. Some Syrian refugees joined Assir's ranks. Whether there is the making of a "guns-for-hire" phenomenon is too early to tell. So far, more than 70 percent of Syrian refugees in Lebanon are women and young children. However, as the conflict in Syria protracts, battle-hardened Syrian men might join their families in Lebanon and join the ranks of the Salafi groups especially in Tripoli, if the latter have the funds to hire their services. Operationally, this will be a long-term process that will take a few years in the making.

While civil war is unlikely, Sunni-Shiite tensions will

continue to deepen. Hezbollah and Future Movement leaders are locked in mutually exclusive positions on key issues that divide them, including the conflict in Syria and Hezbollah weapons. There are no intersection points between their respective positions on these two issues on which a third party could build common ground. Second, neither side benefits from concession-making. Hezbollah knows the opposing camp is no match and doesn't see any benefit from making concessions at this point. To the contrary, the Future Movement benefits from being non-compromising in dealing with Hezbollah at a time when doing so will keep it from losing ground to Salafi preachers. Third, there is no local or regional mediator that could step in between these two parties, a practice on which Lebanese politicians have often relied in the past in solving their internal conflicts. Lebanon's Christian community is internally divided and unable to play a mediating role between Sunnis and Shiites as the Kurds have sometimes done in Iraq.

In the past, regional mediators were instrumental in assisting Lebanese parties negotiate their internal conflicts: Saudis and Syrians in the 1980s and Qataris in 2008.

But today, regional players including the Saudis and the Iranians are keener on pressing for an advantage than at seeking consensus.

A Syria that is unstable and at war with itself for many years to come presents Lebanon with a new set of challenges. Syria's diminishing influence over Lebanese affairs has created a political vacuum that has yet to be claimed by any of the domestic actors. Hezbollah stands the best chance of claiming that space. Yet it has chosen not to do so partly because of its primary focus on the military fight in Syria and partly because governing remains a far distant second priority for the party leadership. A weakened Syrian regime creates a regional vacuum that will be contested by regional players including Saudi Arabia and Iran. Part of that contest will play itself out in Lebanon as each side seeks to bolster the positions of their respective proxies in their bid to strengthen their regional hegemony.

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Iraq's sectarian inheritance

By Fanar Haddad, March 26, 2013

cases, the deluge of Iraq-10-years-on commentary seems to be preoccupied with apportioning blame and delving into questions that cannot but deteriorate into adolescent moralizing or ideological one-upmanship such as “was it worth it?” Or “was it right to invade?” The subject of “sectarianism” (here identified with the Sunni-Shiite divide), a morally charged and confused one at the best of times, has featured prominently in these polemics. This is particularly unfortunate given that a subject as

complex and as multi-layered as sectarian identity cannot be reduced to the confines of an ill-conceived U.S. military adventure in 2003.

Since the invasion, many people in Iraq and beyond, repulsed by the ugly manifestations of sectarian entrenchment and ultimately sectarian violence have tried to find someone to blame. Such efforts have often been linked to views regarding the war: blame “sectarianism” on

the Americans and their partners if you were against the war and blame it on any and everyone else, not least Arab Iraqis, if you were for it. However, whilst it is undoubtedly a momentous turning point in the story of sectarian relations, 2003 is by no means the first chapter. Suggesting that 2003 marks the definitive line between a sectarian and a non-sectarian Iraq is as misleading a view as one insisting on viewing sectarian entrenchment as the status quo ad infinitum of Iraqi society.

The invasion created otherwise avoidable conditions in which sectarian identity took center political stage and nurtured sectarian imaginations, fears, and suspicions by unchaining and inflaming *already extant* fissures in Iraqi society as shaped by recent history. Coalition authorities, Iraqi political elites, regional actors, elements of Iraqi society, pre-2003 history, and post-2003 events all conspired, wittingly or not, to create the perfect sectarian storm from which Iraq and indeed the region seem unable to now escape. In other words, soothing though it might be, attempts to assign a monopoly of blame to anyone will fail to stand up to historical and socio-political facts.

The pre-2003 roots of sectarian entrenchment and the pre-war roots of many of the new Iraq's other ills have remained relatively understudied. Perhaps the most crucial example of this relates to pre-war Iraqi views toward the Baath Party; after all, it was upon such views that the failed attempts at post-2003 nation-building were based. To begin with, the Baath was not a "Sunni regime" anymore than today's political order is a Shiite one. Nevertheless, under both regimes, the political culture in place resulted in varying measures of sectarian discrimination whether indirectly, for example through the conflation of tribalism or regionalism with politics, or directly, such as through the state's policies toward sectarian symbolism and the expression of sectarian identity. This has resulted in distinct Shiite and Sunni positions regarding the pre and post-2003 orders and whilst these obviously do not encompass every Sunni and Shiite they are nevertheless coherent and salient enough to act as divisive political mobilizers.

Regarding regime change, it was the existence of such positions that made sectarian entrenchment all the more likely: whether based in reality or perception, the profound sense of Shiite victimhood under Saddam Hussein meant that Shiites, generally speaking, regarded the downfall of the Baath as *their* salvation as much as it was Iraq's. Conversely, there was no element of sub-national communal identity in whatever desire existed amongst Sunnis to be rid of Saddam Hussein and, even if glad to see his regime's demise, it was hardly likely for them to subscribe to a celebration so heavily tinged with someone else's mythology of victimhood and entitlement. Thus a divergence in historical memories regarding the Baath manifested itself as a divergence in views toward the downfall of the regime, the occupation, and the legitimacy of the post-2003 order. This is but one example of issues predating regime change that meant that the post-2003 era was perhaps always likely to carry sectarian overtones.

Nowhere were these dynamics more apparent or more consequential than amongst the former Iraqi opposition. Whilst we can quite justifiably criticize the coalition authorities for unduly emphasizing the relevance of Iraqi sectarian identities it is apparent that their views were heavily influenced by their prime Iraqi interlocutors, namely the Iraqi opposition. Throughout the sanctions era, when the Iraqi opposition-industry gained momentum, the centrality of ethno-sectarian identity in the opposition's efforts was plainly obvious. In fact, as Hayder al-Khoei has pointed out, the idea of basing politics on ethno-sectarian quotas was a pre-2003 invention of the Iraqi opposition dating as far back as 1992. The opposition's obsession with communal identity was understandable given that so many important factions were based along communal lines: many significant groupings were in essence ethnic or sectarian advocacy groups. Come 2003, it was such visions and readings of Iraqi history, so heavily enmeshed with feelings of unique communal victimhood upon which historical wrongs were to be righted, that were to be privileged by the coalition and ultimately by the gifts of office. In such a climate, that in 2003 Sunni Arabs had neither a significant sense of themselves as a differentiated group nor a myth of unique communal victimhood made

their feelings of fear and encirclement all but inevitable particularly given that the newly empowered ethnic and sectarian political elites did little to assuage these fears.

As is well known, not all of the regime change's Iraqi architects and returning political exiles were ethno-sectarian advocates. However, even these (for want of a better word) secular oppositionists carried a vision of Iraq that, particularly when coupled with their more religious-oriented counterparts, served to broaden ethno-sectarian differences. Their almost pathological demonization of the Baath and of Saddam, even if carried out without an overt ethno-sectarian bias, neatly complemented ethnic and sectarian activists' understandings of recent Iraqi history. Their working assumption prior to 2003 was that the Iraqi people were overwhelmingly in agreement as to what the Baath era signified; with hindsight we can see how dangerous such assumptions have proven as exemplified by the continuing controversies surrounding de-Baathification 10 years after the demise of the Baath. Whilst the exiles expected a grateful people to be united in joy by their liberation from tyranny, what they found instead were a people so divided in their memory of the Baath that they had yet to definitively agree on the identity of those found in the mass graves.

Within Iraq, the decade or so preceding regime change similarly aided, though by no means assured, the emergence of communal-based politics after 2003. Feelings of unique sectarian victimhood were not the preserve of the political opposition abroad but were also mirrored amongst a significant segment of society within Iraq. This was reflected in the near-immediate outpouring of expressions of Shiite identity after the fall of the Baath and the eventual electoral failure of secular forces in the new Iraq's elections. Heightened religious self-perception — inescapably leading to heightened sectarian self-perception — was very much a feature of the sanctions-era. In 2003 this was perhaps best illustrated by the Sadrist phenomena that came as a rude awakening to the coalition and to the exiles who had scarcely been aware of its existence in Saddam's Iraq. The Sadrist phenomena also underlined the problem of religious and sectarian identities as vehicles

for national politics: as nationalistic as the Sadrists may be, theirs is a distinctly Shiite version of Iraqi nationalism that leaves little chance for genuine cross-sectarian participation.

Another sanctions-era development that was to flourish after 2003 was the spread of Salafism. The extent of its spread in the last decade of Baathist Iraq is difficult to assess. However, as the recent scholarship of Joseph Sassoon shows, there can be no doubt as to its existence in numbers considerable enough to elicit the regime's concern. Furthermore, it stands to reason that Iraqi Salafi extremists did not emerge out of thin air in 2003 but were active and spreading their doctrines in pre-2003 Iraq. One such example is Taha al Dulaimi; since 2003 he has emerged as one of the more famous and most virulent of anti-Shiite Iraqi Salafi extremists. Dulaimi's website features footage of his sermons from sanctions era Iraq that provides us with a rare glimpse into the otherwise obscured world of pre-war extremist Iraqi Salafism. It is perhaps more than mere coincidence that the packed mosque in which he preached his unabashedly anti-Shiite doctrines in the 1990's was in Mahmoudiya — one of the towns in the "Triangle of Death," an area that until recently was a byword for anti-Shiite violence.

The above is by no means a comprehensive account of the pre-war roots of the new Iraq's sectarian entrenchment; nor does it negate or excuse the role of foreign powers, regional dynamics, poor governance, and economic issues in the rise of sectarian politics after 2003. It is a brief illustration of some of the pre-war factors that made sectarian identity a likely feature of the post-2003 era. Or put another way, it is an attempt to shed light on the preexistence of various shades of sectarian entrenchment — not necessarily equating to sectarian hatred — and the existence in pre-war Iraq of divergent sectarian imaginings of what Iraq and Iraqi history meant. It was these visions, imaginings — fantasies even — of Iraqis and others that some actors tried to realize in the chaos following regime change. Their perhaps inevitable collision recalls Milan Kundera's lament that, "... history is terrible because it so often ends up a playground for the immature

... a playground for easily roused mobs of children whose simulated passions and simplistic poses suddenly metamorphose into a catastrophically real reality.”

Perhaps the most noticeable feature of the examples given above is the divergence of historical memory. Who should Iraqis unite against? Saddam, the Baath, Iran, Israel, the occupation, terror, the “Safavids” or the “Wahhabis?” And what should they unite for beyond an as yet undefined “Iraq?” To clarify, which symbols, events, tragedies or triumphs from Iraqi history resonate with enough Iraqis to be able to embody “Iraq” and act as a rallying call? The exiles and many a supporter of regime change may have expected the Saddam era to be the symbol that unites Iraqis in a mixture of grief and relief. However, whilst the horrors of the Saddam era had the potential to achieve just that, the manner in which this idea was promoted proved divisive.

Where to for an Iraqi nationalism lacking *in even the prerequisite symbolic props of modern nationalism* such as an agreed upon flag or national anthem? Should Iraqis reach into the Baathi past in their search for unifying symbols or should they construct nationalist symbols from the carnage of the past 10 years? Should a monument honor the mass graves or the fallen in Fallujah? How will future generations deal with the post-war violence and should it be labeled terror or resistance? Will a convenient narrative of unity emerge regarding the civil war or will

competing sectarian martyrologies continue to dominate the memory of those horrendous years?

These are not my abstract musings; rather, they are real and politically salient divisions in Iraqi historical memory that are evident in Iraqi discourse today and that, unless resolved, will continue to hinder a symbolically coherent Iraqi nationalism from emerging. There is no shortage of potentially pan-Iraqi symbols through which Arab Iraqis’ very real desire for an all-embracing nationalism can be given expression. However, this potential will remain out of reach as long as the past continues to be used to validate competing sectarian victimhoods today. Given the pull of regional dynamics and the weight of sectarian martyrologies on popular perceptions of recent Iraqi history, it is uncertain when, if ever, competing victimhoods in Iraq will be replaced by a more inclusive imagining of the past that recognizes the sufferings and culpabilities of all and that can finally give substance to an otherwise hollow nationalism. Until then, to paraphrase James Joyce, it seems that History is a nightmare from which Iraq is struggling to awake.

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Not an Iraqi civil war

By Douglas A. Ollivant, July 16, 2013

Iraq is, quite simply, on the receiving end of a major al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) offensive. AQI remains one of the most capable of the al Qaeda affiliates or regional franchises. As a percentage of the population, Iraq has lost more of its citizens to al Qaeda explosives in each of the past three months than the United States did on September 11, 2001, according to AFP statistics, which show there were more than 400 casualties in each month of April, May, and June. The AQI offensive targets both the Shiite populace in general and Sunni moderates in particular. One would think that the reaction of the United States, despite its desire to forget all things Iraq, would at least be one of deep sympathy.

Instead, the reaction of the U.S. political class has been to bemoan “sectarian violence” and to conflate the attacks with grievances by the Sunni minority against their Shiite-dominated government. Several commentators have taken the occasion to actually blame the al Qaeda violence on the policies of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, dissatisfaction with whom is reflected in large scale in long-term Sunni protests in Anbar and elsewhere. Such comparisons and diagnoses reflect a serious misunderstanding of the situation. The comparisons to the Iraqi civil war that peaked in 2006 and 2007 may seem appropriate if looking at the raw numbers. However, when one pushes another level down and realizes this is not two communities fighting each other (as did occur in the civil war) but instead a nihilist al Qaeda franchise attacking both the Shiite community randomly and the Sunni community strategically, the resemblance quickly fades. As for the attacks on Maliki, these echo those who blamed the United States’s Middle East policies for the 9-11 attacks. Whatever the faults of Maliki’s policies, Iraqis are not responding with sectarian violence nor plunging toward civil war. The Iraqi casualties are simply more victims of al Qaeda terrorism.

To be sure, however, AQI is successfully exploiting Iraq’s

weak security posture. Its success is rooted in four factors. First, upon the departure of the United States, large numbers of “security detainees” — suspected or confirmed terrorists against whom there was no legally sufficient case file — were released into the Iraqi populace. Among them were large numbers of low and mid-level AQI leaders, who have since injected renewed energy into the organization. Further, the Iraqis continue to release likely terrorists in order to appease the Sunni community. Second, the Iraqi security forces simply do not have the precision intelligence capability necessary to root out the bomb-making networks that the U.S. military employed prior to its withdrawal. We should remember that in the early days of the Iraq invasion and occupation, the United States had no such capability either, and it is unreasonable to expect the Iraqis to develop their own without significant growing pains — particularly given the relative youth of their security service institutions. Third, while it is hard to estimate the resources that are now flowing to AQI via their presence in Syria (the AQI “emir,” Abu Baqr al Baghdadi, is widely reported to have relocated to Northern Syria, we can assume that they are significant. The chaos in Syria is spilling into Iraq through a more capable AQI, armed with superior weaponry, with better training, and with more money for recruiting and operations. Finally, a minority of Iraq’s Sunni population is giving aid and succor to this nihilistic terrorist group, perhaps driven by dissatisfaction with the Baghdad government. That they would translate their political frustrations into attacks on innocent civilians is both regrettable and disturbing.

But save for this sanctuary, the violence is largely independent of the ongoing Iraqi Sunni protests, now in their seventh month. While the protests may have begun with legitimate grievances, the movements have now been largely hijacked by the Salafist and Baathist elements in Sunni society. These protests have two root causes. First, the Sunni population resents the blunt and indiscriminate anti-terrorism tactics that the Government of Iraq (GoI)

uses in the absence of a precision capability. The use of these tactics is regrettable, but, short of alternatives, one must ask what the GoI could do otherwise. The Iraqi Government would love to have back the capabilities it enjoyed while the United States was embedded in its security agencies. With the United States gone, it is left using a less refined approach that strongly resembles the actions of the U.S. Army during the early years of the occupation. It will still be years before equipment, training, and experience will begin to provide the necessary tools for it to better overcome the deadly enemies that tear at the fabric of Iraq. In the meantime, the government's constituents are, reasonably, demanding that something be done, particularly given the high recent death rates from car bombings.

Another, more fundamental cause of the protests is a lack of acceptance by the Sunni population, and its leadership, of its minority status in the new Iraq. Part of this is demographic ignorance or deception. The spokesman for the ongoing Ramadi protests has asserted, in public debates, that Arab Sunnis constitute over 50 percent of the Iraqi population. In the absence of a recent census, estimates of the Arab Sunni population of Iraq range from 20 to 25 percent.

But another, darker factor is deep Sunni sectarianism amongst some key leaders. Some more charitable Sunni speakers refer to the Shiites as Iran's pawns. But deeply offensive sectarian terms for the Shiites — the regional equivalent of racial epithets — are also being used at the protest sites. In some ways, the Sunni protests have less the character of the "Occupy" movement or even Arab Spring, and are being manipulated to have more the flavor of a supremacist movement. This combination of demographic error and racist-like sectarian bigotry is hijacking the common democratic expression of the average demonstrators and introducing a new dangerous and disturbing combination, as the reactionary former elite tries to regain the status it once held under Saddam's Baath Party. Indeed, the armed militia of the former Baathists, the Naqshabandi movement, or JRTN, is widely viewed to control several of the protest sites (including the Hawija

camp where the abortive **raid by security forces** to arrest JRTN militants occurred. And beneath the manipulation of opportunistic leadership, the average Sunni citizens of Iraq who have largely coexisted peacefully with their Shiite countrymen, are caught in the middle.

Again, the tragedy in Syria acts as an accelerant of violence and chaos, as that conflict has now also taken on a significant sectarian character. The mixture of real grievances in Syria with Salafist ideology, AQI nihilism, and the surfacing of the basest sectarian hatreds creates a toxic mix, which is now infecting — to an extent — much of the region.

The actions of the Maliki government in trying to solve these two conflated issues have produced some well-intentioned moves and other miscalculations, none of which are as effective as could be hoped. Maliki has, in cooperation with the (Sunni) Arab Iraqiya party of Saleh Mutlaq, attempted to create a package of reforms addressing de-Baathification and pensions for some of Saddam Hussein's paramilitary units. Regrettably, the prospects for this compromise package are uncertain, as the more hardline Sunnis find that it does not go far enough, while the more extremist Shiite parties (which commentators often ignore when suggesting Maliki's removal) have no taste for reforming de-Baathification in any form, let alone pensioning what they view as Saddam's personal army, responsible for many regime abuses. The most disturbing sign for long-term peace in Iraq is the apparent electoral punishment (in the recent provincial elections) of both Mutlaq's Arab Iraqiya and Maliki's State of Law parties for attempting to reach a compromise.

In addition, it appears that the prime minister is beginning to shake up the security services. Whether this has the desired systemic effect in tightening security or simply rearranges the chairs has yet to be seen. More encouraging is the advocacy of the Ministry of Interior (MOI) Inspector General Akil al-Turehi that helped jail the British seller of infamous "explosive detection wands" on charges of fraud. It will be interesting to observe whether other MOI officials (Turehi was recently named the governor

of Karbala) can continue to trace the people responsible for the fraud on the Iraqi side — not to mention whether a real detection capability can be acquired. Other military capabilities — including a wide array of sensors — should arrive in the coming year, both through the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) system and direct procurement by the Iraqi government. These capabilities represent perhaps the best hope to blunt AQI successes.

In short, cooler heads appear to be prevailing. Iraq is nowhere near the brink of civil war — primarily because the Sunni have so much to lose. Sunni elites distinctly recall finding this out the hard way in the civil war of 2006 to 2007. The lethal success of the AQI terror campaign admittedly hints at the reappearance of war, but again, on closer examination this violence is almost exclusively one-sided. The Shiite militias that fought (and won) the last civil war have not — at least yet — rearmed or remobilized.

Iraq continues to be a weak state and immature, transitional democracy and the effect of the AQI offensive on its nascent capabilities is not insignificant. Many things could still go wrong — and some almost certainly will. But the smart bet continues to be on Iraq holding together — both because it has the resources to avoid civil war, and because it has no desire to revisit the terror that would involve.

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