



# THE MYTHOLOGY OF THE SECTARIAN MIDDLE EAST

**Ussama Makdisi, Ph.D.**

Professor of History and Arab-American Educational Foundation Chair  
in Arab Studies, Department of History, Rice University

February 2017

© 2017 by Ussama Makdisi, Ph.D.

This material may be quoted or reproduced without prior permission, provided appropriate credit is given to the author and the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy.

Wherever feasible, papers are reviewed by outside experts before they are released. However, the research and views expressed in this paper are those of the individual researcher(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy.

Ussama Makdisi, Ph.D.  
“The Mythology of the Sectarian Middle East”

The idea of a “sectarian” Middle East causes far more obfuscation than illumination. Sectarianism is often characterized as the violent and illiberal manifestation of competing, age-old antagonistic religious identities in the region. This characterization is rooted in a static, one-dimensional understanding of identity, so that being Sunni and Shi‘i, for example, are assumed to be constants etched into the fabric of the past.<sup>1</sup> Communal identities, however, have always represented dynamic and highly contextual understandings of self and other. They have been riven by innumerable schisms, and have also undergone repeated redefinitions throughout their long histories. Thus, the invocation of sectarianism as a category of analysis for understanding the Middle East misleads; it conflates a religious identification with a political one, and it ignores the kinship, class, and national and regional networks within which sectarian self-expression has invariably been enmeshed.

The historian Bruce Masters, for example, insists that “as long as religion lay at the heart of each individual’s worldview, the potential for society to fracture along sectarian lines remained.”<sup>2</sup> Between the potentiality for sectarian violence and its actuality in the modern Middle East, however, lies a series of contingent, constrained and fateful choices, moments, and turning points. These contingences have almost always involved an array of foreign and domestic interests and actors working in tandem. The notion, therefore, that the inhabitants of the Middle East live in peculiar “sectarian” societies or inhabit “sectarian” mental worlds puts the cart before the horse. It naturalizes sectarian political culture rather than interprets it critically.

More pointedly, assumptions about a deep sectarianism ignore the degree to which, for example, Lebanon’s infamous sectarian polity, whereby public office is parceled out along sectarian lines, is a modern imperial and elitist innovation. Inaugurated in 1861 as a sign of Ottoman modernization and through a joint Ottoman-European protocol, political sectarianism was consolidated in the new post-Ottoman Lebanese state under French colonialism.<sup>3</sup> Most of all, to assume sectarianism exists as an unvarying and age-old historic truth begs the question as to why “sectarianism” was first identified as a modern problem in the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire and in the post-Ottoman Middle East at exactly the moment when the questions of equality, coexistence, citizenship, imperialism, and nationalism became salient around a European-dominated world.

\*\*\*

---

<sup>1</sup> A case of this is Vali Nasr’s *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997). Perhaps more understandable, but nevertheless problematic, is the assertion by the prominent Shi‘i Lebanese cleric Hani Fahs that people revert to their “primary” identities in times of state weakness, as cited in Geneive Abdo, “The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi‘a-Sunni Divide,” Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., 2013, 4.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Masters, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World: The Roots of Sectarianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 40.

<sup>3</sup> Ussama Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Mahdi ‘Amil, *Fi al-dawla al-ta’ifiyya* (Beirut: Dar al-Farabi, 2003 [1986]).

The nineteenth century gave birth to a global idea of secular equality that had adherents and detractors. In no multireligious, multiethnic, or multiracial society was the advent of political equality uncontested. Revolutionary France, after all, sought to re-impose slavery in Haiti after slaves there had liberated themselves. Likewise, the emancipation of enslaved blacks raised enormous controversy in the United States; the defense of slavery was at the heart of the bloody U.S. civil war. Jim Crow segregation of “separate but equal” was legalized across the U.S. South in the 1890s and was maintained until the mid-1950s. In Europe, modern racialized anti-Semitism followed the emancipation of Jews and found its most terrible expression in the Holocaust.

The Islamic Ottoman empire, for its part, struggled with the question of the political equality of non-Muslim subjects. Under enormous European pressure, the sultanate decreed a revolutionary equality between Muslims and non-Muslims in the mid-nineteenth century. This shift was met with resistance—often described by historians as “sectarian” because unprecedented anti-Christian riots occurred in Aleppo and Damascus in 1850 and 1860. Yet this political transformation of unequal subjects into supposedly equal citizens also produced the modern idea of “sectarian fanaticism” as an anachronism, and as the antithesis to “true” religion and civilization. Whereas the former was seen as undermining national unity, the latter were at the heart of national modernization projects in the late Ottoman Empire and in the post-Ottoman Middle East.

The concern with sectarianism in the modern Arab world thus does not simply indicate a political space that is contested by competing religious, ethnic, or other communities. It also presupposes a shared political space. In this sense, the rhetoric about “sectarianism” as insidious in the Middle East emerged as the alter ego of a putatively unifying nationalist discourse. Much like racism in the contemporary United States, sectarianism is a diagnosis that makes most sense when thought of in relation to its ideological antithesis. To identify and condemn racism in America, in other words, one presumably upholds an idea of equality and emancipation. To identify and condemn sectarianism in the Arab world, then, one presumably upholds an idea of unity and equality between (and among) Muslims and non-Muslims. For this precise reason, it was only in the early twentieth century in Lebanon that the Arabic term for sectarianism—*al-ta’ifiyya*—was coined as a negative term in relation to national unity.<sup>4</sup>

To my mind, therefore, sectarianism is far less an objective description of “real” fractures in a religiously diverse world, and far more a language about the nature of religious difference in the Middle East. Despite the well-documented history of religious violence in the United States, and the bewildering array of communal identities that have colored the fabric of American history, the term “sectarianism” is rarely used in scholarship about the United States. For most American academics, and for the American public more broadly, sectarianism remains a topic about other places and peoples. “Sectarianism” is a discourse that has been deployed and expressed by both Middle Eastern and Western nations, communities, and individuals to create and justify political and ideological frameworks in

---

<sup>4</sup> See Ussama Makdisi, *The Ecumenical Frame: Coexistence and Sectarianism in the Modern Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming).

the modern Middle East within which supposedly innate sectarian problems are contained, if not necessarily overcome.

\*\*\*

It would, of course, be absurd to insist that religion and religious differences are not salient features in the history of the Middle East. For centuries, the Ottoman Empire used religious categories to classify and discriminate against its vast and diverse subject population. The so-called “millet system” established ecclesiastical and communal autonomy for Greek Orthodox, Armenian, and Jewish subjects in the empire. Islamic law unquestionably distinguished and discriminated between Muslim and non-Muslim. The ruling Ottoman dynasty and its elites proclaimed themselves repeatedly to be defenders of Islam, and in a struggle against heretics and infidels.<sup>5</sup> One can, therefore, discuss sectarian outlooks, actions, and thoughts in the Middle East in a manner similar to how one would talk about racial (and racist) outlooks, actions, and thoughts in the United States. Yet just as American scholars have gone to great lengths to challenge the notion of singular, age-old racial identifications, whether black or white, so too should scholars of the Middle East reject the facile, monolithic, and ahistorical interpretations of sectarian identity so beloved by pundits, think tank “experts,” and politicians.

The term “sectarianism” is inherently elastic and ambiguous. Typically, the term is used to denote pervasive forms of prejudice, historic solidarities, the identification with a religious or ethnic community as if it were a political party, or the systems through which political, economic, and social claims are made in multireligious and multiethnic societies. The political scientist Arend Lijphart famously used the term “consociational democracy” to refer to the ability of elites to create stable political bargains across sectarian, confessional, or ethnic lines—such as the 1943 National Pact in Lebanon or the multi-member Swiss executive branch.<sup>6</sup> The term “sectarianism,” however, is also used to indicate the favoring of one group over another, whether in hiring practices, renting, job allocation, or the distribution of state resources—that is to say, behavior akin to racial discrimination and profiling. “Sectarianism” is also used to describe sentiments that propel strident communal mobilizations, intercommunal warfare, and genocidal violence perpetrated by one group against another. Finally, “sectarianism” can also be thought of as a colonial strategy of governance insofar as Britain, France, Israel, and the United States have routinely manipulated the religious and ethnic diversity of the region to suit their own imperial ends.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Evliyya Çelebi, *The Intimate Life of an Ottoman Statesman*, trans. Robert Dankoff (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> Arend Lijphart, “Consociational Democracy (1969),” in *Thinking About Democracy: Power Sharing and Majority Rule in Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2008), 25-42.

<sup>7</sup> See Omar Hesham AlShehabi, “Contested modernity: divided rule and the birth of sectarianism, nationalism, and absolutism in Bahrain,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (2016). DOI: 10.1080/13530194.2016.1185937; see also Laura Robson, *Colonialism and Christianity in Mandate Palestine* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011).

Virtually no group self-identifies as “sectarian.” Many individuals or groups, however, are characterized or labeled by others as being sectarian or acting in a sectarian manner. What does this stigmatization accomplish? It delineates a moral hierarchy in which certain groups and countries deem themselves to be superior to others and arrogate to themselves the responsibility and right to judge or intervene—or not intervene—in “sectarian” societies. It also legitimates particular, occasionally violent, courses of action in the face of an allegedly recalcitrant “sectarianism.” Within the Middle East, the invocation of the term has been intimately connected to the question of nationalism, state sovereignty, and national unity. In the West, “sectarianism” is closely connected to Western imperialism and to notions of European and American civilizational supremacy over a “sectarian” Middle East.

\*\*\*

Within the Arab world, the identification of “sectarianism” as a problem has evolved very much in tandem with the emergence of modern states. The origin of the Arabic term, as I have indicated, emerged out of political debates about the nature of the post-Ottoman Lebanese state. Consistently, prominent intellectuals of the twentieth-century Arab world— such as Amin Rihani, Sati’ al-Husari, Antun Saadeh, Constantine Zurayq, Zaki al-Arsuzi, Edmond Rabbath, Munif al-Razzaz, Ali al-Wardi, Hisham Sharabi, and Nasr Hamid Abu-Zeid—have all discussed sectarianism as a major internal impediment to modern development and sovereignty. A secret Arab society, which included Zurayq, was founded in Beirut in 1935 and developed branches in Syria, Palestine, Iraq, and Kuwait. It condemned “sectarian, racist, class, regional, tribal, or familial” solidarities that diluted and weakened “Arab solidarity.”<sup>8</sup>

Nationalist intellectuals, in other words, recognized real social and economic problems within their societies, including that of sectarian affiliation. Yet they also created a trope about sectarianism as a negative, reactionary, holdover from a pre-modern age. In the 1950s, Zurayq, who was deeply opposed to mixing religion and politics, inveighed against “sectarian fanaticism” in evocatively modernist terms. He regarded sectarianism to be a problem “cascading from the past into the present,” and thus as an anachronism “in the age of nationalisms, and indeed in the age of the atom and space.”<sup>9</sup> For him, sectarianism constituted the antithesis of an ideal of a secular, national modernizing state.

Even the Lebanese political elites, who created the first formal sectarian power-sharing government in the Arab world, accepted constitutionally that “political sectarianism” had to be a temporary measure (Article 95 of the Lebanese constitution). Proponents saw “political sectarianism” as a necessary evil until such time as the Lebanese people were able to cast off allegedly innate sectarian solidarities and embrace a modern secular Lebanese identity. Opponents saw “political sectarianism” as a disease bound to weaken, if not destroy, the national body politic. During the same mandate period, the great pan-Arab pedagogue

---

<sup>8</sup> Shafiq Jiha, *Al-haraka al-‘arabiyya al-siriyya (jama’t al-kitab al-ahmar) 1935-1945* (Beirut: Al-furat, 2004), 385.

<sup>9</sup> Constantine Zurayq, *Nahnu wa al-tarikh* (Beirut: Dar al-‘ilm lil-malayin, 1959), 213.

Sati' al-Husari established a secular national educational system in Iraq. He referred to his Iraqi detractors as sectarian. He believed that those who opposed his vision for a modern, secular Arab-nationalist Iraq under the Hashemite monarchy represented reactionary elements in society.

Politicized from its outset, the discourse of fighting sectarianism has inevitably been abused as the twentieth century progressed. The initial, genuine social and political criticism of sectarianism by intellectuals such as Zurayq and Husari may have been condescending toward those whom they labeled as sectarian, but it was part of a vision for remaking and modernizing Arab society. This ideal has been replaced by an increasingly empty rhetoric of anti-sectarianism. This rhetoric has become part of the arsenal of corrupt, anti-democratic, and oppressive political elites across the Middle East. Far from abolishing political sectarianism, for instance, Lebanese elites increasingly entrenched sectarian patronage networks within the state. They also, perversely, denounced "sectarianism." Arab leaders, in turn, used the alleged threat of sectarianism to crush dissent and consolidate power. During the Iraq-Iran war of the 1980s, Saddam Hussein claimed that the Iranians were sectarians who were trying to undermine Arab unity.<sup>10</sup> Saudi Arabia also mobilized sectarian discourse to crush incipient democratic potential during the so-called Arab Spring.<sup>11</sup> Egypt's current leader Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has repeatedly raised the specter of religious extremism to justify his extraordinary repression of Egyptian democracy.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, the evocation of the threat of "sectarianism" is often analogous to the way the word "terrorism" is used by modern states: not as an objective signifier of violence, but as an ideological signifier of a particular form of violence, invariably stripped of any meaningful context.

Despite this evident politicization and ideological framing, Arab understandings of "sectarianism" have often considered it to be both an internal and external problem. These interpretations have often directly or indirectly connected internal "sectarian," "tribal," and "feudal" obstacles to progress and development with the undeniable reality of Western interventionism in the region. Self-criticism, in short, does not preclude being anti-colonial or recognizing the inherent dangers of both domestic and foreign threats to national sovereignty. Throughout the twentieth century, citizens of the Middle East have been haunted not only by the possibility of internal fragmentation in their societies, but by the prospects of foreign manipulation of the region's religious and ethnic diversity.

These fears were not fantasies. Western powers have relentlessly interfered in and invaded the Middle East in the name of protecting "minorities," upholding "religious freedom," supporting colonial Zionism in Palestine, fighting "communism," promoting "democracy," or combatting "terrorism." Nevertheless, some Arab criticism focuses on foreign

---

<sup>10</sup> Dina Rizk Khoury, *Iraq in Wartime: Soldiering, Martyrdom and Remembrance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 65.

<sup>11</sup> Madawi al-Rasheed, "Sectarianism as Counter-Revolution: Saudi Responses to the Arab Spring," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 11 (2011): 513-526.

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, "Sisi calls for 'pre-emptive' measures to stop terrorism and extremist thoughts," *Ahram Online*, August 18, 2015. <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/138106/Egypt/Politics-/Sisi-calls-for-preemptive-measures-to-stop-terrori.aspx>. Accessed September 8, 2016.

imperialism without adequately accounting for the many internal contradictions and taboos that also contribute to the sectarian problem in the Middle East. To wit, a few years before the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the Egyptian historian Samir Murqus narrated a history of cynical Western exploitation of Arab Christians, including Egyptian Copts, to advance their imperialism in the region. His book was published with the endorsement of the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated judge and intellectual Tariq al-Bishri.<sup>13</sup> Al-Bishri's own massive apologetic compendium on Coptic-Muslim coexistence blamed virtually every Coptic-Muslim relations problem on British colonialism, without grappling with precolonial legacies produced over the course of centuries of Islamic ideological and legal supremacy.<sup>14</sup>

Too often, moreover, an anti-colonial sensibility overemphasizes the foreign dimensions of the sectarian problem in the Middle East. In August 2016, the Lebanese newspaper *Al-Akhbar* ran a front-page story with the headline "The Plague of Sectarianism: Made in USA," with an accompanying picture of then-U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's infamous visit to Lebanon in 2006. The article quoted extensively from Douglas Philipponne's slim 2008 master's thesis for the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School on how to defeat Hizbullah. Philipponne wrote that the best way to contain Hizbullah was not to assault it directly (as that would merely increase its support). Instead, he suggested that the "United States should disrupt Hezbollah's ability to conduct global operations by: exacerbating internal Lebanese sectarian conflict, working to establish a global coalition against Hezbollah as a designated terrorist organization, using an information campaign to portray Hezbollah as an international terror proxy for Iran, and by selectively and covertly killing or capturing Hezbollah's military leaders" (emphasis my own).<sup>15</sup> There is no proof that Philipponne's advice became policy—a point the *Al-Akhbar* article overlooks. There is, however, intimate knowledge in the region about various colonial, including U.S., stratagems to divide and rule. That U.S. officials, military strategists, think tank gurus, journalists, students, diplomats, and politicians all feel the authority to comment on, "contain," and otherwise act upon the "sectarian" Middle East affirms the rational basis for linking an internal problem of sectarianism with external agendas.

\*\*\*

If a recognition of sectarianism within the Arab world is tied to nation-building, and to anxieties over sovereignty, the Western idea of the sectarian Middle East has been inextricably bound with Western, including American, domination over the region. The idea of an innate Middle Eastern or Islamic sectarianism often serves to absolve Western powers from their complicity in creating, encouraging, or exacerbating a sectarianized political landscape in the Middle East. U.S. President Barack Obama, for example, asserted

---

<sup>13</sup> Samir Murqus, *Al-himaya wa al-'iqab: al-gharb wa al-mas'ala al-diniyya fi al-sharq al-awsat* (Cairo: Mirit, 2000).

<sup>14</sup> Tariq al-Bishri, *Al-muslimun wa al-aqbat fi itar al-jama'a al-wataniyya*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition (Cairo: Dar al Shuruq, 2004).

<sup>15</sup> Douglas Philipponne, "Hezbollah: The Network and its Support Systems, Can they be Stopped?" (master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2008), 48. Cited in . . Omar Nashabe, "Amerika tuharib Hizbullah...bi al-ihtiqan al-madhhabi," *Al-Akhbar*, August 13, 2016, <http://al-akhbar.com/node/263165/article>. Accessed September 8, 2016.



in 2016 that “the only organizing principles [in the region] are sectarian” and that the conflicts that rage in the Middle East under America’s watch “date back millennia.”<sup>16</sup>

Obama’s assertions, at least as recounted by journalist Jeffrey Goldberg, are both preposterous and self-serving—preposterous because they discount the rich, twentieth-century history of the Arab world that underscores the numerous social and political bonds in the region that are manifestly not sectarian, of which Obama is clearly ignorant; self-serving because they affirm an imperial self-righteousness that presumes that the problems of the Arab world, including those that affect the United States, are due to the persistence of allegedly immutable sectarian solidarities that defy a putative American benevolence. We have tried to help them, but they are hopeless appears to be the essence of Obama’s message.

Not uncoincidentally, Obama’s message tallies precisely with the paternalism of L. Paul Bremer III, the U.S. administrator of the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq. Bremer, who knew no Arabic and by his own admission knew very little about the country, was placed in supreme authority over occupied Iraq in 2003. Bremer rationalized the sectarian effects of U.S. imperialism by insisting that Iraqis only “vaguely understand the concept of freedom,” and pleaded for U.S. guidance. In his view, sectarianism in the region was endemic, so much so that Bremer described parts of Iraq as “the Sunni homeland.”<sup>17</sup> Both Obama and Bremer made the problem of sectarianism principally and essentially an Arab one, and not one related to a manifest and amply documented history of Western, including American, interventionism and imperialism that have shaped and reshaped the modern Middle East.

However, the brute reality of Western interventionism and imperialism in the region not only exacerbates “internal” problems, but creates new conditions and contexts that define the very nature of what is internal. Thus, then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice declared confidently in 2006, amidst Israel’s devastating U.S.-backed assault on Lebanon, that the world was observing the “birth pangs of a New Middle East.”<sup>18</sup> The aftermath of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, moreover, witnessed not only the destruction of what remained of the secular Baathist Iraqi central state; it also created a new Iraqi Governing Council along explicitly sectarian lines. This fateful decision to divide Iraqi government along “Sunni,” “Shiite,” and “Kurd,” or to invent a “Sunni triangle,” was not predetermined

---

<sup>16</sup> See Karla Adam, “Obama ridiculed for saying conflicts in the Middle East date back millennia,” *Washington Post*, January 13, 2016. Accessed 8 September 8, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/01/13/obama-ridiculed-for-saying-conflicts-in-the-middle-east-date-back-millennia-some-dont-date-back-a-decade/>; Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” *The Atlantic*, April 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525>. Accessed September 8, 2016.

<sup>17</sup> L. Paul Bremer III, *My Year in Iraq: The Struggle to Build a Future of Hope*, with Malcolm McConnell (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 71.

<sup>18</sup> “Secretary Rice Holds a News Conference,” *Washington Post*, July 21, 2006. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/07/21/AR2006072100889.html>. Accessed September 8, 2016.

objectively by the diversity of Iraqi society. It was principally a U.S. imperial interpretation of this diversity.<sup>19</sup>

The “sectarian” Middle East does not simply exist; it is imagined to exist, and then it is produced. It does not emerge latently. Yet the strong association of the term “sectarianism” with the Middle East repeatedly suggests that the region is more negatively religious than the “secular” West. This is an ideological assumption woven into how the Arab and Muslim worlds are generally depicted as having fundamentally religious landscapes—even the term “Muslim world” highlights the allegedly religious nature of this region, as opposed to the geographic designation of the “West.” Not only does this assumption gloss over how religious the West is, but it also pretends that what is occurring in the Middle East reflects an unbroken arc of sectarian sentiment that connects the medieval to the modern. Modern politics, in short, is transformed into little more than a re-enactment of a medieval drama between Sunni and Shi’i, rather than being a geopolitical struggle in which Western states are deeply implicated.<sup>20</sup>

I am for this reason in sympathy with Aziz al-Azmeh’s criticism of the “over-Islamization of Islam.”<sup>21</sup> This fixation with the study of Islam, the Muslim, the Muslim woman, and Islamic piety has ignored and relegated as historiographically and analytically unimportant secular Arabs, or Muslim Arabs who do not necessarily flaunt their piety in ways that conform to Western stereotypes. It also effaces the agency and histories of non-Muslim Arabs, Turks, Iranians, Armenians, and others who have lived, interacted with, and shared a culture with Muslims across the Middle East. Most of all, this Western fixation with the allegedly medieval and fixed nature of religiosity in the Middle East distracts scholars and the general public from understanding the modern roots of the “sectarian” Middle East.

\*\*\*

I am not suggesting that we think of sectarianism as only, or even primarily, a question of colonial “divide and rule.” But I am saying that we should stop pretending that the so-called “internal” dimensions have not themselves been massively affected, exacerbated, and even transformed by the West. When Fouad Ajami tendentiously insisted that the “self-inflicted” wounds “matter” more than foreign ones, he obfuscated the degree to which the foreign has long shaped the landscape in which the “local” plays itself out.<sup>22</sup> Rather than assume sectarianism to be a fixed, stable reality that floats above history, it is far more important to

---

<sup>19</sup> Sahar Bazzaz, “The Discursive Mapping of Sectarianism in Iraq: The ‘Sunni triangle’ in the Pages of the *New York Times*” in *Imperial Geographies in Byzantine and Ottoman Space*, ed. Sahar Bazzaz, Yota Batsaki, and Dimiter Angelov (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 245-261.

<sup>20</sup> For a recent study of the British colonial “ethnosectarian gaze” in the Gulf, see AlShehabi, “Contested modernity: divided rule and the birth of sectarianism, nationalism, and absolutism in Bahrain,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (2016). DOI: 10.1080/13530194.2016.1185937.

<sup>21</sup> Aziz al-Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities*, 3rd ed. (London: Verso, 2009), 74.

<sup>22</sup> Fouad Ajami, *The Arab Predicament: Arab Political Thought and Practice Since 1967* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 3. A more recent expression of this notion that domestic concerns are far more important than foreign ones is Geneive Abdo, “The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Sunni-Shi’i Divide,” Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., 2013.

locate and identify—to historicize—each so-called “sectarian” event, moment, structure, identification, and discourse in its particular context.<sup>23</sup> What is needed urgently is a new research agenda to study the dialectic—the complex, constant, and unequal relationship between local and foreign—that makes up the modern Middle East. We also need to appreciate the dynamic between tradition and transformation, between history and politics, between self-identification and orientalist representation, and between discourse and action that makes up the substance of what we call “sectarianism.”

---

<sup>23</sup> See ‘Amil, *Fi al-dawla al-ta’ifiyya*, for the case of post-1920 Lebanon; see also Makdisi, *Culture of Sectarianism*, for nineteenth-century antecedents.