

# Sectarianism after the Arab Spring

## An Exaggerated Spectre

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**S**ectarianism has experienced a boost in the aftermath of popular uprisings in the Arab world. Recent sectarian strife following the fall of Arab authoritarian leaders has been provoked by ideological rifts between Islamists and secularists and between conservatives and liberals, as well as by religious divisions between Sunnis and Shias, Muslims and Christians. However, the rise of sectarian strife in the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings has also been stoked by geopolitical strategies as power vacuums create opportunities for political ambitions and agendas. While sectarianism is real and bears important risks, it is not the main driver of divisions in the region. The West must not lose sight of the fact that many regimes are stirring up sectarianism while neglecting other cleavages, such as regional agendas, a lack of respect for human rights, corruption, and poor economic conditions.

Yet, however manipulated it may be, the rise of sectarianism in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region risks undermining the prospects for building peaceful and stable democratic societies in the Arab world. This raises

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several questions. How are political players favoring and instrumentalizing the reawakening of traditional religious and denominational cleavages? How have governments in the region responded? And what could Europe and the international community do to reduce sectarianism's potential to spoil peaceful democratic transitions?

### Deepening Traditional Rifts

Even though sectarianism in the MENA region is not new, it has acquired alarming dimensions in a changing regional context. Many analyses of sectarianism in the MENA region concentrate on the religious and political divergences between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shia Iran. Saudis and Iranians are mutually defiant regional strategic rivals. In a similar vein, other Arab Gulf countries are preoccupied by Iran's connections with Shia Arabs and Tehran's growing influence in the region due to its strong presence in post-Saddam Hussein Iraq and its alliances with the Syrian government and the Lebanese Hezbollah.

Naturally, when the Arab Spring opened new avenues of regional influence, tensions between Iran and the Gulf countries mounted. Tehran initially expressed its satisfaction over the toppling of Tunisia's Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Egypt's Hosni Mubarak. From Iran's point of view, the Arab people's decision to oust their pro-Western leaders was good news. Tehran's attitude changed, however, when riots erupted on the territory of its closest Arab ally, Syria. This confirmed Arab Gulf countries' suspicions that Iran's praise of the uprisings had only been in pursuit of its strategic interests.

Suspicions based on confessional divergences and the presumed political agendas behind them also prevailed in domestic debates in several MENA countries. In Tunisia and Egypt, the opponents of Muslim Brotherhood affiliates and Salafist parties deplored their presumed pro-Sunni Islamist financial support from Saudi Arabia and Qatar. In Bahrain, which is led by a Sunni minority, Shia-dominated antiregime riots led the Bahraini and several neighboring governments to accuse Iran of interference. Similar accusations were made by Saudi Arabia when riots erupted in the country's Shia-dominated east.

Divisions also abound beyond the apparent Sunni-Shia rift. In the United Arab Emirates, despite the absence of demonstrations, the state apparatus alleged risks of a regional rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and criticized the speeches of the Qatar-supported preacher Sheikh Youssef al-Qaradawi. By

doing so, Emiratis denounced the way some regional countries (Qatar and Saudi Arabia in particular) stood ready to support groups with religious-led agendas in order to strengthen their own regional influence.

The deepening of historic sectarian rifts in the region was accelerated by the Arab Spring, but its onset goes further back. In Iraq, sectarian strife has been rampant since the fall of Saddam in 2003. The Iraqi central government remains weak, struggling to ensure national unity. The rise of a strong Kurdish presence in the north and a Shia bastion in the south saw the Sunnis of the center squeezed between strong rivaling regional factions. During the Israeli-Lebanese war in the summer of 2006, several of Hezbollah's critics, such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Israel, and some members of the European Union (EU), judged Iran to be behind Hezbollah's actions. In the Maghreb, diplomatic relations between Morocco and Iran were suspended in 2009 after Morocco accused Iran of attempts to convert Moroccans to Shiism. In the aftermath of the 2011–12 power shifts, several Arab countries now fear that such sectarian tendencies could reach and destabilize their own territories. Several governments in the region have therefore felt pressure to respond to these developments in order to avoid possible spillovers.

### Between Containment and Instrumentalization

Since the toppling of some of their authoritarian peers, Arab leaders have been keen to avoid spillovers of two sorts: revolutionary regime change and a loss of social cohesion through sectarian strife. The Tunisia-originated wave of popular unrest has affected most Arab countries with only a few exceptions. By underlining their own importance for maintaining stability, threatened Arab leaders have contained and instrumentalized sectarian tensions at the same time.

Following Ben Ali's fall and the spread of uprisings, Arab leaderships across the region adopted strict measures to contain demonstrations domestically, usually under the pretext of preserving national security. At the same time, Arab leaders' overemphasis on the dangers of sectarianism conveniently served their purpose of safeguarding ruling elites' hold on power. The risk of sectarian splits is real and present in several Arab countries. In Lebanon, sectarian strife between Sunnis and Alawites in Beirut and in the north of the country has resurfaced. Nevertheless, Arab governments have adroitly instrumentalized the tangible dangers of sectarianism to keep a lid on protests.

In Saudi Arabia, repression of timid uprisings in the east of the country was portrayed by the rulers as a struggle against Shia-led sedition. A similar public diplomacy strategy was adopted in Bahrain, where violence extended to a wider scale. Yemen's President Ali Abdullah Saleh referred to tensions between communities as a plot aimed at destabilizing and dividing the country.

Sectarian tensions have assumed the most alarming proportions in Syria, where riots quickly turned to violence between Sunnis and Shia Alawites. The Syrian regime exerted harsh repression and justified its acts by the threat of a "foreign conspiracy." The sectarian argument eventually served the Bashar al-Assad regime in its efforts to curtail the dynamics of protests by keeping people away from the streets. In Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, sectarianism was used as a pretext to criticize Iran's growing role in the region. Most significantly, the Gulf Cooperation Council offered membership to Jordan and Morocco. Though still in abeyance, this intended "alliance of the Arab kingdoms" can be understood as a way of building a "Sunni alliance" in opposition to Iran and its supposed "pan-Shiite" regional expansion strategy.

Wielding the argument of sectarianism is a powerful tool as it frightens many communities in the Arab world—such as the Berbers in North Africa. Both sectarian and interreligious tensions between Christians and Muslims present threatening scenarios in several countries, including between Copts and Sunni Muslims in Egypt, as well as in Lebanon and Iraq, where sectarian divisions are reflected in public institutions.

Nevertheless, the instrumentalization of sectarianism could also turn against rulers and their interests. Drawing attention to sectarian tensions runs the risk that such schemes will be appropriated and reinforced by the population in a self-fulfilling prophecy. The same applies to the current overemphasis of media reporting and analysis on confessional, ethnic, and tribal affiliations. Overemphasizing these issues as a major source of regional identity questions the integrity of the nation-state and may potentially weaken national cohesion and favor disintegration.

## How to Respond

Many international actors in the region have been taken in by the spectre of sectarianism. The United States and the EU were the first to buy into such a reading. In so doing, Western countries risk missing important nuances. Sectarian affiliations are a reality, and so is a certain conflict potential inherent to

them. But sectarian strife is not the most pressing challenge faced by today's Arab world.

The uprisings clearly show that political and socioeconomic grievances are at the center of people's demands. In Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen, initial demonstrations were based on demands for change from wide sectors of society—including youth, the unemployed, and regime defectors—without strong sectarian affiliations or considerations. The quest for a better future and for new political rules was the main fuel for their demands. Whatever tribe, clan, religion, sect, or ethnic group they belonged to, citizens asked for “dignity” before anything else. It was only over time that sectarian tendencies came to the forefront. As transitions appeared to be regressing, people increasingly chose to identify themselves along tribal or confessional lines rather than political ones.

The international community should have learned a number of lessons from Iraq and Afghanistan. After being invaded, both countries experienced a deepening of internal sectarian tensions. This was largely due to an overemphasis on the role of sectarian communities in transition processes. Instead of placing trust in either country's own potential for national transcommunitarian cohesion, the invading powers bestowed an equal share of political prerogatives on different communities. This triggered a deepening of the divisions between the various groups. Larger communities eventually came to consider it a great opportunity to strengthen their position. While Shias are dominant in Iraq's current political process, the Pashtun people are a majority in Afghanistan's government.

The Arab uprisings confirmed the West's long-standing inclination to favor transition processes that attach high priority to ring-fenced “minority rights.” Western insistence on the rights of the Coptic community in Egypt is a case in point. In Syria, the United States regularly stresses that it wants members of the opposition (especially those forming part of the Syrian National Council) to commit more clearly to protecting the “rights of the minorities.” However, there is some inconsistency: in general, Western countries' potentially laudable defense of minority rights seems to be less fervent when it comes to defending the rights of Shias. For example, the international community has played deaf to demands for change from Shia communities in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen. In particular, violent clashes between the Bahraini/Saudi armies and Shia demonstrators in 2011 and 2012 have not led to international condemnations anywhere near as severe and determined as in the Syrian case.

In Libya, division between groups has been implicitly encouraged rather than avoided. Following Mu‘ammar Gadhafi’s fall, divisions have widened between the members of the Transitional National Council (TNC). Given that the country is comparatively homogeneous in confessional terms (Sunni), tribal, regional, and ideological divisions play a greater role. Since the beginnings of the anti-Gadhafi protests, Benghazi became a focal point for protests, somewhat to the detriment of regional priorities. Regional, ideological, and tribal rivalries have grown progressively since. Due to Libya’s decentralized history and societal structures, national cohesion has been more problematic here than anywhere else in the region. Moreover, no concrete steps for the organization of a post-Gadhafi transition had been defined before the fall of the Libyan leader. The result was further division among large parts of the population along ideological (Islamists versus secularists) or ethnic affiliations (Arabs versus Berbers as well as tribal rivalries).

Even though state protection of minority rights is important, foreign governments should stress the consolidation of the rule of law, citizenship, and human rights as a whole without a specific emphasis on any community or minority. By abstaining from distinguishing between one community and the other, the EU and the United States would gain credibility and trust in the region. While Russia and China may not be willing or able to give lessons in respect for minority rights, these two countries benefit from the perception (whether justified or not) that they are more reluctant to pick winners and play communities against each other. Western countries do not do themselves a favor when their actions arouse suspicions of divide and rule.

## Conclusion

Genuine concerns over the dangers of sectarian conflict become confused with geostrategic considerations, often to the detriment of regional security. Some Arab leaders’ fears of being swept away by continuing uprisings lead them to instrumentalize sectarianism as a form of life insurance. The frequent reference to the Sunni-Shia rift presumably promoted by Iran is the most obvious example. Western actors need to move their sectarian-based reading of some events in the region towards broader interpretations. Both Western and local actors must stop viewing the MENA region through a sectarian prism and instead aim to strengthen the internal cohesion of nation-states.

Libya offers a concrete opportunity to do so. The TNC’s internal contradictions, combined with a rise in tribal and local tensions, provide room for the

West to attach conditions to its support of the country's reconstruction. Meanwhile, in Syria, the international community would be wise to broaden its sectarian interpretation of facts, according to which Alawites dominate and exclude all the other communities. It should move towards a more pragmatic, transconfessional narrative that calls on all Syrians, without reference to any community in particular, to define together a shared vision for Syria's future.

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