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The origins of sectarianism in Egypt and the Fertile Crescent

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ABSTRACT

This paper differs from previous studies in arguing that sectarianism has overwhelmingly been created consensually by/or as a result of the elites’ behavioral patterns. Religious or communal pluralism does not categorically lead to political sectarianism; The development of pluralism into political sectarianism can thus be adduced as dependent upon other factors—first and foremost the behavioural patterns of the elite. While the imperial legacy, theological controversies, and socio-economic gaps feed political sectarianism, in and of themselves they are insufficient to cause it. A survey of the history of Egypt and the other countries in the Fertile Crescent reveals that the development of political sectarianism or sectarian violence has been organically linked to elites’ political behaviors and interests. Sectarianism takes the form of the instrumental exploitation of a religious or communal identity or framework in order to enable political organization, the gaining of political legitimacy, the promotion of political change, or the preservation of the control held by interest groups. While in the eyes of many critics, sectarianism forms a striking example of the elites’ intrinsic weakness, sectarianism is first and foremost a product of the elites’ quest for power.

Sectarianism in Arab society of the Middle East is commonly understood as a new phenomenon deriving from theological differences, socio-economic dissonance or provocation by foreign powers. I present two primary arguments against these traditional/restored explanations, contending firstly that sectarianism has always played a role in shaping Arab domestic politics despite being pursued under the guise of modern modalities such as social reform, revolutionaryism and nationalism, and secondly that a direct link exists between sectarianism and the behavioural patterns of the ruling elites in the Arab Middle East. This paper differs from previous studies in arguing that sectarianism has overwhelmingly been created consensually by, or as a result of, the elites’ behavioural patterns on the one hand and been linked to political elites in modern Arab society on the other. Herein, sectarianism is conceived neither in terms of formal political structures, such as the confessional system in Lebanon, nor in relation to the social division of Arab society into diverse religious communities. Tracing the epistemological roots of the term of sectarianism lying beyond its scope, this paper examines the way in which religious or communal differences have become
political pawns in the hands of the elites for ruling or controlling the masses, its working definition of secularization resting on empirical and historical evidence.¹

Although Arab history abounds with examples that illustrate the existence and dominance of sectarianism, I shall focus on five cases—Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine. These evince the organic link between elite patterns of behaviour and their use of political sectarianism to gain legitimization, bludgeon or engender political mobilization.

Four primary schools or explanations can be found in the literature on political sectarianism. The first is the colonial. It is no secret that political sectarianism has been a constitutive factor in the socio-political history of the post-colonial era. In tracing its historical roots, many point to the Western imperialist legacy as a central cause, numerous studies demonstrating that the French and British mandatory rulers adopted a divide-and-rule policy in order to firmly establish their control over the local populace. As Philip Khoury has demonstrated, the French colonial tradition in North Africa ultimately led to Syria’s partition into separate states on the basis of a sectarian divide and the enlisting of minorities into the Levant army. Britain followed a similar policy in establishing an Iraqi militia and excluding the Shi’ites from power, showing preference to the Christians in Mandatory Palestine and exploiting the Coptic–Muslim division in Egypt. Usama Makdisi follows this general line of thought, linking the development of sectarianism to Western modernization and the colonial heritage in the region.²

Although the role the external powers played in encouraging sectarianism in the Middle East cannot be completely dismissed, however, it must be placed in its proper historical context. Almost 70 years have now passed since the physical presence of the Western powers in the region ended. Not only is this argument thus outdated but the fact that Western countries had no interest in the outbreak of sectarian violence reveals that this argument is primarily apologetic in nature.

The second explanation is historical and religious. Just as the historical model of Western imperialism in the region is not a sufficiently stable factor to explain the sectarianism the new era is experiencing, so the historical model of Islam proposed by Syrian intellectual George Tarabishi—according to which religious dogma has constituted a permanent constitutive factor within Islamic history since its very beginnings—is also unconvincing.³ Adducing the Sunni–Shi’ite divide as the source of sectarianism within Islam, Tarabishi constructs a historical sequence running from the seventh century through to the outbreak of the civil war in Iraq in the wake of the American invasion in 2003. This completely ignores the economic, political and social developments in the region and the changes Shi’ite doctrine has undergone in consequence of the community’s failure to realize its political programme following the tragedy of Karbala and al-Hussein’s murder.⁴ Tarabishi’s theological approach towards sectarianism is supported by Martin Kramer and Emanuel Sivan, both of whom place the theological dimension and heterodox affiliation of the Ba’ath regime at the centre of modern Syria’s sectarian conflicts.⁵ Ferhard Ibrahi similarly ascribes sectarianism

¹For the epistemological context of the term, see Kazim Shabib, al-Masala al-Tatifiya (Beirut: Dar al-Tanwir, 2011), 32–56.
³Jurj Tarabishi, Hartaqat (Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 2011), 2:89.
⁴Ibid., 2:11–12.
to the Shi’ites’ marginal status in the Ottoman Empire and their exclusion from the reforms of the nineteenth century.6

Failing to make the necessary distinction between religious-theological and political sectarianism, Tarabishi thus perceives a historical continuity stretching from the medieval Sunni–Shi’ite religious clashes in Baghdad through to the civil war that erupted in the wake of the American invasion. Are the religious struggles that occurred in the Middle Ages in fact associated with the conflict into which Iraq was plunged after the formation of a territorial state, however? Rather than disagreements over dogma, the current problems revolve around the sources of political and economic power of the territorial state, the religious divergence being exploited by the ruling elite, the majority vs. minority divide forming a decisive factor in the relations between the two communities within the political framework. Tarabishi’s contention that a logical historical sequence extends from the seventh century through to the twenty-first appears to me to be an essentialist, deterministic, one-dimensional and simplistic theory that, focusing on the text, ignores the context.

The third explanation is ideological, positing sectarianism as an alternative to nationalism. Those who belong to this school—Fuad Ajami, Asher Susser and Aided Dawisha, for example—attribute the growing trend towards sectarianism in the region to the significant decline in the status of secular pan-Arabism following the defeat of the Arab armies in 1967.7

The fourth school is geographical determinist, according to which sectarianism is a product of geographical and regional boundaries as theorized by Ibrahim Haidari and Fanar Haddad.8 The claim is thus made that the dichotomous geographical division between the rural Iraqi Shi’ite majority in the south and the urban Sunni minority in the centre fed sectarian trends. A similar argument is made with regard to the division between the rural and peripheral heterodox minorities—the Druze and Alawis, for example—and the affluent urban Sunni community. According to numerous scholars, this constitutes one of the structural factors behind the sectarianism that has plagued Syrian politics.9 This explanation does not hold true for Lebanon, however, where the geographical distribution of the various communities is far more diverse, a large number of these crossing the urban/rural divide. Nor is it plausible with respect to Egypt, where the distinction between urban/rural or centre/periphery is irrelevant for understanding Muslim–Coptic tensions.

As this article evinces, the emergence of political sectarianism is organically related to the way in which the elites deal with difference and diversity. A British document addressing the political behaviour of Iraqi Shi’ites following the eruption of the Islamic revolution in 1979 explicitly adduces this fact:

The Shia are not a cohesive, organized body. Their religious leaders do not form a closely structured independent hierarchy, many, if not most of them, draw salaries from the Iraqi government. At least at present, they are too amorphous and disparate to provide serious or united resistance to the central authorities.10

6Ferhard Ibrahim, Konfessionalism und Politik in der arabischen welt: Die schiiten im Irak (Berlin: LIT, 1997), 338.
10PRO, FCO 8/8402, CS76404, Stirling to A.G. Munro, Middle East Department, ‘The Shia in Iraq after the Iranian Revolt’, 12 April 1979.
A Canadian document similarly observed that while ‘… particularly among the youth there is no remarkable religious consciousness’, there is a ‘distinct possibility that this mass of peasants and new urbanites could be politicized’.

These documents indicate that the very existence of a community does not inevitably lead to sectarianism or another model of politicalization. I would argue that this process only occurs if and when powerful elites or classes are interested in its development.

**The elite’s structural dualism**

Pierre Bourdieu coined the term *habitus* in reference to the lifestyle, values, dispositions and expectations particular social groups come to hold through everyday activities and experiences—a structure of the mind characterized by a set of acquired schemata, sensibilities, dispositions and tastes. As a set of beliefs and personal proclivities that reflect social conventions, it is a social construct that also functions as a personal structure. Modern society is comprised of social fields, each of which coalesces around common interests, every class creating the dispositions that characterize its members. Despite the fact that they are acquired, these tendencies appear to be natural. While Norbert Elias had earlier maintained that every society possesses its own *habitus*, he did regard *habitus* as labile and developing rather than fixed and permanent.

I suggest that the concept of *habitus* can serve as a useful analytical tool for understanding the inner dynamic of sectarianism. Although some studies have attempted to conceptualize this idea in the fields of ethnicity and nationality, synthesizing Bourdieu’s and Elias’ understandings I propose that it can be fruitfully applied to understanding the behavioural patterns of elites. I submit that the *habitus* of the elite as a set of norms and behavioural patterns distinctive of a social group constitutes the mechanism that gave rise to and maintains political sectarianism within Arab society.

Applying Bourdieu’s theory of class distinction to the political sphere, I posit that the ruling classes in the Arab Middle East have developed a *habitus* intimately informed by a tendency towards dualism. On this reading, sectarianism takes the form of the instrumental employment and exploitation of a religious or communal identity or framework in order to enable political organization, the gaining of political legitimacy, the promotion of political change or the preservation of the control held by interest groups. In the case of the political elites, a habitus which contains a disposition of dualism has been evolved. While their official discourse draws on modern Western culture, the mechanisms of control and the normative system that shapes their attitude towards the masses rest on a utilitarian interpretation of the norms and values of the traditional religious world and promotion of complete identification between their interests and those of the community (including the fabrication of imaginary mass interests). While the interactions between the ruling elites are governed by a disposition towards secular norms, the instruments they adopted to dominate the lower classes are deeply influenced by religiously oriented systems. I thus contend that the policies and politics engaged in by the Arab elites directly fuel sectarianism.

In his critical analysis of the mass-elite vs. the elite based on the writings of the Muslim intellectual Muhammad Arkon and the French historian Jean-Paul Charney, Walid Nuwayhid

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11 FCO 8/8402, CS 76404, Canadian Embassy, Baghdad to the Under-Secretary of State, Ottawa, 7 June 1979.
argues that just such a form of cultural dualism constitutes the hallmark of the Arab intellectual and political elite. Despite differing with regard to its origins, these two scholars contend that the Arab-Muslim intellectual is mired in a structural crisis stemming from cognitive or cultural dualism. Charney regards this as a successor of the intellectual pluralism that characterized early medieval Islam, arguing that ambivalence and antitheses are thus an inevitable outcome of pluralism and diversity in Islam on the conceptual and lexical planes alike. Arkon, on the other hand, attributes the cultural dualism to Islam’s encounter with the modern West.

The model proposed by Moghadam—who also maintains that patriarchal values were preserved—can also be applied to the case of sectarianism. According to this theory, while the material basis of classical patriarchy collapsed in the wake of the processes of modernization, urbanization and capitalism, its values continued to be upheld because they served the interests of the political elite, religious figures and men. When we examine the phenomenon of sectarianism across time, we see that the political elite not only sought to preserve the existing community structures but also worked to politicize these frameworks.

Iraqi sociologist Ali Al-Wardi, whose work was censored by the Ba’ath regime, also posited that the elites within Iraqi society suffered from a form of dualism, social reality confronting them with two conflicting sets of values—namely, local customs and the normative religious system. The key factor that has promoted sectarianism in the new era, however, is Western modernization, whose values and ideas directly clash with local customs. The most interesting aspect of Al-Wardi’s theory in the present context pertains, of course, to the political elite, which he regards as being the pre-eminent dualistic entity in the Iraqi/Arab space. While on the formal level politicians declare their commitment to justice, equality and democracy, once in power they frequently espouse nepotism and favouritism. In this regard, the political elite is not significantly different from the café-going middle class.

In his comprehensive 1965 volume on Iraqi society, Al-Wardi further develops this thesis, arguing that rather than constituting a mental disease sectarianism is a social phenomenon he calls ‘cultural ambivalence’. Developing this notion, Muhammad Hassan al-Barghuti emphasizes that the intellectual dualism exemplified in the oscillation between the Arab cultural legacy and the adoption of Western modernization created a dissonance and split within educated Arab circles. While Arab intellectuals could not develop an effective mechanism for dealing with their Arab legacy they enjoyed the benefits of modernization.

Linking al-Wardi’s theory regarding cultural dualism with Bourdieu’s concept of habitus provides us with an integrative framework through which to explain the political configuration of sectarianism within Arab society. The ambivalence towards sectarianism is a direct heir of the structural dualism that characterizes the elite. On the formal, explicit level, the elite rules in the name of the state and nationalism. On the informal, cloaked level, they harness sub-national affiliations—first and foremost religious—in the service of political 

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interests. The cultural ambivalence in which the elite is mired in Arab society is thus responsible for creating political sectarianism.

It is not necessary to be a Marxist to infer from the writings of Kamal Marwah, Mahdi Amil and Ussama Makdisi that the ruling political stratum in Lebanon employs sectarianism as a front for its class interests, not hesitating to evoke sectarian identity in order to defend them. Prior to Makdisi the Marxist Lebanese intellectual Waddah Shararah promulgated the thesis that sectarianism constitutes a tool for ruling developed by the Lebanese feudal leaders, the Ottoman authorities and the Western superpowers, making a compelling argument for the claim that sectarianism would not have become the basis of the political regime had it not been for the agreement reached between the Western powers and ruling social classes in Lebanon. In this sense, Shararah regards the sectarian conflict in Lebanon as a mutation and front for the class struggle waged between the elite and exploited social strata.20 As the more in-depth studies of Harik, Bakalini, Massara and Khazin demonstrate, the social and political elite of each of the religious communities in Lebanon, in the pre- and post-war eras, consisted of three social strata—the feudal clans, the wealthy and the upper-middle class.21 Rather than guaranteeing proper representation of each of these within the different communities, sectarianism recognizes and promotes the status of the social elite alone. It is thus a by-product of the ideological and behavioural dualism that characterizes the elite’s patterns of behaviour. As Mishael Gharib notes, while from an external perspective sectarianism rests on a public religious pillar, it is a priori intended to achieve a disguised social goal completely unrelated to religion or faith—namely, the domination of the elite over the life of the masses.22

The tendency towards dualism is most strikingly evident in the Nasserist revolutionary regime’s ambivalent approach towards Islam. While Nasser promoted secular pan-Arabism in order to legitimize his regime ideologically, he rapidly began to make use of Islam as a weapon in his struggle against the Muslim Brotherhood. His Minister of Education, Kamal al-Din Hussein, was known for his Islamicist tendencies even before he joined the free officers. Systematically working to Islamicize the Egyptian education system, he introduced a curriculum in which students learnt passages from the Quran instead of studying literary texts, and poems lauding the Prophet and his life and activities rather than love poetry.23 Religion also became a compulsory subject in the public school curriculum under the Nasserist regime. While no argument exists about Nasser’s commitment to the idea of Arab nationalism, religion was never excluded from public life. Although al-Azhar was turned into a modern university, only Muslim students were admitted, creating a wide religiously oriented segment within the middle class.24 The pan-Arabist thinker Yasin al-Hafez reinforces this claim, underscoring the fact that the pan-Arab movement neglected the fundamental principle of the division between church and state. As part of its struggle against the Muslim Brotherhood, the Nasserite regime introduced the teaching of religion from an

atavistic-future rather than a modernistic-national perspective. Nor was the use of Islam confined to state education, the Nasserite regime also being responsible for increasing the number of Muslim students admitted to Al-Azhar University and establishing Dar al-Quran in 1964 and subsequently the Quranic broadcasting station.

Political power in Ba’athist Syria has long relied on revolutionary Arabism for formal legitimacy, moves to establish Alawi hegemony over the military and security establishment similarly immediately being countered by the claim of inciting a fitna. Informal legitimacy, however, has always rested on community support, the Ba’ath regime promoting the belief that the new regime had the local interests of the Alawi community at heart. Thus, for example, swarms of Alawite villagers paraded through the town of Baynas calling ‘Ba’athism is Alawism’ during the celebrations marking the first anniversary of the Ba’ath regime’s rise to power.

In Iraq, while the Sunni elite formally legitimized its dominance in the name of the ‘common Arabism’, its informal legitimacy rests on fear of an imagined Shi’ite threat. The Sunni elite—vs. the Sunni community—created a ‘concept of fear’ to justify its elitist and dominant position in Iraq, thereby denying Shi’ites access to high-ranking military and security posts. The Baghdadi elite believed that it could ensure its position by controlling admission into the officer ranks on the one hand and indoctrinating the younger generations with pan-Arab ideology on the other. Fear thus served as a mechanism for political and social control. In a report submitted to parliament, the Iraqi Shi’ite politician ‘Abd al-Karim al-Azri, who served as chairman of the Parliamentary Finance Committee during the monarchy period, asserted that the Iraqi state ignored and denied the existence of sectarianism within the country, burying its head in the sand like an ostrich in order to avoid dealing with it. In his view, the problem should have been tackled head-on, firstly by recognizing its existence and then by making genuine efforts to resolve it. At the heart of his argument lay the claim that admission to the military academy was based purely on sectarian criteria. The elite naturally responded with an apologetic discourse, regarding the very raising of the issue as undermining the foundations of the Iraqi army and creating the false impression that Iraq was marked by factionalism.

**Sectarianism as a mechanism for ruling and political mobilization**

In his book on the authoritarian state, Khaldoun Al-Naqib demonstrates how the socio-economic reforms implemented by the revolutionary regimes in Egypt, Iraq and Syria, together with their policies of nationalization and agrarian reform, were designed first and foremost to weaken the traditional elite and strip them of their economic power rather than constituting a true attempt to establish a strong, stable national economy. This argument strengthened the impression amongst Shi’ite circles in Iraq that the pursuit of nationalization undertaken by the pan-Arabist regime in 1964 was directed against the trading

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communities—the majority of whom were Shi’ites. The adoption of the same policy in Nasserite Egypt was similarly regarded as directed primarily against the Coptic community, whose members were prominently represented amongst the affluent class in monarchical Egypt. In Syria, the radical steps taken by the Ba’athist regime after 1963 were viewed by the traders and wealthy urban class—the majority of whom were Sunnis—as a form of revenge fuelled by sectarian considerations on the part of peripheral parties who came to power on the strength of social sectarianism.

This claim is substantiated by statements made by Dr Ibrahim Makhus (Alawi), the head of the Ba’athist branch in the Latakia province, in relation to the dismissal of government officials whose loyalty to the new regime was in doubt. In an angry outburst, Makhus exclaimed:

They’ve ruled us for a hundred years, we will rule them for a thousand years… The Sunnis of Latakia [have ruled us for a century] … the mountain dwellers had no right to descend into the city, and if they did they should have walked in the gutter. If any of them raised their heads, they should immediately have been told: ‘Lower your head.’

This statement evinces the social dissonance that so closely paralleled the cultural conflict prevailing in Latakia and the way in which it was systematically harnessed by the educated classes and minority officers in order to encourage the members of their community to join the party/army. In other words, counter-sectarianism was garbed in a revolutionary mantle for the purpose of encouraging opposition to the existing socio-political order.

Syria also provides us with several examples of the way in which the elite employed local sectarianism as a tool for ruling the masses. The exploitation of localism nevertheless first arose as a result of the initial clash between the revolutionary government and conservative Sunni elite, most prominently in Hama—a year following the Ba’ath’s coup d’etat in 1963. The feudal families of the city and its environs opposed the Ba’ath revolutionary regime on the basis of its secularist and socio-economic policies. Nationalization and the agrarian reform serving their ‘subjects’ rather than their own interests, they quickly recognized their common interest with the Muslim Brotherhood. In the wake of this alliance, a committee of the city’s neighbourhoods was established in order to foster an armed revolt to overthrow the regime. The latter responded in kind, placing the task of suppressing the revolt in the hands of a Druze captain (Hamad Ubied), in what appeared to be retaliation to the matter of subduing Jabal al-Duruz to Damascus’ rule in 1954 in the hands of Fuad al-Aswad, a Sunni Syrian officer from Hama. Hereby, the ruling elite blatantly exploited localism and its codes of behaviour—most importantly, the blood-feud custom.

Following the military coup in 1951, Adib al-Shishakli took power in Syria, founding a dictatorship in the name of Arabism and Islam. Lacking any popular support base, however, sectarianism became a key weapon in his struggle to remain in power. His desire to strengthen the central government’s hold over the Syrian periphery leading to clashes with the peripheral heterodox minorities, he sent border-police units to Mount Druze in the direct knowledge that the majority of them were Bedouin and Sunni Muslims from around al-Laja who had been engaged in hostilities and blood feuds with the Druze from time immemorial. Although the border-police units that entered As-Suwayda, the capital of the province,

\[\text{Abdu al-Diri, Ayyam Ma’ a al-Qadr: Jumhuriyyat al-Fasad wa-l-Istibdad (2007), 1:263.}\]
slaughtered hundreds in the name of enforcing State authority, the real motive behind their action was clearly local-sectarian.32

The testimony of Dr ʿAbd Allah Saʿada, leader of the Syrian Nationalist Socialist Party, regarding his experience in a Lebanese jail following the party’s abortive coup against the Lebanese government in 1961, further illustrates the elites’ exploitation of religious differences for sectarian purposes. If a party member arrested was a Muslim, he was interrogated by a Christian. If he was a Christian, he was interrogated by a Muslim.33 The Lebanese elite, whose legitimacy rested exclusively on representing the interests of the various communities and maintaining co-existence, transformed religious divergence into a tool with which to buttress the party’s position and tighten its rein over the masses. According to the evidence given by Mutaa al-Safadi, a leading member of the party during the pre-1963 coup d’état, the Syrian Ba’ath regime employed the same sectarian form of control in the state jails. According to his statements, all the officers, investigators and torturers in the al-Mazzih jail were Alawite, Christian or Druze fanatics infused with and driven by sectarianism and anti-religious sentiment which intentionally insulted the religious beliefs of the Muslim prisoners.34

Mandatory Iraq also demonstrates the deep, organic link between the elite’s patterns of behaviour and political sectarianism. Between 1935 and 1937, the country witnessed a series of tribal revolts against the central government. These are customarily depicted as having been instigated by the chiefs of the Shi’ite tribes for personal, tribal or local interests. This description ignores one of their key aspects, however—namely, the manipulation of religious differences in the service of internal political struggles amongst the ruling elite. In other words, they would not have erupted had it not been for the power struggles within the ruling elite in Baghdad. Their point of origin goes back to August 1934, when Ali Jawdat al-Ayubi was appointed head of the Iraqi government. His rivals amongst the Sunni politicians, headed by Yasin al-Hashimi, Ali Rashid Kilani and Hikmat Sulieman, encouraged the leaders of their Shi’ite tribal allies in the south to revolt against the government on the pretext of being deprived of their religious rights. The two Sunni leaders serving as Prime Minister sought to oust al-Ayubi, enlisting the help of their Shi’ite allies to revolt against the Sunni government.35

Four of the leaders—ʿAbd al-Wahid Sukar, Alwan al-Yasiri, Muhsin Abu Tabikh and ʿAbd al-Hims—determined to boycott the government, going so far as to begin an armed revolt. The Sunni sectarian manipulation achieved its goal, al-Ayubi’s government falling and being replaced by that of Jamil al-Madfai. The latter only remained in power for a very short period, being succeeded by Yasin al-Hashimi, an ally of the Shi’ite tribal leaders. Al-Hashimi promptly dissolved parliament and held new elections that brought his Shi’ite allies into the parliamentary body.36

In his writings, the tribal chief Abu-Tabikh maintains that the revolt of 1934–1935 was not coordinated by al-Hashimi but was the result of deep anger and frustration due to

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33ʿAbd Allah Saʿada, Awraq Qawmiyya: Mudhakkirat al-Daktur ʿAbd Allah Saʿada (Beirut, 1987), 133.
deteriorating circumstances in the middle Euphrates provinces. He nonetheless acknowledges that the most pressing cause was the Sunni politician Hikmat Suleiman, who extended his help to the rebels.37 When the latter failed to gain the post of Minister of the Interior, he employed the same sectarian tactics—this time allying himself with the Shi‘ite allies of the two deposed Prime Ministers, al-Ayubi and al-Madfa‘i, headed by the Shi‘ite tribal chiefs, in particular Khawam al-‘Abd al-‘Abas and Shalan al-Atiya.

This old/new protest movement adopted the platform of the struggle for Shi‘ite rights. Seeking to gain a political-conceptual dimension, it issued a document known as Mithaq al-Shaab, which contained a series of complaints and demands by the Shi‘ite community against the central government.38 The text, quoted in full by `Abd al-Karim al-Uzri, included the claims characteristic of Shi‘ite publicity of the period—equality of opportunity, recognition of Shi‘ite jurisprudence, and the establishment of health and education systems in southern Iraq.39 Of particular significance is the note that sectarian manipulation served as a tool to foment conflict within the tribal Shi‘ite elites:

> The sheikhs who have signed the manifesto and joined the Ulama have done so less because they are sincerely interested in Shi‘ite ecclesiastical or political aspirations and more because they think that by this step they will rob `Abdul Wahid of the initiative and place him in an impossible position.40

Of particular interest in the politics of sectarian manipulation is the fact that Abu Tabikh, who participated in the revolt against al-Ayubi’s government, adduced the same Shi‘ite charges in asserting that the protest movement and revolt against al-Hashimi’s government in 1935 and 1936 were due to tribal incitement and the bribing of their chiefs.41 The measures used against al-Ayubi’s government were also employed to bring down al-Madfa‘i’s government. Al-Hashimi responded to the revolt with violence. When the protest movement developed into an armed revolt against the government, he brought in military forces to suppress it, simultaneously seeking to appoint Shi‘ites to top-ranking jobs in order to defuse the increasing protests in the south.42

The argument that the Shi‘ite tribal revolts in the south between 1934 and 1936 were rebellions against the Sunni government is too simplistic, however. Abu Tabikh accurately draws attention to the intrinsic link between sectarianism and the tribal elite’s patterns of behaviour. The Sunni leaders and politicians who left the government and were excluded from power not only encouraged but even incited their Shi‘ite allies to rebel in the name of the struggle for Shi‘ite rights in order to embarrass their rivals in the government. Immediately after they gained power, however, they began accusing them of spreading a sectarian spirit. The irony in this is clear, the three leaders (al-Haj Sukar, Abu Tabikh and al-Yasiri) of the ostensibly tribal Shi‘ite revolt against the Sunni government to gain Shi‘ite rights being arrested in March 1937 by Hikmat Suleiman’s government—which had incited them to revolt against al-Ayubi—on precisely the same grounds.43

38Ibid., 133–7; al-hashimi, Mudhakkirat Taha al-Hashimi, 438–9.
40FO 406/73, Sir A. Clark Kerr to Sir John Simon, no. 171, 23 March 1935.
41Abu Tabikh, al-Mabadi wa-l-Rijal, 137.
42al-Uzri, Mushkilat al-Hukum, 60.
43Abu Tabikh, al-Mabadi wa-l-Rijal, 283.
The ruling elite not hesitating to exploit political sectarianism to weaken their enemies or mobilize political support, their behavioural patterns constitute the causal and circumstantial context in which political sectarianism developed in Iraq. A British document from 1935 explicitly notes that the political elite in Baghdad headed by Kilani, Suleiman and al-Hashimi exploited the unrest amongst the Shi’ites as a tool in their political struggle against their other enemies.44 Sectarianism could reveal itself to be a double-edged sword, however. Immediately following the formation of the new government, the rebellion’s leaders and their armed supporters entered Baghdad. This act not only reflected the danger inherent in sectarianism, serving as an effective weapon in the struggle against their rivals, but also undermined the State’s status and laws.45 The danger was noted by a British document that highlights the destructive consequences of the sectarian politicalization of the tribal leaders:

Politicians in Baghdad were at a loose end. The tribes not only reverted to the feuds that had troubled their relations in the past they also entered politics; some under the aegis of Ali Jawdat and the Wihda party, and others under that of Yasin and the Ikha al-Watani. The two groups faced each other as it were bareteeth.46

All the tribal revolts in southern Iraq against Al-Naqib, Ali Jawdat, Jamil al-Madafi and Yasin al-Hashimi’s second government broke out as part of the ruling elite’s direct involvement in Baghdad and internal struggles for power and prestige. Behind every Shi’ite tribal rebellion stood a Sunni leader.47

The description given by the Shi’ite tribal leader Muhsin Abu-Tabikh reflects the close link between sectarianism and the elite’s behavioural patterns, explicitly indicating that sectarianism served as a political tool for ruling forged by Arab elites. While numerous Shi’ite politicians protested against the Sunni elite’s deprivation of Shi’ite rights in Iraq, however, it quickly became evident that this discourse functioned as a weapon for gaining power and status. By the same token, Sunni leaders who were dismissed from key positions turned to Shi’ite politicians, inciting them to work against the state or the current government in the name of the deprivation of Shi’ite rights, hoping thereby to inflict a blow upon the Sunni elite. When they came to power, these leaders promptly accused these same Shi’ites of sectarian incitement.48 Abu Tabikh’s statements leave no doubt that the political elite of both communities deliberately employed sectarianism in order to advance their interests and strengthen their position. A confidential British memo noted in this regard the tribal leaders’ efforts:

[to widen the front of their attacks on the government by bringing into the struggle the Ulama of Kerbala and Najaf, though the Shah tribal leaders have not proved successful, the Ulama being by no means disposed to take sides in what they have sufficient wit to see is only a struggle between two groups of Sunni politicians, neither of which is really concerned to further the communal interests of the Shahs.49

This corresponds to the version given by ‘Abd al-Karim al-Uzri—another Shi’ite politician from the monarchical era—who states that during the monarchy period, those at the top

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44Records of Iraq, 7:354.
45al-Qassab, Min Dhikrayati, 306–7.
46FO 406/73, Sir A. Clark Kerr to Sir John Simon, no. 300, 30 May 1935.
48Abu-Tabikh, Mudhakkirat, 376–7.
of the Shi’ite leadership were tribal or local feudal leaders. Both tribal and feudal Shi’ite leaders were thus dependent on the Baghdad elite, all their interests being bound up with the preservation of their political status within their community.\(^{50}\)

Any discussion of sectarianism in Palestinian historiography immediately arouses suspicions and negative political associations amongst intellectuals due to the struggle against Zionism and the State of Israel. Raising the issue is thus automatically perceived as a sinister plot to undermine Palestinian national unity from within.

The political intellectualization and instrumentalization of religion in the struggle against Zionism was not the sole contributing factor that led to the growth of the trend towards sectarianism within the Palestinian nationalist movement, however. Just as it was an outcome of the socio-economic dynamics that drove Palestinian society, so sectarianism was also umbilically linked to the elites’ political patterns of behaviour. As is well known, during the British Mandate the Palestinian elite was split into two factions—the Husseinis, who ruled the Supreme Islamic Council; and the Nashashibis, who were excluded from the Council. In an effort to strengthen their political position and challenge the official nationalist discourse propounded by Hajj Amian al-Husseini, which emphasized national unity between Muslims and Christians, two of the Mufti’s opponents—Sheikh Suleiman al-Farouki and Sheikh Asaad al-Shuqayri—convened a ‘National Islamic Council’, establishing ‘Nationalist Islamic Associations’.\(^{51}\) They then sought to rival the Mufti on the basis of a new agenda—namely, the struggle against the non-proportional representation of Christians in the governmental administration and their control of the Palestinian municipal economy. Embarking on a P.R. campaign, they called for a boycott of Christian stores and trade with Christians—a move primarily felt in Jerusalem and Jaffa.\(^ {52}\)

While the socio-economic gaps between the local populace and refugees had been wide since 1948—continuing until today—as long as no powerful factor sought to harness them to promote its political and public standing they never fuelled sectarian trends. In recent years, they have even diminished, the refugees having increasingly assimilated into the urban economy, the children gaining a higher level of education than their parents. As Ahmad Ashkar’s studies of Nazareth indicate, the urban Christian class nonetheless continued to preserve its economic and educational supremacy.\(^ {53}\) According to the statistics he quotes, despite the fact that Muslims constitute the majority close to 80% of the city’s school teachers were Christians between 1995 and 2000, Muslim teachers constituting no more than 13%. The same trend is evident in other sectors of the city’s economy, Christians being heavily represented in industry, banking, health, academia etc.\(^ {54}\)

As Israeli sociologist Sami Samucha notes, the socio-economic gaps served as fertile ground for the growth of political sectarianism when the Islamic movement was augmented by an elitist or independent local factor.\(^ {55}\) In 1994, an engineer by the name of Salman Abu Ahmad—a member of one of the great Nazareth clans who sat on the city council—backed

\(^{50}\) al-Uzri, Mushkilat al-Hukum, 83.
\(^{52}\) ibid., 219–23.
\(^{54}\) Ashqar, al-Tadmir al-Dhati, 74, 84.
the decision to destroy the Ottoman school close to the Church of the Annunciation. Around three years later, he headed the struggle led by the Islamic movement to defend and protect Islamic holy sites from the ‘Nazareth 2000’ project, which Muslims viewed as an attempt to accentuate the city’s Christian character and represent Christian economic interests.56

In an effort to challenge the communists and undermine their control of the city, Abu Ahmad and the Islamic movement sought to build a mosque close to the church in order to sabotage the plans and enlist mass Muslim support amongst the poor neighbourhoods in the city. The protest the lower-class Muslims launched against the richer and more well-educated Muslims found ostensible ideological and real practical expression when it achieved its goal in the municipal elections in 2000, the Islamic movement winning an unprecedented 10 out of 19 mandates on the city council. Abu Ahmad himself was appointed acting mayor, thereby helping to reduce tensions over the status of the Islamic holy places in Nazareth.57

According to Tsimhoni, the conflict in the city formed part of the pan-regional penetration of political Islam into a Muslim middle class disappointed by modernization and Westernization.58 The fact that Abu Ahmad and the Islamic movement allied themselves with the secular-communist Hadash also demonstrates the depth of the link between the behavioural and utilitarian approach adopted by the elites in Arab society towards religion and the development of sectarian tendencies, however.

The rise to power of the Ba’ath Party in Syria in 1963 constituted a decisive watershed in the country’s internal politics for two reasons. Firstly, the coup of February 1963 determined the conflict between the urban-civic elite and the military elite in favour of the latter. Secondly, it signalled an unprecedented exacerbation of the socio-political struggle in the country—a conflict that carried clearly religious hues. According to Nabil al-Shawiri, a Christian Ba’ath Party member, 1963 formed a decisive milestone in the development of sectarianism in Syria, the two rival sides—the heterodox minority army officers and the Muslim Brotherhood—both using sectarianism as a political weapon. Neither the Sunni officers nor Alawite officers in the Ba’ath Party were being religious fanatics; the struggle was purely and simply over power, communalism being employed as a tool by both sides.59

From a historical perspective, the Ba’ath Party represented the rural middle class and fellaheen who had gained a modern education. The blending of this social status with nationalist-revolutionary-socialist ideology was perceived as a threat by the urban landowning elite, who had failed to construct a modern state on the one hand and free themselves from the tradition of the meddling Ottoman and French imperialist legacies on the other.60 The elite was composed of three social classes: the landowning Ayans, the big traders and religious figures. All three sectors regarded the Party as a secular and socialist movement whose ranks were filled with minorities who threatened their status and economic interests. They thus found in the Muslim Brotherhood ideologically and politically ready ‘cannon fodder’ to stand against the Ba’ath Party. Assad’s decision to dissolve the syndicates of engineers,
lawyers, doctors, dentists and pharmacists manifests the wide support the movement enjoyed amongst the middle class.\textsuperscript{61}

Not surprisingly, since 1963 the Muslim Brotherhood has thus constituted the spearhead in the urban elite’s struggle against the Ba’athists, rapidly running into violent underground channels. Already in 1961, the American consul general reported that the vast majority of the second rank of businessmen in Aleppo were Muslims and that ‘the danger they most often mention is a coalition of convenience between the Syrian Communist Party and the Socialist wing of the Ba’ath’.\textsuperscript{62} The first underground movement to emerge was that of ‘Abd al-Rahman Abu Awda, in Aleppo in 1963. This was followed by the Marwan Hadid’s declaration of open revolt against the regime from the al-Sultan mosque in Hama a year later. In 1975, Hadid founded the underground movement known as the ‘Muhammad Brigades’ against the backdrop of the eruption of the second Lebanese civil war. This subsequently turned into the ‘al-Taliya al-Muqatila’ (Fighting Vanguard Units) that led the armed struggle against Assad’s Ba’athist regime.

In 1981, Adnan Saad al-Din, Ali Sadr al-Din al-Biyanuni and Said Hawa created the Islamic Front, which espoused armed opposition to the regime.\textsuperscript{63} The assassination of Muhammad Ghara, head of General Intelligence in Hama, signalled the beginning of a wave of murders that took the lives of officers and top-ranking officials, the overwhelming majority of whom were Alawis. This trend reached its peak in 1979, when Brotherhood fighters attacked the artillery school and executed dozens of Alawi officers.\textsuperscript{64} The regime responded with an extensive military offensive that ended in a mass slaughter in Hama in 1982 that is still unsurpassed to this day.\textsuperscript{65}

The Muslim Brotherhood violence not only encouraged sectarianism in Syria, but also the revolutionary-ruling military elite that championed Arabism, secularism and socialism as the basis of legitimate rule, who employed sectarianism as a means of domination and control. As early as 1971, the American consul in Beirut reported the existence of special units of 2000–5000 fighters under the command of Rafaat al-Assad, the President’s brother, the majority of whom were (naturally) Alawis.\textsuperscript{66} As numerous sources indicate, the 1963 coup and Ba’athist rise to power accelerated the Alawization of the Syrian army, in particular the officer and top-ranking echelons. According to a British document from August 1964, the entire 70th Armoured Division was composed of Alawis, who also constituted 70% of the 72nd Artillery Brigade, around 30% of the 18th Armoured Division and 20% of the 40th Artillery Brigade. In other divisions, the representation of Alawi soldiers ranged between 5% and 15%. Their numbers were clearly disproportionate to their percentage of the Syrian populace as a whole. This document also confirms that since 1963 military delegations were accustomed to going through Alawi villages seeking to persuade young men to enlist, promising them immediate acceptance. This explains the high percentage and disproportionate


\textsuperscript{62}NARA, RG 59, CDF 1960–1963, Arthur Allen to the Department of State, Dispatch no. 43, ‘Post-Cup Political Stirrings in Aleppo’, 21 October 1961, 783.00/10–2161.

\textsuperscript{63}Abu Fakhr, A’yan al-Sham, 63; Sivan, Radical Islam, 114.

\textsuperscript{64}Abu Fakhr, A’yan al-Sham, 73–4.

\textsuperscript{65}Ibid., 74.

\textsuperscript{66}NARA, Brown to Department of State, ‘Private Army within Syrian Army Supports Assad’, Airgram A-131, 23 December 1971, POL 23-9 SYR.
representation of the Alawis in the top military echelons. It also accounts for the accusation made by General Muhammad Shinawi that the army was run on tribal rather than military principles, giving preferential treatment to Alawis.\textsuperscript{67}

The data adduced by Drysdale point to a similar trend amongst high-ranking officers. As early as 1965, only 25–30% officers were Sunni, the remainder coming from the minorities.\textsuperscript{68}

The summary report of the Second Regional Council of the Ba’athist Party held in 1966 confirms that the efforts taken to strengthen the regime and defend the revolution (the 1963 coup) precluded any objective criteria for army conscription, prompting many to join due to close family and personal ties.\textsuperscript{69} Rather than entering the army and Ba’ath Party with the explicit intention of ruling the State, Alawi enlistment was intimately related to the behavioural patterns of the community’s military elite. Convinced that minority enlistment in the army and membership of the Party could promote their interests, a group of Alawi officers understood at a very early stage the important role the military could play as both a weapon of support and an ideological-revolutionary framework within which to reinforce their status.\textsuperscript{70} Salah Jadid’s actions between 1963 and 1966 stand out in this context, demonstrating the dualism characteristic of the elite: employing all the means at his disposal to persuade his followers and friends that he was as far as could be imagined from sectarianism, his protestations ironically entrenched its existence.\textsuperscript{71}

### The search for legitimization

Although the issue of legitimacy in the modern Arab state lies beyond the scope of this paper, the elites’ incapacity to generate hegemony over society in this context clearly reflects a struggle for what Munoz refers to as ‘historical legitimacy’ resulting from independence. While independence gave the post-colonial rulers recognition from the population, these rulers had a strong need to maintain and enhance their legitimacy by reforms promising prosperity, efficiency and stability. Internalizing this structural crisis, post-colonial ‘progressive regimes’ attempted to overcome their impotence by promoting revolutionary social and economic reforms.\textsuperscript{72} The state politics of seeking legitimacy produced sectarianism, as evinced by the case of the revolutionary-Nasserist Egypt.

In Egypt, the totalitarian Nasserite regime paralysed Egyptian civil society and abolished party and political pluralism. One of the principal victims of this policy was the Coptic community, none of whose members were elected to the National Council in 1964. The same trend continued in the parliamentary elections of 1968, 1971, 1976 and 1979. Nasser’s regime was thus compelled at an early stage to introduce a constitution granting the President the

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\textsuperscript{69} For the full text of the report, see Nikolas Van Dame, \emph{The Struggle for Power in Syria} (London: I.B. Tauris, 1997), 146–51.\textsuperscript{70} NARA, William Rogers, Memorandum to the President, 19 November 1970, POL 2 SYR.


power to appoint 10 members to the council, the majority of whom were generally Copts. 73
It is reasonable to assume that the underground organization known as ‘The Coptic Nation’
early on signalled the Copts’ growing alienation. Emerging as a reaction to the Muslim
Brotherhood movement, this adapted the latter’s ideology to the Coptic situation, calling
for the revival of the Coptic language and culture. 74 Although the revolutionary socio-econo-
mic policies followed by the Nasserite regime were designed to create a wide base of
popular legitimacy, they also sowed the early seeds of sectarianism.

The socio-economic policy adopted by the revolutionary government reinforced feelings
of alienation amongst the elite and middle class alike. Coptic and foreign sources concur
that the Copts were its primary victims, 75% of those suffering from the nationalization of
the transport, banking and industrial sectors being Copts. The missionary and foreign schools
were also subjected to strict and uncompromising inspection at the hands of the revolu-
tionary government. The fact that none of the military groups who seized power was Coptic
created the impression that the Copts were easy prey, the policy of nationalization being
intended to cut them off from economic and financial resources.75

This policy weakened the Copts’ status in Egyptian public life. Not only did no Copt sit on
the Revolutionary Command Council but the first parliament elected in 1957 also included
no Coptic members. Afraid of the implications of excluding the Copts from political life,
Nasser’s regime sought to preserve Coptic representation in the Egyptian parliament by
holding closed regional Coptic elections, appointing around 10 members customarily either
women or Copts. This policy only served to increase the separatist and isolationist trends
within the Coptic community, however, strengthening their sense of being a socio-political
minority.76 Al-Bishri concurs with Bahr and Abu Sayef that Nasser’s nationalization policy
was not fuelled by confessional or religious motives but rather by the prominence of Coptic
representation amongst the affluent and companies and their directors, whose nationaliza-
tion led the Copts to feel themselves the primary victims.77 Nasser’s oppression of the Marxist-
Communists also contributed towards Coptic religious isolation and segregation, particularly
that of its educated and middle-class members. When the regime embarked on a campaign
to suppress the Egyptian Communist Party, the security forces were surprised to discover
that more than 30% of its members were Copts.78 According to Milad Hanna, this massive
membership was a direct continuation of Coptic support for the Wafd, both parties cham-
pioning a secular Egyptian state.79 The policy of nationalization and the scattering of the
parties on the one hand and the suppression of the Marxist left on the other pushed the
Copts into the arms of the Church establishment, this remaining their sole relevant frame-
work—particularly after the 1967 defeat.

The change the ruling elite and political orientation underwent following Nasser’s death
led to a fundamental transformation in the elite’s attitude towards religion. Rather than
serving as an instrument for gaining legitimacy for revolutionary ideology, religion now
became an ideological-moral tool in the internal struggles within the elite and a weapon

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wa-l-Sira al-Tabaqqi fi Misr (Cairo: Sina li-l-nashr, 1989), 73.
77 al-Bishri, al-Muslimun, 767.
78 Milad Hanna, Nah am…. Aqbat lakin…. Misriyyun (Cairo: Maktabat Madbli, 1980), 93.
79 Ibid., 93–4; Hani al-Madawi, al-Aqbat wa-Qadiyyat al-‘Uruba’, in al-Mas’ qala al-Ta ifiyya fi Misr, ed. Khalid Muhyyi al-Din
(Lebanon: Dar al-Tall’a li-l-Tiba’a wa-l-Nashr, 1980), 236.
against Nasserite and left-wing/Communist factors. Tariq al-Bishri notes that during the Sadat era the ruling elite began to appeal to Islam as a way of excluding left-wing Marxist forces. Setting religion at the centre of the public and political space, however, also isolated the Copts. In addition to the constitutional aspect—which found expression in the definition of Islam as a religion and Shari’a as the source of law—Muhammad Salim’s government also declared its intention in August 1977 of applying the punishments decreed by Shari’a law to those who reneged from Islam. This decision increased sectarian tension within the country, being vehemently opposed by the Church. Calling on the Coptic masses to fast for several days, they succeeded in compelling the government to abandon the idea.

The first significant indication of sectarianism in Egypt emerged in 1972 in what became known as the El-Khaniqah events in al-Qalyubia, when a Muslim mob set fire to a Coptic church, leading to violent clashes between the two communities. The event shaking the Egyptian public, a parliamentary committee of inquiry headed by Jamal Ghatifi was established. Rather than addressing the causes of the religious tension between Muslims and Copts, however, its decisions and recommendations were primarily directed towards putting an end to left-wing opposition to the regime.

Sadat’s rise to power was accompanied by an ever-growing trend towards Coptic withdrawal from Egyptian public life that culminated in their virtually complete absence. An American document of 1971 indicates that the Copts were in fact excluded from public life, their representation being confined to four top-ranking positions in the public Establishment. Not a single Copt served as governor. While Sadat systematically employed religion as a political tool to gain legitimacy for his regime, he was far from the first to do so. The Coptic bourgeoisie who had complained about the lack of Coptic representation in the government administration established a body in 1911 known as the ‘Coptic Congress’ in an effort to enlist the support of the community as a whole against the regime, espousing communal solidarity despite their modern education and social class.

This duality is even more strikingly evinced in the case of the liberal constitutional party, an elitist party that represented the absent landlords and intellectual classes responsible for the formulation of the liberal constitution of 1923. As part of its political struggle against the Wafd and its attempt to undermine the bases of the latter’s popular support amongst the masses and middle classes, this party initiated a P.R. campaign that depicted the Wafd as being controlled by the Copts. Despite its declared commitment to Western liberal values, it thus promoted sectarianism with regard to parliamentary representation and government administration.

Hafez al-Assad’s rise to power at the end of 1970 crossed a red line with the Muslim Brotherhood. Assad not only espoused a secular socialism completely opposed to the Brotherhood’s ideological worldview and socio-economic interests but was also a member

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81 Hanna, Na’am... Aqbat, 96.
82 al-Bishri, al-Muslimun, 677. For the full text of the report by the investigation committee, see Majdi Khalil, Aqbat al-Mahjar: Dirasa Maydaniyya Hawla Humum al-Westan wa-l-Muwatanatna (Cairo: Dar al-Khayyal, 1999), 322–42.
83 NARA, Bergus to Department of State, ‘What Ever Happened to Kemal Ramzi Stino?’, 18 October 1971, POL 15–1 EGY.
of a heterodox minority regarded by Sunni orthodoxy as heretical. His efforts to amend the constitution by abolishing the article stipulating that the President must be a Muslim gave the Brotherhood the opportunity for which they had been waiting to protest against the legitimacy of his regime and stir the masses up against it. Riots broke out in the large cities—Damascus, Aleppo, Hama and Hums—between February and May 1973 led by the Muslim Brotherhood, who referred to Assad as ‘Allah’s enemy’ and called for a jihad against the atheistic regime, forcing Assad to restore the clause.\(^86\)

In the customary manner of ruling elites, Assad proceeded to make an alliance with a religious element—the Lebanese Shi’ite religious leader Imam Musa al-Sadr. In exchange for the secular Ba’ath regime’s support of his popular-religious movement al-Sadr issued a religious ruling that the Alawis formed part of Shi’ite Islam. The regime’s uncompromisingly secularist approach began to change following the armed uprising of 1979–1982 led by the Muslim Brotherhood. In the wake of the suppression of the Islamic insurgency, the Assad regime established an alliance with the merchants and middle classes and the Ulama establishment, giving a free hand to prestigious Sunni religious figures, who established numerous religious colleges and schools.\(^87\) Ahmad and Hassan Kaftaru, Munira al-Qabasi, Muhammad Ghul Aghasi, Muhammad Habash, Muhammad Said al-Buti and many others thus created numerous religious institutions. The regime also allowed the formation of institutes dedicated to the memorization of the Quran and around 300 Islamically oriented charities.\(^88\) The Islamization process further expanded to include governmental curricula, Islamic education becoming an important component of the Grade 4–Grade 12 curriculum under Ba’ath auspices.

This not truly placating the Muslim Brotherhood, the outbreak of the second Lebanese civil war in April 1975 constituted a further golden opportunity for it to incite rebellion against the regime. The new Ba’ath state being interventionist and centralist by nature, it raised the Brotherhood’s fears of creeping secularization. In the greatest of ironies, the latter thus initiated an armed strike against the Ba’ath regime on the grounds that Assad supported the pro-Establishment Christian camp and opposed the secularization of the Lebanese state à la the anti-Establishment leftist camp supported by the Palestine Liberation Organization. The instrumentalization of religion explains the Muslim Brotherhood’s support of the anti-Establishment leftist forces in Lebanon—despite the socialist, secular pan-Arab ideology it shared with the Ba’ath Party itself and being under the leadership of Kamal Junblat, who was himself Druze and a member of a heterodox sect in Islam.\(^89\) The regime employed precisely the same tactics against the Muslim Brotherhood during the same period. Thus, for example, the suppression of the revolt in Hama in February 1982 was carried out by special units (composed primarily of Bedouin al-Shawaya tribes regarded as contemptible by other Bedouin) under the command of Ali Haydar and by defence forces composed mainly of Alawi militia under the command of Rifaat al-Assad.\(^90\)

During the 1970s up until the outbreak of the second Lebanese civil war, numerous controversies erupted between the Druze Kamal Junblat, who headed the anti-Establishment

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\(^{87}\)Ibid., 186; Abu Fakhr, A ‘yan al-Sham, 78.

\(^{88}\)Abu Fakhr, A ‘yan al-Sham, 76–7.

\(^{89}\)Sa’ad al-Din, al-Hukm al-Ba’thi, 305–9.

\(^{90}\)al-Hurani, Mudhakkirat, 4:3242–3.
leftist front, and Beirut’s traditional Sunni leaders. While Junblat sought to eliminate the confessional structure in Lebanon, the latter called for the structure to be reformed by granting them a large share of power. In an attempt to undermine the status Junblat had gained amongst the Beirut Sunni middle class, the Sunni leader Saab Salam began attacking him by drawing attention to the fact that he was a Druze whose goal was to dominate the Lebanese Sunnis.91

Junblat adopted the same sectarian-political approach against the Ba’ath regime in Syria when the leftist anti-Establishment front split from the regime in the wake of Syria’s invasion of Lebanon. The outbreak of clashes between the secular leftist anti-Establishment front and the Syrian regime signalled the shift from a formal to an informal system, Junblat beginning to promote a discourse highlighting the regime’s Alawi character, asserting that it had sent its army to rescue its twin Maronite political structure in Lebanon. He thus embarked on an unprecedented P.R. campaign against the Ba’ath regime that focused on its Nusayri (rather than Alawi) character in order to incite the Syrian-Sunni majority against it—despite himself belonging to a heterodox minority regarded by Sunni Islam as heretical. Claiming to be seeking to eliminate the confessional regime in Lebanon in the name of secularism and revolutionarism, he played the religious-sectarian card in order to undermine the legitimacy of the Syrian ruling elite.92

The sectarian conflict in Syria was primarily between the Alawi minority and Sunni majority. Syrian society being religiously varied and pluralist, however, had sectarianism been exclusively a product of religious difference we would have expected it to have been much broader in scope than it actually was. The fact that it was not primarily limited to two communities struggling for power and influence leaves no doubt regarding the connection between the elite’s patterns of behaviour and the rise of political sectarianism in Syria. Like other countries in the Fertile Crescent and Egypt, the elites in Syria employed religion as a way of gaining power/legitimacy or undermining the legitimacy of others. In Lebanon, where sectarianism has served as the traditional form of rule, the Maronite political establishment realized that the best way to curb the leftist and anti-Establishment challenge and to restore legitimacy to the confessional system was to promote and politicize Shi’ite identity. This understanding is reflected in the rapport between Sadr and the Lebanese state and the former’s establishment of the Islamic Shi’ite High Council in 1969.93

Conclusion

An overview of the socio-political history of the Arab states in the Middle East indicates that virtually all those with a religiously heterogenic populace have witnessed violent sectarian conflict, this erupting into bloody civil war in Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen and most recently Syria. While religious tension in Egypt never escalated into civil war, the country did not escape sectarian violence, this becoming more prevalent from the 1970s onwards. This fact has led many to conclude that fragmentation and violent struggle are the inevitable outcome of communal or religious pluralism. The fact that some countries with larger and more heterogeneous populaces have not been plagued by sectarian problems casts doubt on this

93Hilal Khashan, ‘Lebanon’s Shi’ite-Maronite Alliance of Hypocrisy’, Middle East Quarterly 19, no. 3 (2012): 83.
thesis, however. The United States, which has a large migrant population and essentially heterogenic character, presents a completely different model, ethnic and cultural pluralism lying at the heart of the American success story. A lateral comparison of the Arab model with that adopted in India, the U.S., Malaysia etc. raises questions regarding the validity of the thesis that religious and communal pluralism inexorably leads to fragmentation and violence—despite the potential for this that exists in every pluralist reality. Religious or communal pluralism does not categorically lead to political sectarianism; the development of pluralism into a violence-inducing trend in the Arab Middle East can thus be adduced as dependent upon other factors—first and foremost the behavioural patterns of the elite.

This article has evinced that political sectarianism in its various forms is not an inevitable result of a pluralistic reality but the product of the cultural patterns, modes of behaviour and interests of the ruling elite. It reveals the close link between the elites’ patterns of behaviour and the emergence of sectarianism as a formative element within Arab politics. While the imperial legacy, theological controversies and socio-economic gaps feed political sectarianism, in and of themselves they are insufficient to cause it. While they have always existed, sectarianism as a model of political organization and formal/informal activity is dependent upon the rise of hegemony and Western modernization in the region, its continued existence being a function of a complex matrix of elite interests and behavioural patterns.

A survey of the history of Egypt and the other countries in the Fertile Crescent reveals that sectarianism emerged when a powerful factor exploited differences or commonalities to create an imaginary identification between its power and the general interest of the masses or even an ‘imaginary communal interest’ linked to the powerful configuration of the elite. In a certain sense, sectarianism thus serves as a tool of control in the elites’ hands, designed to maintain their power, undermine their rivals and/or mobilize the masses in their support. In and of itself, religious divergence does not necessarily create political sectarianism. The latter only develops when a powerful factor succeeds in co-opting the religiously similar or different in order to promote the political goal of joint leadership and control of the Other. This factor is frequently the elite, which Gramsci calls a class that determines the social standing of its allies and controls the status of others. We must thus distinguish between the historical-religious text itself and the way in which it is employed by the elite to provoke political sectarianism.

The dualism adduced at the beginning of this article well reflects the elites’ attitude towards religion and religious/communal identification. But more importantly, it explains the configuration of sectarianism within the social and political mechanisms of Arab elites. While on the official, explicit plane it is denied and repudiated, informally the elites engage in a systematic attempt to politicize difference or commonality as a means of controlling the masses. Characterizing the elites’ attitude towards Islam, dualism towards religion feeds sectarianism. As a direct continuation of the elites’ cultural value-system and normative dualism, they have developed two political strategies—an official, national, state policy and an unofficial, undeclared politicization of the sub-state and pre-modern frameworks. This pattern of dualistic politics is an outcome of the disposition of dualism grounded in the habitus that the elites in Arab societies have developed.

The essentialist-deterministic approach that regards pluralism as necessarily leading to sectarianism does not stand the test of historical facts, sectarianism not always being a

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formative element in the history of Egypt or the Fertile Crescent while pluralism forms a fundamental component of the region’s cultural and religious dimension. Although religious, communal or cultural fragmentation (Israel, for example) may give birth to sectarianism, this outcome is dependent first and foremost on the ruling elites’ patterns of behaviour—or those of the counter-elite. In the eyes of many critics in the region, the elites’ political instrumentalization of religious or communal differences forms a striking example of their intrinsic weakness, numerous important studies having been published arguing for the inherent impotence of the territorial state in the Arab Middle East. Whether viewing sectarianism as another expression of this feebleness or not, this study evinces that sectarianism is first and foremost a product of the elites’ quest for power.

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