

**FPC Briefing: Constructing Sectarianisms and Conflict in the Middle East**  
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When discussing the evolution of conflict in the Middle East, many scholars and practitioners have referred to the increase in sectarianism as the main driving force behind the increase in violence. Sectarianism, taken to be 'the promotion and deliberate deployment of sect-based allegiance in the pursuit of political ends'<sup>1</sup> appears especially important in the Middle East given the ethno-religious complexity of the region. While much has been written about the rise in sectarianism across the region, there are two flaws in this analysis. Firstly, analysis of sectarianism assumes a binary conflict, yet this often belies the complexity of the situation across the region. When talking of Sunni and Shi'a groups in conflict, analysis often fails to recognise complexity within both Sunni and Shi'a forms of Islam, which are not homogenous entities. Addressing this flaw is beyond the scope of this analysis, yet it remains imperative to remember the fractious nature of broad identities. Secondly, links have yet to be clearly drawn between the increase in the use of sectarian narratives and the geopolitics of the region. Indeed, the rise in sectarianism across the region, like much sectarian discourse, is constructed to reflect changing geopolitical considerations.

For Saudi Arabia and Iran, sectarian narratives provide an opportunity to secure themselves, their geopolitical allies, and to weaken the external 'other'. As Andrew Hammond notes, Saudi Arabia is seeking to cultivate sectarian spaces, with the construction of sectarian narratives playing a key role in the Al Saud's foreign policy.<sup>2</sup> The prominent location of sectarianism within foreign policy demonstrates the importance of 'othering'. This sectarian narrative is often fused with the idea of being 'Iranian backed', fostering ideas of 'othering' and increasing tensions regionally.

This has manifested itself in four main areas of competition: Syria, Lebanon, Bahrain, and Iraq. This brief will unpack the four main areas in which sectarian conflict appears to be occurring, then locate this sectarianism within a broader geopolitical context, namely the increasing proxy conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

### **In Syria**

The conflict in Syria is perhaps the best example of the growth in sectarian violence, with (what is left of) the state experiencing a civil war that pits the regime (and Shi'a groups) against the majority Sunni population. While protests were initially inspired by the Arab Revolutions, events in Syria have become increasingly violent and sectarian, possessing an existential aspect. Of the roughly 22 million population (although the veracity of this number is difficult to verify), somewhere in the region of 74% are Sunni Muslims and 13% are Shi'a Muslims of Alawi.<sup>3</sup> The ferocity of the conflict has resulted in a death toll that has surpassed 100,000 people, and which the UN has stopped counting, given the difficulty in verifying statistics.<sup>4</sup>

The Syrian conflict possesses a strong geopolitical aspect, given Syria's strategic importance to Iran, permitting safe passage to Hizballah in Lebanon. Given this, Syria is incredibly important for Iran and Hizballah, demonstrated by the presence of members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) in Syria, along with increasing numbers of Hizballah fighters from Lebanon. As Madawi Al Rasheed argued, the outbreak of conflict presented Saudi Arabia with an opportunity to 'win Syria

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<sup>1</sup> Fatima Ayub, *Introduction: The Gulf and Sectarianism*, (European Council on Foreign Relations), Available at: [http://ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR91\\_GULF\\_ANALYSIS\\_AW.pdf](http://ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR91_GULF_ANALYSIS_AW.pdf) p2

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Hammond, *Saudi Arabia, Cultivating Sectarian Spaces: The Gulf and Sectarianism*, (European Council on Foreign Relations), Available at: [http://ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR91\\_GULF\\_ANALYSIS\\_AW.pdf](http://ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR91_GULF_ANALYSIS_AW.pdf) p5

<sup>3</sup> Who are held to be sect of Shi'ism.

<sup>4</sup> Kashmira Gandar, *UN to Stop Updating Death Toll in Syria*, (The Independent, 07.01.14) Available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/un-to-stop-updating-death-toll-in-syria-conflict-9045096.html>

back to the Arab fold',<sup>5</sup> by providing support to opposition groups the Saudi Arabian Al Saud regime is seeking to challenge the long standing alliance between the Assad family and Iran.

### **In Bahrain**

In Bahrain, conflict between the ruling Sunni elite and the majority Shi'a population has been cultivated in the aftermath of uprisings in 2011. Estimates as to the size of the Shi'a population range from 55% to 75% although this percentage is decreasing as a consequence of the strategies employed by the Bahraini Al Khalifa ruling family to address this imbalance. While initially beginning as a pro-democracy protest, comprised of different ethno-religious groups, the Al Khalifa regime has cultivated a sectarian narrative in an effort to maintain control.

The location of Bahrain's archipelago is perhaps the key reason for the state's importance within the Middle East. Lying 25 kilometres off the Eastern coast of Saudi Arabia, but only 200 kilometres from the western coast of Iran, Bahrain has become embroiled in a proxy conflict between the two regional powers. The ease of access between Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, via by the 25 kilometre King Fahd causeway, the Al Saud does not wish for instability in such close proximity. Furthermore, there is the perception that Iran has aspirations over the sovereignty of Bahrain, with historical and contemporary claims to ownership over the archipelago,<sup>6</sup> which is furthered by a belief that Iran has been behind the unrest in Bahrain. The second reason Bahrain is important for Saudi Arabia is because of the ethno-religious composition of the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. The Eastern Province, home to the cities of Dammam, Khobar and Al Qatif, is the location of the largest oil field in the world. It is also the location of Saudi Arabia's Shi'a population. The Al Saud is wary of unrest within their Shi'a community, especially given the location of oil reserves in the province. The history of unrest in the Eastern Province<sup>7</sup> has led some to suggest that this unrest is a consequence of Iranian influence, or that the Shi'a of the Eastern Province are members of a 'fifth column'.

### **In Lebanon**

In Lebanon, the spill over from Syria is becoming progressively violent, with an increasing number of clashes between the Shi'a supported Hizballah and Sunni supported Al Qa'ida affiliated groups. Lebanese society is a melange of religious identities, with Muslims totalling some 54% of the population, with Sunnis and Shi'a comprising approximately 27% each. The rivalry between Sunni and Shi'a has become enshrined within two political factions, operating with external support: the March 8th Alliance, comprised of Iran, Hizballah, Syria and several Lebanese actors and the March 14th Alliance, the pro-Hariri coalition, supported by Saudi Arabia.<sup>8</sup>

Given the ties between former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and Saudi Arabia<sup>9</sup>, the aftermath of Hariri's assassination and the Cedar Revolution of March 2005 appeared to foster outright competition between two factions within Lebanon. While a cold peace remained, despite the outbreak of conflict between Hizballah and Israel and 2006, it appears that the civil war in Syria, coupled with Hizballah's involvement in the conflict has resulted in spill over into Lebanon.

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<sup>5</sup> Madawi Al-Rasheed, *The Saudi response to the 'Arab Spring': containment and co-option* (Open Democracy, 10.01.12), Available from: <http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/madawi-al-rasheed/saudi-response-to-%E2%80%98arab-spring%E2%80%99-containment-and-co-option> [Accessed 15.01.12].

<sup>6</sup> Kayhan & historical

<sup>7</sup> See: Toby Matthieson, *The Shi'a of Saudi Arabia at a Crossroads*, Middle East Report Online, (May 6 2009) Available from: <http://www.merip.org/mero050609.html>

<sup>8</sup> Wehrey, Frederick., Karasik, Theodore W., Nader, Alireza., Ghez, Jeremy J., Hansell, Lydia., Guffey, Robert A., *Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam: Rivalry, Cooperation, and Implications for U.S. Policy* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2009). p79.

<sup>9</sup> International Crisis Group, *Lebanon's Politics: The Sunni Community and Hariri's Future Current*, Available from: [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Lebanon/96%20Lebanons%20Politics%20-%20The%20Sunni%20Community%20and%20Hariris%20Future%20Current.ashx](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Lebanon/96%20Lebanons%20Politics%20-%20The%20Sunni%20Community%20and%20Hariris%20Future%20Current.ashx)



In recent weeks, Beirut has suffered from several explosions, mainly located around the Hizballah controlled suburbs of south Beirut. It is believed that many of these explosions were carried out by various groups affiliated to Al Qa'ida. In the immediate aftermath of a bombing on 21<sup>st</sup> January in which four people were killed, the Al Qa'ida affiliated Al Nusra released a statement claiming responsibility for the attack, stating that it was carried out in retaliation for 'the massacres of the party of Iran [Hezbollah] against the children of Syria'.<sup>10</sup> This follows the assassination of a prominent anti-Assad politician in December, and continued violence between Sunni and Alawite groups in Tripoli.

### **In Iraq**

Sectarian violence in Iraq has been increasing since the overthrowing of Saddam Hussein in 2003. The removal of Ba'ath party infrastructure removed key mechanisms that were preventing the emergence of large-scale outbreaks of violence. According to UN statistics, 2013 saw the largest number of deaths in Iraq in five years, with at least 7,818 civilians killed, along with 1,050 members of security forces.<sup>11</sup> In addition, an estimated 140,000 Iraqis have fled their homes.<sup>12</sup>

The ethnic constitution of Iraq means that aspects of the population are open to interference from neighbouring states, particularly in light of the US withdrawal. Indeed, a strong concern exists that 'tribes would turn to neighbouring states for help, thus becoming a vehicle for the conflict's further regionalisation. Arab states, seeking to promote their influence, counter Iran's or pursue a sectarian, Sunni agenda might pick up where the U.S let off'.<sup>13</sup> It should be noted that for the most part, 'Iraq's Shiite actors engage only with external Shiite parties just as Iraq's Sunnis deal exclusively with Sunni states. By the same token, neighbouring states are inclined to deal with their co-religionists'.<sup>14</sup> Although, it is important to note that Saudi support has previously been through the financing of Sunni groups by private individuals.<sup>15</sup>

Aside from the increasing involvement of external actors one of the key factors in the increasing death toll in Iraq has been President Nouri Al-Maliki appearing to advocate a portfolio of increasingly sectarian policies. This is coupled with the renaissance of Al Qa'ida affiliated organisations in and around the Anbar province, namely the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI). This has also been fostered by the passage of individuals from Syria, and the porous borders across the region. With the increasing fragmentation of states in the region, the passage of individuals across borders is becoming easier, allowing groups such as ISI to move freely across borders, fanning the flames of sectarianism.

### **Conclusions**

While it is clear that sectarian violence is rising across the Middle East, it is imperative to remember the geopolitical roots underpinning this sectarian violence. With negotiations continuing over Iran's nuclear programme, following the phone call between Obama and Rouhani a perceived burgeoning US – Iranian rapprochement appears to be taking place. In light of this, Saudi Arabia has employed a

<sup>10</sup> David Kenner, 'How One Beirut Street Found Itself on the Front Lines of a Regional War', *Foreign Policy*, Available from:

[http://www.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2014/01/21/how\\_one\\_beirut\\_street\\_found\\_itself\\_on\\_the\\_front\\_lines\\_of\\_a\\_regional\\_war](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2014/01/21/how_one_beirut_street_found_itself_on_the_front_lines_of_a_regional_war)

<sup>11</sup> *Iraq's annual death toll highest in five years – UN*, (BBC, 01.01.14), Available from: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-25568687>

<sup>12</sup> *Thousands flee fighting in Iraq's Fallujah*, (Al Jazeera, 10.01.14), Available from:

<http://www.aljazeera.com/video/middleeast/2014/01/thousands-flee-fighting-iraq-fallujah-2014110134156502517.html>

<sup>13</sup> International Crisis Group interview in April 2008, in International Crisis Group, *Iraq After The Surge 1: The New Sunni Landscape*, Available from:

[http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Iraq/74\\_iraq\\_after\\_the\\_surge\\_i\\_the\\_new\\_sunni\\_landscape.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Iraq/74_iraq_after_the_surge_i_the_new_sunni_landscape.pdf) Accessed 12.02.12]. p15.

<sup>14</sup> Group interview, senior Sadrists official, November 2007, in International Crisis Group, *Iraq's Civil War, The Sadrists and the Surge*, Available from:

[http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Iraq/72\\_iraq\\_s\\_civil\\_war\\_the\\_sadrists\\_and\\_the\\_surge.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Iraq/72_iraq_s_civil_war_the_sadrists_and_the_surge.pdf) [Accessed 12.02.12].

<sup>15</sup> Frederick Wehrey, Theodore W. Karasik, Alireza Nader, *et al* Op. Cit., p63.

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strategy of using sectarianism to affect the geopolitical dynamics of the region, ensuring that its regional allies remain in line, and continue to be wary of Iranian action. Yet in cultivating sectarianism, Riyadh is pouring fuel onto the fire of a conflict that continues to engulf the Middle East and entire Muslim world.