

Toby Dodge, 'Themed Section Introduction: Between *Wataniyya* and *Ta'ifia*; understanding the relationship between state based nationalism and sectarian identity in the Middle East'.

'The Mashreq today is in the midst of a major reconstitution of its bodies, social and politic, by political sectarianism effecting a transmutation of denominations into sects' (Al-Azmeh 2017).

Each of the four papers in this themed section seek to explain why the modern history of the Middle East, especially since the end of the First World War, has seen a number of states, created through colonial intervention, struggle to mould trans-state and sub-state identities into coherent territorially based nationalisms. The four papers examine the latest phase of this struggle, which has seen identities based on religious communalism rival, and in some cases triumph over, territorially based nationalisms. To do this, the papers use case studies that include Iraq (Dodge and Haddad) and Syria (Hinnebusch), with Valbjørn developing a more general theoretical argument. Central to all the papers in this themed section is the key analytical point that identities are being constantly challenged and redefined. Thus, the papers caution against a dichotomous or indeed coherent relationship between the secular, the national and the religious; instead they argue for a relational or dialectic interaction that creates a contested fluidity which is the outcome of the on-going struggle to dominate the political field. As Haddad argues, 'sectarian identity in the age of the nation-state is as much a function of competing *national* truths and contested claims to the nation-state as it is a function of competing religious truths'.

This introduction will identify the main arguments that the four papers develop but also locate them in the wider theoretical, comparative and historical perspectives from which they originate. First, it places the study of communalist or sectarian identities in the Middle East in the broader comparative debate about the study of ethnic and nationalist identities. It then examines the causalities underpinning the shifting relationship between these different identities in the Middle East. Taking modernity as a starting point, it details the integration of the region into a globalising capitalist market from the mid-nineteenth century onwards and the transformations that caused. Then, it examines the external imposition and growth in coherence and capacity of geographically delineated states. As Hinnebusch argues in his paper, global capitalism retained a powerful ability to penetrate and transform the states and societies of the region, with the rise to global dominance of neo-liberal policy prescriptions forcing states to abandon the economic populist policies of inclusion, instead fostering crony capitalism and creating the space for sectarianism to flourish. Finally, this introduction surveys the role that a series of extended wars played in the forging of and competition between different sets of identities, trans-state Arab Nationalism (*Qawmiyya*), state-based nationalism (*Wataniyya*) and religious and ethnic identities (*Ta'ifia*). All four papers have been written within and interact with these wider theoretical, comparative and historical themes.

Rogers Brubaker, in his book *Nationalism Reframed*, argues that 'Nationalism is not engendered by nations ... it is induced - by *political fields* of particular kinds' (Brubaker 1996: 17). Under this analytical rubric, placed at the centre of Dodge's paper, nationalism, ethnicity and sectarianism can all be viewed as relational categories of practice, in competition with each other for the allegiance of a

population contained within a political field (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 4). Against this background, as Hinnebusch argues, the competition between Arab Nationalism, state-based nationalism, Islamism and sectarianism in the Middle East utilises both ideology and institutions, in an interactive struggle to impose competing categories of practice. All four papers in this themed section take, as their main focus, religious and sectarian categories of practise, juxtaposed against nationalism.

Ussama Makdisi defines sectarianism as ‘a process - not an object, not an event, and certainly not a primordial trait’ (Makdisi 2008). This process, as detailed in Dodge’s paper, sees politicians or sectarian entrepreneurs, seeking to impose religious difference as the ‘primary marker of modern political identity’ (Makdisi 2000: 7). As Hinnebusch argues in his paper and the work of Fredrik Barth details, agents involved in this process seek to solidify both the internal coherence of each religious group but, more importantly, the boundaries that divide groups from each other (Barth 1969: 15). The main division that sectarianism in the Middle East seeks to solidify and amplify and the one focused on by all four papers, is the distinction within Islam between its Sunni and Shi’a wings. Sectarianism, as a category of practice, is the reification of this distinction, its politicisation and then the solidification of the internal membership of each of the opposing groups, ‘the transfiguration of the social fact of groups of kin, locality and religious affiliation, into political actors denominated by a sectarian signature’ (Al-Azmeh 2017).

In the contemporary Middle East, religious identities and their competitive interaction with a secular nationalism have become the two primary contestants within the political field. However, as Hinnebusch and Haddad argue in their papers, unlike the

religious conflicts in Europe in 16th and 17th centuries, the religious content involved in sectarian encounters in the Middle East is not dominant. The struggle is not primarily focused on theological arguments around who had the right to lead Islam after the death of Mohamed or doctrinal or organisation differences between these two branches of Islam. As Dodge and Haddad argue, it is at base, a struggle to define and control different categories of practice and impose them on a country's political field.

Against this background, the study of sectarianism's interactive struggle with nationalism in the political fields of the Middle East can be placed firmly within the wider comparative study of nationalism and ethnicity. All four papers interact in detail with these theories and units of analysis. However, all of the papers, especially Valbjørn's, seek to get beyond, in different ways, the dichotomous theoretical debates between primordialism, modernism, ethno-symbolism and instrumentalism. Valbjørn, in his paper, scrutinises each of these approaches in turn, arguing that their supposedly dichotomous relationship is an unsustainable caricature. Both Dodge and Hinnebusch use a broad and pluralist reading of constructivism as an umbrella for incorporating the strengths of the competing theories. Dodge deploys the sociological theories of Pierre Bourdieu, in an attempt to capture the analytical insights of both instrumentalism and ethno-symbolism. However, Valbjørn warns that nothing approaching a new conventional constructivist wisdom has emerged in the study of sectarianism. Instead, he identifies a myriad of differed, if not competing approaches; all seeking to transcend what Gorski and Turkmen-Dervisoglu label the 'macro-culturalist'-'micro-rationalist' divide (Gorski and Turkmen-Dervisoglu, 2013). Haddad revisits his previous use of ethno-symbolism (Haddad 2013) to question the

analytical utility of the term sectarianism, suggesting instead that the focus should be shifted to a more focused sectarian *identity*, which he understands as a multi-layered concept.

The modernist school of nationalism, as personified by the differing approaches taken by Benedict Anderson and Ernest Gellner, has a strong but not uncritical influence in the study of nationalism and sectarianism in the Middle East. As with wider debates on nationalism, Anderson and Gellner's work has been critiqued in the Middle East for structural teleology, overstating the power of the state to transform identities and hence for claims about national homogeneity (Hutchinson 2005). The Ottoman Middle East and with it the identities of its population, was certainly transformed with the area's integration into a globalising capitalist market in the mid-nineteenth. This process was accelerated by the Ottoman Empire's defensive modernisation, personified by the *Tanzimat* reforms during the same period. However, as Ussama Makdisi persuasively argues, this transformation was not unilinear nor modular, it certainly drove the birth of nationalism but also sectarian political identities. In 1869 the Ottomans introduced the concept of secular citizenship unleashing what Makdisi has labelled the 'the ecumenical *nahda*', or awakening. It is from this moment that he dates a struggle within a new, if nascent, political field, between 'the culture of sectarianism' and nationalism, with the nationalist narrative damning sectarianism, *ta'ifia*, as 'being antithetical to modern national development' (Makdisi 2000: 166). The result across the region was a struggle about the boundaries of competing political fields, who had a right to claim membership of these fields and on what basis.

As Hinnebusch argues in his paper, the second great causal mechanism shaping both nationalist and sectarian identities was the forced external imposition of territorially limited states and the institutional centralisation that came with them. This came to North Africa under the auspices of French colonialism from 1830 and to Syria and Iraq under French and British colonialism in 1920, in the aftermath of World War One, justified under a League of Nations Mandate. As Breuilly and Calhoun argue, states both accelerate the imposition of capitalist relations but also homogenised life within their boundaries, with state policies and the major cultural and economic changes they herald, shaping a sense of national identity (Breuilly 1993; Calhoun 1993). But, as with the transformatory effects of a capitalist modernity, the influence of exogenous state imposition and then indigenous state building were neither modular nor unilinear (Hutchinson 2005). The societies that these states were imposed upon already had strong socio-economic organisational and cultural structures in place (Ayubi 1993: 135-6). A modernist transformation under Ottoman centralisation initially gave rise to a counter linguistic conception of nationalism based on Arabic. It was this pan-Arabism that Hinnebusch's paper argues was 'the hegemonic identity in the Arab world' for the first forty years of state building. Weakly institutionalised states with low legitimacy had to contend with and seek to co-opt pan-Arab categories of nationalist practice and non-territorial political fields.

Michael Barnett suggests that it was only after the cataclysmic defeat that the Arab armies suffered at the hands of Israel in the 1967 that there was a decisive shift from *qawmiyya* (a pan-Arab national identity), to *wataniyya* (state identity) (Barnett 1998). Hinnebusch's paper details the growing power of state institutions during this period, with etatist development plans allowing the state to dominate the national economy

and shape the lives of its population. He details how this allowed the state to enmesh increasing numbers of the population in a wide array of corporatist bodies.

However, the early 1970s marked the high point in the coherence, power and legitimacy of Arab states. This was followed by economic crisis and the rise of what Hinnebusch labels post-populist policies that saw the state attempt to renege on its social contract with the population, withdraw from the economy and seek alliances with a previously repressed national bourgeoisie and trans-national capital. This post-popular politics was justified in the name of a new neo-liberal path to development. It is this crisis of the Arab state and post-colonial states more generally, labelled by Fred Halliday as the 'greater West Asian crisis', which saw a steep decline in state legitimacy, the withdrawal of its economic institutions from society and an increasing dependence upon coercion and corruption (Halliday 2002). As Hinnebusch details in his Syrian case study, *asabiyya*, or the deployment of solidarity based on communalism and sectarianism, paralleled and was balanced by the populist policies pursued by Hafiz al Asad. However, once populism was abandoned, only *asabiyya* was left, now associated with the corruption of crony capitalism and the spread of alienation across the political field.

As predicted by both Geertz and Rothchild, the failure of the 'integrative revolution' saw the state in the Middle East become a focus for resentment often framed in terms of ethnic or sectarian categories of practise (Gertz 1993: 255-310; Rothchild 1981: 235, 247). The political field was now shaped by the failure of post-colonial etatist development and hence the weakening of secular territorial nationalisms.

Governments faced with this financial and ideological crisis resorted to *asabiyya* based patronage and coercion as a strategy of survival.

This is the background to the 2010-2011 'Arab Spring'. Young people, with no memory of the liberation from colonialism, state-driven development nor the wars against Israel, mobilised against sclerotic, de-legitimised regimes, personified by brutal repression and overt corruption. As Hinnebusch argues, these initial protests, which in the case of Syria degenerated into civil war, were based on nationalist not sectarian categories of practice. However, it is in moments of contention, like the conflict in Syria or regime change in Iraq that the categories of practise, secular, religious and national, that dominate the political field, can be successfully challenged and transformed (Baczko, Dorronsoro, and Quesnay 2017).

As indicated above, along with the transformations wrought by integration into a globalised capitalist market and the imposition, growth and decline of state capacity and legitimacy, the third great causality shaping identitarian competition within the region's political fields was war. Tilly's injunction that war made the state and the state made war is certainly correct for the Middle East but defeat in war became more influential than victory (Tilly 1992). Similarly, Hutchinson's study of the role of war in nationalism is right to stress the ambiguous role that it has played in state and nation building. War in the Middle East certainly provided the 'raw materials for ethnic *mythomoteurs* (constitutive myths)' but those myths have often been deployed by state elites to stress the belonging of one core section of society to the nation over others, thus putting divisive 'we-they' imagery to work to split the nation's collective self-identification, not unify it (Hutchinson 2005; Hutchinson 2018: 12).

The defeat of the Ottoman Empire during World War One was the founding act for those states, including Turkey, who were created out of its remnants. However, it was the Arab-Israeli conflict that played a central role in state and nation building across the region. The creation of the state of Israel in 1948 and the defeat of the Arab armies who tried to prevent it, 'sent shock waves through the Arab world for decades, and did much to promote a more radical Arab nationalism and sense of Arab identity' (Halliday 2005: 111). The role of Israel as regional enemy did much to justify state building and the lack of democracy. However, as detailed above, the defeat in the 1967 war played a central role in the de-legitimisation of Arab Nationalism, creating the space for territorial nationalism to dominate Arab political fields.

It was the Iranian revolution, the threat that a radical trans-national Shi'a Islamism posed to its neighbours and the ensuing eight-year Iran-Iraq war, that did much to encourage the ruling elites of Middle Eastern states to utilise an overtly sectarian narrative. The Iraqi regime and the ruling elites of the Arab Gulf states used a sectarian category of practise to mobilise and solidify the Sunni sections of their societies. In doing so, they drew this portion of their political field closer to the ruling elites but alienated their sizable Shi'a populations, marginalising them within a national narrative that drew attention to the increasingly inequality of citizenship. The influence of this dynamic, driven by regime vulnerability in the face of revolution, has led Laurence Louër to argue that a general understanding of 'sectarianism' cannot be accurately deployed to understand Gulf politics as a whole before the Iranian revolution and the onset of the Iran-Iraq war (Louër 2013: 118).

If the Iranian revolution and the Iran-Iraq war placed sectarianism at the centre of the strategies for survival of the region's ruling elites, then the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and its bloody aftermath made *ta'ifia*, or sectarianism as a category of practise, a common principle in both popular and elite discourse. It is this case study that Dodge uses to examine the rise to dominance of ethno-sectarian categories of practise in Iraq's political field. Invasion and regime change coincided with two other political and technical innovations. First, it marked a new level of instability driven by the 'greater West Asian crisis'. Across the region, non-oil producing states were faced with fiscal crisis, de-legitimisation and the failure of neo-liberal programmes of structural adjustment (Gause 2014). Secondly, the invasion was preceded by a marked expansion in satellite television across the Middle East, freeing up debate in the non-territorial media. The invasion of Iraq coincided with the uptake of social media across the region that pluralised the production and consumption of opinions and news, sectarianism for above was now joined by a new, technologically empowered, populist sectarianism from below (Byman 2014: 86-7, Dodge 2014). In Iraq, Dodge details a series of post regime change governments that were built around the principle of *muhāsasa ta'ifia*, sectarian apportionment, placing the institutionalisation of sectarianism at the centre of a major state on the eastern flank of the Arab world.

All four papers seek to examine but also problematise the relationship between nationalism and sectarianism. They do this by critically interacting with the dominant academics and schools that have shaped the study of nationalist and ethnic identities. In doing so they seek to understand the transformation of the Middle East through

modernity, war and state building but also seek to further develop the theoretical approaches to understanding religious, secular, national and communal identities.

References.

Ayubi, Nazih N. 1995. *Over-stating the Arab State. Politics and Society in the Middle East*. London: I.B. Tauris.

Al-Azmeh, Aziz. 2017. 'Sectarianism and Antisectarianism', Keynote address Rice University/University of Houston Conference on Anti-Sectarianism', <https://www.strikingmargins.com/news-1/2017/12/20/prof-aziz-al-azmeh-sectarianism-and-antisectarianism>.

Barnett, Michael N. 1998. *Dialogues in Arab Politics; Negotiations of Regional Order*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Barth, Fredrik. 1969. 'Introduction', in Fredrik Barth (ed), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries. The Social Organization of Culture Difference*. Boston, Massachusetts: Little, Brown and Company.

Baczko, A., Dorronsoro, G., and Quesnay, A. 2017. *Civil War in Syria; Mobilization and Competing Social Orders*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Kindle version.

Breuilly, John. 1993. *Nationalism and the State*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Brubaker, Rogers. 1996. *Nationalism Reframed*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Brubaker, Rogers and Cooper, Frederick, 2002. 'Beyond "Identity"', *Theory and Society*, 29,1: 1-47.

Byman, Daniel. 2014. 'Sectarianism afflicts the new Middle East', *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, 56, 1: 79-100 .

Calhoun, Craig. 1993. 'Nationalism and Ethnicity', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 19: 211-239

Dodge, Toby. 2014. 'Seeking to explain the rise of sectarianism in the Middle East: The case study of Iraq', Project on Middle East Political Science, <https://pomeps.org/2014/03/19/seeking-to-explain-the-rise-of-sectarianism-in-the-middle-east-the-case-study-of-iraq/>.

Gause III, F. Gregory. 2014. 'Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War', Brookings Doha Center, Analysis Paper, 11, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/English-PDF-1.pdf>.

Geertz, Clifford. 1993. 'The Integrative Revolution. Primordial sentiments and civil politics in the new states', in C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures, Selected essays*. London: Fontana.

Gorski, Philip S. and Turkmen-Dervisoglu, Gulay. 2013. 'Religion, Nationalism, and Violence: an Integrated Approach', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 39: 194-6.

Haddad, Fanar. 2013. *Sectarianism in Iraq; Antagonistic Visions of Unity*. London: Hurst & Co.

Halliday, Fred. 2002. *Two hours that shook the world; September 11, 2001: causes and consequences*. London: Saqi Books.

Halliday, Fred. 2005. *The Middle East in International Relations; power, politics and ideology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hutchinson, John. 2005. *Nations as zones of conflict*. London: Sage.

Hutchinson, John. 2018. 'Bringing the study of warfare into theories of nationalism', *Nations and Nationalism*, 24, 1: 6–21.

Louër, Laurence. 2013. 'The state and sectarian identities in the Persian Gulf Monarchies: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait in comparative perspective', in Lawrence G. Potter, (ed), *Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf*. London: Hurst & Co.

Makdisi, Ussama. 2000. *The Culture of Sectarianism; Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press.

Makdisi, Ussama. 2008. 'Pensée 4: Moving Beyond Orientalist Fantasy, Sectarian Polemic, and Nationalist Denial', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 40, 4: 559-560.

Rothchild, Joseph. 1981. *Ethnopolitics, A Conceptual Framework*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Tilly, Charles. 1992. *Coercion, Capital, and European states, AD 990-1992*.