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Beyond a self-fulfilling prophecy: religion and conflict in the Middle East

Blog entry

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Beyond a self-fulfilling prophecy: religion and conflict in the Middle East

Beyond a self-fulfilling prophecy: religion and conflict in the Middle East

[Katerina Dalacoura](#) [1] 13 January 2014

Subjects:

- [International politics](#) [2]
- [Democracy and government](#) [3]
- [Culture](#) [4]
- [Conflict](#) [5]
- [Lebanon](#) [6]
- [Syria](#) [7]
- [Iraq](#) [8]
- [Libya](#) [9]
- [Egypt](#) [10]



[11]



[12]

Primordialism is back with a vengeance when it comes to analysing conflict in the Middle East. However, Libya and Egypt help us put religion in its proper place.

Speaking on BBC radio on 12 October 2013, shortly after the brief kidnap of the Libyan prime minister Ali Zeidan by armed militia, Alistair Burt, the former British Foreign Office minister for Middle East, made [a revealing comment](#) [13]: he said that, a year before, he had been optimistic about Libya because 'it was a single religion' scenario. He was proven wrong. More than two years after the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime, Libya is racked by conflict and the prospects for the country's pacification are slim.

Burt's erroneous estimation about Libya's prospects was based on a commonplace assumption: that conflict in the Middle East (as in other parts of the world) is caused by religious difference or heterogeneity, either within societies or between them.

As catastrophes in the Middle East multiply - death and destruction in Syria and Iraq, profound instability in Lebanon, political crisis in Egypt, chaos in Libya - the 'primordialists' are experiencing a comeback.

Their line is that primordial loyalties were never overcome by modernisation in the Middle East; and that they continue to undermine patriotic devotion to the nation-state and lead to violent conflict. Twenty or thirty years ago the primordial loyalties in question were deemed to be ethnic or tribal; nowadays, they are religious. The Sunni-Shia split is much in vogue.

Instances of the primordialist approach can be found in [numerous recent analyses](#) [14] which trace the root of current Middle East conflicts to the Sykes-Picot agreement: the 1916 deal between Britain and France which led to the carving up of the Arab core of the Middle East into discrete nation-states, taking little notice of the preferences of the local peoples.

These types of analysis have the semblance of being respectful of history but are, in fact, profoundly

ahistorical. They denigrate the people of the region by implying that they have remained unchanged through a hundred years of tumultuous political history, biding their time to 'return' to a narrow sense of community that has been the only thing that 'really' mattered to them since time immemorial. Harking back to an idealised European historical record, which elides the harsh role of power in the process of state formation in the old continent, they assume that there was an alternative 'organic' way in which nation-states could have emerged in the Middle East, heedful of the people's 'real' desires.

Such analyses ascribe the intensity of contemporary Middle East conflicts to the fact that many different sects (and other sub-state entities, such as ethnicities or tribes) were grouped together arbitrarily under one government. They argue that the greater the number of these groups the greater the propensity of the state to fail.

In lieu of such accounts, a historicised analysis of the present conflicts in the Middle East region, while not ignoring the role of religious identity and the strength of religious belief, would assign it its proper place: a place determined by the process of state formation, the function and scope of state institutions, the relationship between government and society, the division of wealth and power as well as the relationship between domestic and outside forces.



[15] Yassine

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To illustrate the point using a tangible example: a properly historicised analysis of the Lebanese conflicts would not attribute them to the fact that (more or less) eighteen religious and ethnic 'communities' coexist in one tiny country - but to the manner in which they have related to one another politically, and even socially and culturally; and the position, type and scope of the state institutions that emerged from the inter-war period onwards. Heterogeneity is not the reason why Lebanon has been wracked by civil war, for the same reasons that (ethnic) homogeneity has not prevented the failure of the Somali state over the past thirty years.

Don't let's exaggerate

With regards to the current Middle East situation, the cases of Libya and Egypt help us assign religion in its proper place rather than exaggerating its role. In Libya, religious extremism is undoubtedly present and is playing a destructive role; but it is only one element in the country's multiple causes of conflict. For the most part, the chaotic post-2011 situation must be attributed to the weakness of state institutions, the lack of a strong central state authority and the atrophied state

of civil society and political groups. All of these were systematically emasculated over decades by the Gaddafi regime, which opted instead for [an idiosyncratic method of divide and rule](#) [16], allowing only direct relationships of patronage and control (with the help of oil money) between the centre and the various segments of society.

Primordialists will quickly retort that Libya's current crisis can be attributed to the strength of the tribes and/or [the historical division](#) [17] between Tripolitania and Cyrenaica (the two parts which merged, with Fezzan, to create modern Libya). However, although tribal divisions are part of the jigsaw puzzle in Libya at present, they do not constitute the dominant lines of confrontation along which the parties to the conflict are organised. Furthermore, as elsewhere in the Middle East, tribes are not necessarily the 'natural' foci of allegiance of their members but have been artificially buttressed and manipulated by Gaddafi as levers of control. As for the internal territorial split, although it is true that the rebellion's mainstay in 2011 was in Benghazi – traditionally opposed to Gaddafi's Tripoli-centred rule – there is, again, no evidence that the country is at the present moment split in two or that the main driver of the conflict is the organised claim to independence of 'Cyrenaica'.

The case of Egypt allows us to draw similar conclusions about the role of religion, albeit for different reasons. The current crisis in Egypt is a political crisis; the role of religion in public life is one important element in it, but this does not constitute the central bone of contention. Egyptians [agree between themselves](#) [18] that Islam is an important marker of their identity and that religious values must be upheld, using public powers and institutions. The Brotherhood's demeaning and intolerant attitudes towards women and the Copts was an important reason why *some* Egyptians turned against them; but it was not the main cause of the groundswell of opposition to them. Let us be honest: for the majority of Egyptians, women and the Copts must be kept firmly in their place.

The main reason for the rejection of the Brotherhood in 2013 by a great number of those who had voted for it in the 2012 parliamentary and presidential elections was its failure to deliver in the vital areas of security and economic prosperity; as well as the perception that it went out of its way to place its own personnel in positions of power and control, and failed to collaborate with other political forces in the country, thus evincing a 'winner takes all' mentality. The Brotherhood's drop in popularity, in other words, was not primarily caused by its 'Islamic' agenda.

Applications further afield

Putting religion in its proper place, using the cases of Libya and Egypt, can help us think through present-day conflicts in Iraq and Syria (plus Lebanon) and, by extension, the regional clashes which are inter-linked with them.

These conflicts have undeniably turned sectarian, in that they pit Sunnis against Shia in the case of Iraq and Sunni, Christian, Shia and Alawite in the cases of Syria and Lebanon. The lines of confrontation are understood to be such by many of those directly involved in the fighting (although it is difficult to measure motives precisely or to distinguish sectarian from other loyalties). Therefore, it would be wishful thinking to deny that religion plays a key role in the bloodletting. One would also have to accept that Iraq and Syria may fracture along sectarian lines in future.

However, even if we accept that, at least in some cases, religious differences define the lines along which communities confront each other, they are not in themselves the causes of conflict between them. This is for two reasons.

The first is that the various parties to the conflicts in Iraq and Syria do not aim to convert other communities into their own faith or eradicate other faiths. The struggle, in other words, is not about spreading correct dogma. The objectives of the great majority of those involved are, to be precise about terminology, sectarian, not religious: to protect their 'own' group against outside attack and/or place it in a dominant position over others.

There is an exception here: the most radical of the Islamist groups, for example the al Qaeda franchise in Iraq and Syria which currently goes by the name of Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant

(ISIS), do arguably harbour goals of spreading 'true' religious belief as they see it or eradicating other faiths. But they are clearly in the minority and their harsh policies are already causing revulsion and resistance among their target populations.

The second reason why the causes of conflict are not religious is that they can be located somewhere else: the struggle in Iraq and Syria, and to some extent Lebanon, is over determining the structures of power and authority in what remains a fluid situation and altering the terms of co-existence between the various sectarian groups.

In the case of Iraq, the source of conflict is the loss of predominance by the Sunni minority; in the case of Syria, it is the threatened position of the Alawite minority. It is about safeguarding, maintaining or augmenting communities' entrenched rights, positions and privileges. This often translates into economic terms, too, as groups squabble over their share of the proverbial pie.

In conclusion

Defining the parties to a conflict along sectarian lines is a choice, one option among others. It is a sign of the times, a result of an excessive emphasis on 'religion', that outsiders to the Middle East region depict its conflicts in this manner, as opposed to formulating a more complex picture. Insiders increasingly do too, in what is often a self-fulfilling prophecy.

However, these facile labels must be constantly questioned to ascertain whether they do accurately represent realities on the ground – and these realities vary from case to case. For instance, in Syria, the al Assad regime is not only 'Alawite' but can be variously defined by ideology, region, clan and economic interest. In Iraq, sectarian divisions – partly as a result of the Americans who invaded in 2003 with pre-established notions about Sunni, Shia and Kurd – are arguably deeper and more entrenched than in Syria. Loyalty to 'Syria' may be stronger than loyalty to 'Iraq'. 'Religion' and 'sect' will only be useful in the analysis of Middle East conflicts if they are placed in proper context.

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 About the author

Katerina Dalacoura is an associate professor in the department of International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science who specializes in democracy and human rights in the Middle East with a special emphasis on Egypt, Iran, and Turkey. Her book [Islamist Terrorism and Democracy](#) [19] in the Middle East was published in April 2011 by Cambridge University Press.



[20]

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- [3] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/topics/democracy-and-government>
- [4] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/topics/culture>
- [5] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/topics/conflict>
- [6] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/countries/lebanon>
- [7] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/countries/syria>
- [8] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/countries/iraq>
- [9] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/countries/libya>
- [10] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/countries/egypt>
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