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SECTARIANISM FROM THE TOP DOWN OR BOTTOM UP? EXPLAINING THE MIDDLE EAST'S UNLIKELY DE- SECTARIANIZATION AFTER THE ARAB SPRING

By Justin Gengler

On September 14, 2019, pre-dawn strikes against two major Saudi oil facilities knocked out half the output of the world's largest oil exporter and raised the real prospect of direct armed confrontation between Saudi Arabia and its perennial rival Iran, which it blamed for the attacks (Hubbard, Karasz, and Reed 2019). The incident was the culmination of a decade of open hostility, mutual recriminations, and, in Syria and Yemen, effective proxy warfare. The episode is also, however, a stark illustration of an ongoing puzzle in the politics of the Persian Gulf and wider Middle East and North Africa: unlike at other points since the beginning of the Arab uprisings in 2011, the latest dramatic escalation in tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran has not been accompanied by a spike in sectarianism—or the conflation of the countries' geopolitical competition with their respective sponsorship of Sunni and Shi'i Islam. More generally, sectarian rhetoric at the elite and popular levels has notably dissipated across the region, with political conflicts much more likely to be described and analyzed in dry bureaucratic terms than attributed to primordial divisions. If sectarianism represents the politicization of confessional group

identity, then why has the increasing possibility of war between the Middle East's two political-cum-religious powers coincided with a years-long decrease rather than increase in sectarian conflict, incitement, and overall narrative?

The present essay explores this incongruence as a way of better understanding the nature and drivers of sectarianism and de-sectarianization in the MENA region. It makes two key arguments, supported by public opinion and other data that substantiate the marked decline in Arabs' concern over sectarianism since 2011. It argues, first, that

Abstract: Sectarian politics has retreated across the Middle East in the years after the Arab Spring, even as conflict between the region's two main sectarian actors—Iran and Saudi Arabia—has intensified. This essay explores this incongruence as a way of better understanding the nature and drivers of sectarianism and de-sectarianization in MENA states, supported by public opinion and other data that substantiate the post-2011 decline in Arabs' concern over sectarianism. It contends that the close correspondence between the rise and demise of the Arab Spring on the one hand, and that of sectarianism on the other, supports an instrumentalist interpretation of sectarian politics in the region.

Keywords: Sectarianism, de-sectarianization, Arab Spring, Middle East, public opinion

the loss of salience of sectarian division suggests that the processes of sectarianization are much more closely linked to local contests for power between political groupings and the state, as opposed to larger inter-state rivalry between country actors often ascribed a sectarian agenda. Second, it contends that the close correspondence between the rise and demise of the Arab Spring on the one hand, and that of sectarianism on the other, is evidence supporting an instrumentalist interpretation of sectarian politics in the Gulf and greater Middle East.

The Rise and Decline of Middle East Sectarianism after 2011

Public interest in and worry over the spread of sectarian conflict in MENA countries, and in the Gulf region in particular, has fallen off drastically since the onset of the Arab Spring in 2011. That year saw the spread of Arab demonstrations from confessionally-homogenous North Africa to a number of more religiously diverse societies: Yemen in January,¹ Bahrain in February, and Saudi Arabia and Syria in March. Suddenly, the Arab Spring had the impression not of a movement for change and democracy, but of a transnational settling of sectarian grievances. This conclusion was helped along by embattled Arab rulers, who delegitimized opponents as stooges of co-sectarian sponsors abroad. King Hamad of Bahrain, for instance, penned a *Washington Times* editorial justifying his government's deadly crackdown on Shi'a-led protests by claiming they "were hijacked by extremist elements with ties to

foreign governments in the region"—that is to say, Iran (Al Khalifa 2011).

Some indication of the power and ubiquity of the sectarian narrative at this time can be gleaned from the output of scholars. In 2013–2014 alone, there would appear three volumes on Middle East sectarianism (Matthiesen 2013; Potter 2014; Wehrey 2013), to be soon followed by several more (Hashemi and Postel 2017; Wehrey 2017). The spike in interest was not limited to academia, however. The idea of regional Sunni-Shi'i conflict, promoted by state-controlled satellite networks and amplified by emerging social media (Siegel 2015), resonated with Arab publics.

Figure 1 shows online Arabic search interest in "sectarianism" ("الطائفية") over the period from 2011 to 2019 (Google Trends, generated on October 23, 2019). The line shows the level of search interest relative to the highest point during the period, which is set at 100. The chart demonstrates that peak popularity occurred as expected during the opening months of 2011, spiking intermittently through 2015 but never again reaching even half of 2011 levels.

By the time of the suspected Iranian attack on Saudi oil infrastructure in September 2019, public interest in sectarianism in the Arab world amounted to a mere 6 percent of peak interest. And this despite ongoing civil wars in Syria and Yemen, the resumption of Iran's nuclear program following the U.S. withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear accord, and other key developments that might have contributed to the politicization of sectarian identity.

Figure 1. Interest in Sectarianism (الطائفية) among Arab Publics, 2011–2019.

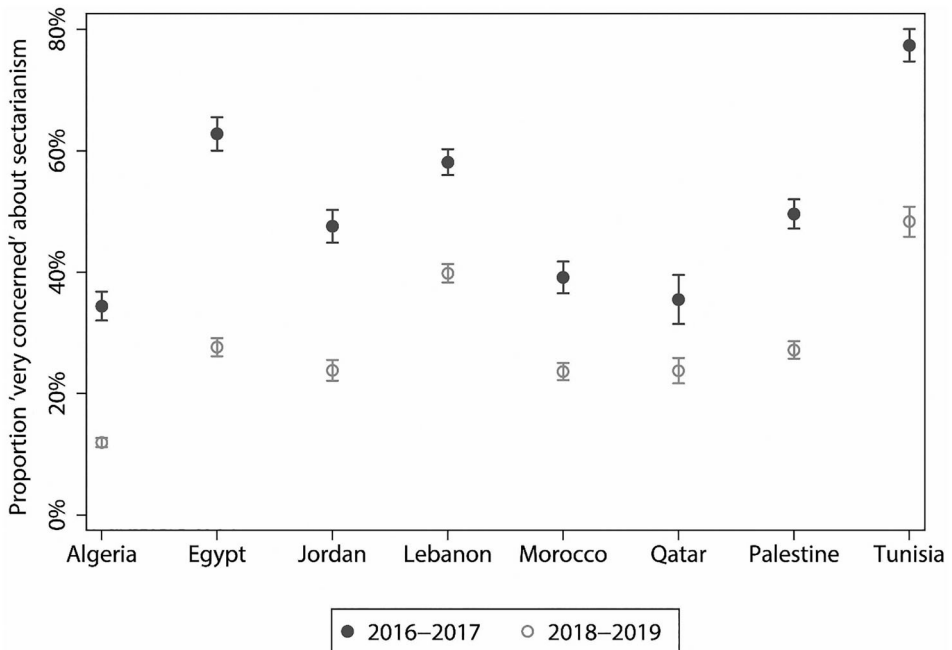


Scientific polling data collected in the MENA region tell the same story about the declining salience of sectarianism. [Figure 2](#) depicts reported concern over regional sectarian division in a diverse set of eight Arab countries included in the fourth and fifth waves of the widely-used Arab Barometer survey, conducted in 2016–2017 and 2018–2019, respectively (Tessler et al. 2016).² In every country surveyed, the proportion of citizens who said they were “very concerned” about “the spread of sectarian division in the region” plummeted in the years between the two surveys. Drops occurred irrespective of the absolute level of concern. In Tunisia, for instance, almost 8 in 10 citizens reported being highly worried about sectarianism in 2016–2017, but in 2018–2019 only 54 percent said the same. Algerians, Moroccans, and Qataris expressed far less worry in 2016–2017, yet their concern had waned even further by 2018–2019. Overall, average concern across the eight countries nearly halved from 2016–2017 to 2018–2019, falling from 52 percent to 29 percent.

Drawing Lessons from the Middle East’s Unlikely De-sectarianization

But how to account for this fizzling out of the sectarian narrative while conflicts between Sunni and Shi’i actors, at both the state and inter-state level, persist? The explanation lies in the parallel trajectory of the Arab Spring, and points to the deliberate divide-and-rule strategy of authoritarian states as the key first mover in the sectarian cascade. Beginning in earnest with the Bahrain uprising of February 2011, Arab and especially Arab Gulf rulers employed what Brumberg has called “protection-racket politics” (Brumberg 2013, 88–103) to dissuade members of their mainly co-sectarian support bases from joining the opposition, lest they enable their own subjugation at the hands of their political-cum-confessional rivals. In the absence of cross-societal coordination that could exert effective pressure for political change, mass demonstrations were demonized locally and abroad as unrepresentative and undemocratic, snuffed out militarily, and then followed by a complete closing off of the political space (Al-Rasheed 2011). In short, the

Figure 2. Concern over Regional Sectarian Division in Eight Arab Countries, 2016–2017 vs. 2018–2019.



sectarian narrative ended in large part because it was no longer needed by threatened regimes, while on the other hand it carried significant risks of blow-back (Gengler 2015).

Meanwhile, Gulf states' preoccupation with domestic unrest after 2011 was to be replaced by direct involvement in external conflicts—first in Yemen and then with each other following the June 2017 blockade of Qatar led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (Ulrichsen 2020). Emphasizing religious and other group cleavages is a useful strategy to pre-empt political cooperation among citizens, but for exactly that reason it is unproductive as a means of rallying the population behind a national cause. Hence the rise of state-

sponsored “militarized hypernationalism” (Al-Rasheed 2015), in the terms of Al-Rasheed, spearheaded by Saudi Arabia’s newly-empowered Deputy Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman. Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states were also embarking on deep, unpopular structural reforms of

the welfare state that required financial sacrifices of all citizens, after the 2014 crash in oil prices (Gengler and Lambert 2016). It was now the strengthening of national rather than sectarian identity that would help push forward the state’s agenda, with Qatar-sympathizing traitors taking over for Shi’a fifth-columnists as the officially-sanctioned objects of scorn (Nereim 2019).

Likewise on the side of ordinary citizens, sectarian identity gains special relevance and is more likely to serve as a basis for coalition-building when uncertainty prevails about the outcome of a political struggle over the distribution of power and resources, such as in the early days of the Arab Spring and, before that, post-2003 Iraq. When no such ambiguity exists because a political conflict is absent or already has been decided, or because citizen mobilization is impossible due to extreme repression, then sectarian identity naturally loses an important, potent part of its political *raison d’être* (but see Brooke 2017).³ The processes that encourage and privilege the activation of sectarian identity—both at the individual psychological level and at

the elite strategic level—are thus closely connected to feelings of insecurity and fear that attend challenges to the socio-political status quo.

Such a reading suggests not only an instrumentalist basis of sectarian politics in the Middle East, clearly, but also a primarily top-down rather than bottom-up instrumentalism. In the Gulf case particularly, the close parallel between changing state threat perceptions and the rise and decline of sectarianism since 2011 serves as empirical evidence of elite manipulation (Haddad 2011; Shaery-Eisenlohr 2008),⁴ rather than popular sentiment and everyday reification (Fibiger 2018), as the original impetus down the course of sectarianization. That is because, in the

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authoritarian Middle East, it is the state and political leaders who are able to choose their internal and external political battles, and who enjoy the instruments and resources to frame for ordinary people those conflicts they do not begin of their own accord. Arab rulers

are well equipped to dictate the nature and degree of instability experienced by the population, and the terms in which they understand it, whereas except in uncommon revolutionary circumstances the reverse is not true. Although this power imbalance may be shifting with the spread of social media and the decentralization of information, citizens remain at a decided disadvantage in their ability to create and control political narratives.

One need not simply take this author’s word for it, however. For the first time in 2018–2019, the Arab Barometer survey asked Arab men and women directly whether they believed that regional sectarian tensions are due to “a religious divide between Shi’a and Sunna” or instead “a political divide between politicians.” Twice as many citizens identified political contestation (49 percent) as compared to doctrinal differences (25 percent) as the main cause of sectarian division, while a fifth of respondents blamed both factors. This raises the possibility of a final, more hopeful contributor to the notable decline in Middle East sectarianism over the past decade: that most citizens have finally wised up to the destructive and self-defeating political game. ❖

About the Author

Justin Gengler studies survey methodology, political behavior, and the political economy of development in the Arab Gulf states. He has recent or forthcoming publications in *British Journal of Political Science*, *Political Behavior*, and *Comparative Politics*. He is also the author of *Group Conflict and Political Mobilization in Bahrain and the Arab Gulf* (Indiana UP, 2015). He is currently Assistant Research Professor at the Social and Economic Survey Research Institute at Qatar University.

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Notes

1. Although the Yemen uprising was not generally viewed through a sectarian lens in 2011, it set the stage for the takeover of the state by Zaydi rebels in 2014 and subsequent military intervention by Saudi Arabia.
2. It is telling that the Arab Barometer, which has conducted 50 surveys in 15 different Arab countries since 2006, did not ask a question about sectarianism until after its third wave that began in 2012.
3. Not to say its reality or relevance for individuals' lived experiences.
4. Cf. the literature on "sectarian entrepreneurs."

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