



GSJ: Volume 8, Issue 11, November 2020 Online: ISSN 2320-9186

www.globalscientificjournal.com

Sectarianism in the Arabian Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC): Local and Regional Factors

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ABSTRACT

To explain the problem of sectarianism in the context of the Arabian Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), it is crucial to assess the internal and the regional factors that have made sectarianism a protracted and contested phenomenon. Other than historical and religious explanations, this paper elucidates sectarianism as a local problem, instrumentalized and evolved by the dynamics of local politics in mobilizing and polarizing identities within the groups involved. Likewise, the regional factors, rather than the deep-rooted reasons in the Islam religion itself, contribute to flaring up sectarianism. However, analyzing both local and regional aspects after the Iranian Revolution as major transformation factors, sheds light on the actual causes of the division between Sunni and Shia sects in the Arabian Gulf region. The domination of religion in local politics has contributed to alienation by means of the discriminatory institutionalized policies against the “other,” as well as to the reinforcement of absolute loyalty to the elites and the rulers. Thus, authoritarianism has played a major role in using sectarianism as a tool for perpetuating power and dominance.

Key Words: Authoritarianism, Elites, Iranian Revolution, Local politics, Sectarianism, Sectarianization, Sectarian entrepreneurs.

Introduction

Although several factors explain the Middle Eastern conflicts, the fact remains that sectarianism has often been a contested and equivocal issue in the region, and “political conflicts and tensions often have arisen over issues other than sectarianism, but sectarian divisions and alliances always played a role” (Fibiger, 2018, p. 6). However, “this is all to say that it is more useful to look at how religion is used and manipulated by elites to political ends, rather than explain the conflicts plaguing the region solely through references to an age-old schism at the heart of Islam” (Matthiesen, 2013, p. 20). Sectarianism “essentially involves the politicization of religious or

ethnic identity to achieve particular objectives and policies” (Binhuwaidin, 2015, p. 18). Sectarian division between Sunnis and Shias has influenced every aspect of politics, ethnicity, and identity in the region, with real consequences observed in domestic and international domains. The reason is that “sectarians seek to mobilize support by emphasizing the importance, persistence, and inevitability of sectarianism throughout history” (Dixon, 2017, p. 12). Looking back historically, in the wake of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, sectarianism began to surface as a fault line, shaping and characterizing the political, religious, economic, and social domains in the Arabian Gulf region (Binhuwaidin, 2015). It takes astute insight and thinking to make sense of a confounding region, but understanding sectarianism represents one layer of the contested issue. It is imperative to understand the reasons why fueling the division and the tension that could make the members of one sect (either in a group or a state) alienate themselves and resort to extreme measures can extend to demonizing and dehumanizing the “others.” However, analyzing both local and regional aspects after the Iranian Revolution as major transformation factors, as well as turning points over the last decades, sheds light on the actual causes, rather than focusing on the symptoms of the division between Sunni and Shia sects in the Arabian Gulf region. This approach is significant to avoid conflating the symptoms with the real causes.

To explain the problem of sectarianism in the context of the Arabian Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), it is crucial to assess the internal and the regional factors that have made sectarianism a protracted and contested phenomenon. Other than historical and religious explanations, this paper elucidates sectarianism as a local problem, instrumentalized and evolved by the dynamics of local politics in mobilizing and polarizing identities within the groups involved. Likewise, the regional factors, rather than the deep-rooted reasons in the Islam religion itself, contribute to flaring up sectarianism.

The schism between Sunni and Shia sects among Muslim communities in the Middle East, particularly in the Arabian Gulf region, is a protracted phenomenon. The deep-rooted division goes back to the early period of Islam; subsequently, the two sects have continued to maintain their religious ideologies and beliefs without engaging in mutual understandings or reconciliations. After 1979, the Arabian Gulf region has been defined by hostilities and rivalries between its two powerful states: Saudi Arabia as the Sunni propagator, and on the other

side of the Gulf, Iran with its revolutionary regime representing the Shia faction's populism. Notably, the majority of Sunnis are of Arab and other ethnicities, whereas the majority of Shias are of Persian and other ethnicities. Nevertheless, sectarian identity matters (Shaery-Eisenlohr, 2008); it is an important division within Islam as the institutionalized religion, but it has always coexisted with other identities—national versus local, and urban versus rural and ethnic tribal. However, “in terms of governance, identity can be a resource to be mobilized or exploited by rulers” (Wehrey, 2014, p. 26). For example, “for the Saudis, this focus on religious identity has proven particularly useful, for it has encouraged polarization and marginalization in the Kingdom to undermine the minority Shi'a population and stave off any mass uprising” (Abdo, 2017, p. 114). The questions are when sectarianism is mobilized and how elites (whether political or religious) do so and exploit it to perpetuate power, and to the extreme end, people kill for it.

In the past, the extensive independence of sectarian groups in the Middle East, particularly in the Arabian Gulf region, made them coexist peacefully. Gengler (2014) asserts, “one characteristic of sectarianism in the Persian Gulf is that many groups are transnational and often located in border areas where in the past they enjoyed considerable autonomy” (p. 6). However, in the aftermath and with the effects of the Second World War, these groups in the Arabian Gulf region have sought to establish their own political systems based on their tribal ethnic and religious sectarian affiliations. This view is explained by the definition of a nation and a nation-state formation as “an imagined political community” (Anderson, 2016, p. 6). The monarchies in the Arabian Gulf region have emerged as legitimized states with considerable economic power from their vast wealth of oil and gas productions. This wealth has created “a political environment, in which others' policy views are not easily identifiable, combined with an economic environment that promotes individual rather than collective pursuit of material resources, works to privilege political coordination on the basis of ascriptive social groupings rather than cross-societal programmatic coalitions” (Gengler, 2014, p. 64). This situation has then become the fault line threatening the harmony of the different groups with different ethnicities or religious affiliations.

Therefore, these rigid authoritarian rule systems are rooted in their institutions, as well as their societies that are woven into the fabric of the region. Wehrey (2014) argues, “an even smaller fringe sees sectarianism as a large-

ly instrumental tool in the hands of authoritarian rulers, who mobilize religious leaders to spread a sectarian discourse with the aim of bolstering their control over society” (p. 11). The phenomenon is all about the failure of political governance and broken political systems that have failed to deliver on their promises of higher standards of living, social justice, representation, and distribution of economic wealth. These authoritarian regimes face these political challenges from below, and the way that they respond to such issues is to play the sectarian card to place the blame on foreign or external parties. The ruling elites in the authoritarian countries play the sectarian card to deflect attention from their corrupted systems and incompetent governance, as well as to divide and weaken the opposition. Another purpose is to send a message to the international community, blaming external players for trying to intervene to undermine the authoritarian countries’ security and stability as a cover-up for the masses’ real grievances and demands (Al-Rasheed, 2011; Gengler, 2014; Wehrey, 2014).

For example, the Saudi authoritarian regime has used religious discourse to politicize the sectarian differences in order to widen the split between Sunnis and Shias. Al-Rasheed (2011) clarifies, “through religious discourse and practices, sectarianism in the Saudi context involves not only politicizing religious differences, but also creating a rift between the majority Sunnis and the Shia minority” (p. 513). Other than the deeply entrenched hatred between Sunnis and Shias in the region, sectarianism was kept under control in the past because of the absence of the driving forces and the actors that had the opportunity to activate or instrumentalize it as a tool for bolstering power. One major element of these driving forces is sectarianization, which is “a process shaped by political actors operating within specific contexts, pursuing political goals that involve popular mobilization around particular (religious) identity markers” (Hashemi & Postel, 2017, p. 4). Notably, looking back to the 1950s and the 1960s, almost no sectarianism or sectarianization process existed all over the Middle East and the Islamic world. During that period, few countries sponsored the major trajectory of transformation in the Middle East. Egypt was a leading player in the region and promoter of Arab nationalism and socialism until the rise of the Iranian Revolution, when Saudi Arabia and Iran became the major powers in the region. However, that power shift has since then become quite clear in the region.

Geopolitical and Regional Factors

To begin with, separating the layers of the causes of sectarianism in the Arabian Gulf region shows geopolitical and regional factors as fundamentally important elements because “in the decades that followed, the use of sectarianism by the Gulf states waxed and waned in line with the geopolitical circumstances” (Rabi & Mueller, 2018, p. 64).

In 1967, the defeat of the Arab coalition during Israel’s occupation of Palestine was a symbol of a deeper failure, haunting the hearts and the minds of the people in the Middle East. It was a failure of Arab unity, as well as of several modern attempts at nation-state formation, particularly Arab nationalism. It was the paradigm that crashed to the ground in the region. The 1967 defeat was a turning point in the history of political transformation in the Middle East; it emptied a great deal of those modernist ambitions for democratic and welfare state formation. It was the turning point for those who hoped in some form of secular or democratic political platforms. Arab nationalism primarily started to fail with the former Egyptian revolutionary Gamal Abdul Nasser’s secular promises of a post-colonial state rooted in these nationalist promises that they had made. The people then did not just give up but looked for other paradigms, platforms, and ideologies, and that was when the shift began to take different forms of politicized religion. Subsequently, the Iranian Revolution was the key turning point that brought political Islam to power. Turning to religion or religious sects was the consequence of the failure of Arab nationalism—and to some extent, of the 1967 defeat and disappointment—to appeal to many secular political and social movements (Haddad, 2017). This thinking goes beyond sectarianism or the rivalries between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

After the Iranian Revolution, the rise of Iran as the leading powerful and largest Shia state in the Arabian Gulf region had deep political and religious impacts in the region; “it also turned Iran from an ally to a foe of the West and the Arab Gulf monarchies, and led some of them to champion Sunni Islamism against Iranian claims to lead the *umma*, the community of Muslim believers” (Matthiesen, 2013, p. 20). Likewise, its revolutionary approach increased rivalries between the Islamic Republic and other Arabian Gulf countries in the region. These

rivalries were transformed into threats to the monarchies and the rulers in the Arabian Gulf region. Primarily, the revolutionary force in Iran was considered a new wave of ideological transformation in the Arabian Gulf region that swept the Middle East from Nasserism and nationalism in the 1950s to the Iranian Revolution and radical Islam. This wave created deep fears of regime changes among the states in the Arabian Gulf region (Katz, 2001). These monarchies vastly benefited from the revenues of the oil and gas explorations over the last decades that materialized in creating regimes with mandates to keep the status quo in terms of security and prosperity (Binhuwaidin, 2015). Therefore, the Sunni majority of the Arabian Gulf regimes implemented the most effective strategy to counter foreign ideologies by using sectarianism for “a wide array of purposes: to deflect criticism over failures in governance, to induce divisions among the opposition, and to rally domestic audiences against the external threat from Iran” (Wehrey, 2014, p. 255). It is important to understand that regimes and authoritarian rulers exploit any sectarian conflict one after another to perpetuate their rule and power, but there are other agents and actors from below, called “sectarian entrepreneurs” (Dixon, 2017; Shaery-Eisenlohr, 2008). Such entrepreneurs are those who exploit sectarianism to further their own interests, such as *imams* and social agents who are actually involved in justifying sectarianism or have their own sectarian agendas. Obviously, the authoritarian leaders are not the only sources of sectarianism, but they just happen to be the most powerful. For example, in Saudi Arabia, any attempt to recognize Shias in the political or any public sphere is considered a challenge to Sunnis’ domination because “for certain Sunni actors, such as the Salafi clerical establishment in Saudi Arabia, sectarianism provides real material benefits. It ensures their continued and exclusive access to political power” (Wehrey, 2014, p. 255).

For example, the authoritarian regime in Iraq has exaggerated the fear of the Iranian Revolution for domestic and regional reasons. The regime in Iraq feared that its Shia majority might be inspired by the revolutionary Shias in Iran and could turn against the regime (Haddad, 2017). Haddad (2017) contends, “The demise of Arab nationalism and communism as significant political forces and the emergence of the Islamic Republic (and regional Islamist movements in general) further explain the growing relevance of Shi’a-centric movements to the organized opposition within Iraq and beyond” (p. 115). Furthermore, after the rise of the Iranian Revolution, the

authoritarian Sunni majority in Saudi Arabia has spent significant amounts of money and resources to counter the Iranian power and influence, “seeking to portray it as a distinctly Shi’a/Persian phenomenon based on a corruption of the Islamic tradition” (Hashemi & Postel, 2017, p. 10).

The 1979 invasion of Afghanistan by the former Soviet Union occurred during the expansion of communism and the competition between the United States and the then Soviet Union for the sphere of influence in central Asia. The United States and its Western allies attempted to contain the spread of communism after the Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan by supporting the Mujahedeen fighters who came from different Muslim countries to defend the land of Islam against the infidels, as the communists were portrayed. The Arabian Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, mobilized their resources to support their ‘brothers’ and the newly formed groups of fighters under the premise and overarching call of *jihad*. These groups’ members were mainly Sunni militants who devoted their lives as Mujahedeen. These militant groups recruited most of the radical Islamists, mainly belonging to Salafism (the revivalist promoting the adherence to original Islam and they are the most hardliner in Sunni sect), from around the world, led by Osama Bin Laden and others. This recruitment eventually evolved into what had been the most brutal terrorist organization, al-Qaeda. However, the guiding principle of these “Salafist-jihadi groups was decidedly anti-Shi’a, both in theory and practice, buttressed as it was by a neo-Wahhabi reading of the world” (Hashemi & Postel, 2017, p. 10). Thus, this propagandistic anti-Shia movement unmistakably fed the existing entrenched sectarian hatred between Sunnis and Shias. It has also been sponsored and materialized by the hardliners and the authoritarian rulers of Saudi Arabia since that time.

In 2003, the United States invaded Iraq based on falsified claims about the latter’s possession of weapons of mass destruction. Subsequently, the American troops swiftly captured Baghdad without any major resistance. The minority Sunni regime of Saddam Hussein was toppled, and a new regime was established in collaboration with the majority Iraqi Shias. The Shias constitute the majority sectarians in Iraq, with limited access to power and influence during Saddam’s regime. However, “indeed, the removal of Saddam from power, constituted an unprecedented strategic opening for Iran to gain influence in a major oil-producing Gulf Arab state and the Saudis looked on with alarm as Iran began capitalizing on the opportunity” (Rabi & Mueller, 2018, p. 55). Before

the American invasion, the Iraqi Sunnis rarely perceived themselves as sectarian, and “they never felt threatened or persecuted as Sunnis; not in their relations with the state, not in how the threat of political Shi’ism was viewed, and not even during the Iran-Iraq war” (Haddad, 2017, p. 117). This perception changed after the invasion, when the Shia majority assumed power, with both American and Iranian support. However, the power shift in Iraq contributed to the rise of sectarianism on an extraordinary scale because the “regime change forced Sunnis to reimagine themselves as a sectarian group, both as a response to the political empowerment of Shi’a sect-centricity and in order to be relevant in a system fundamentally based on identity politics” (Haddad, 2017, p. 118). Subsequently, Iraq has been engulfed in political turmoil and instability for many years to come, fueled by the sectarianism from its neighboring countries in the Arabian Gulf region (Rabi & Mueller, 2018).

Bahrain

The authoritarian rulers in Bahrain have played a major role in fueling sectarianism because they have formulated and institutionalized discriminatory and alienating policies against the Shia majority. The protracted tensions between Shias and Sunnis have a long history in the small kingdom. The Bahraini Shias comprise the majority compared with the Sunni ruling family, and the relationship between the two sects is characterized by political unrest and hostility. The tensions between Sunnis and Shias are caused by the discriminatory policies and marginalization in employment, religious practices, and economic welfare against the Shia majority (Abdo, 2017). Abdo (2017) asserts, “although Bahrain did not endure a protracted civil war, as was the case with Lebanon, the country has a long history of institutionalized discrimination against its Shi’a majority” (p. 117). Therefore, the authoritarian regime in Bahrain has used the ruling strategy of separation and categorization against its Shia population, mainly based on ascribed religious identities. This strategy is effective in perpetuating power since sectarianism to construct society originated from the colonial powers. Matthiesen (2017) explains, “it is important, however, to remember that sectarianism originated as a ruling strategy, as a conscious decision by colonial powers and Middle Eastern elites to structure society according to ascriptive group identities in order to divide and rule” (p. 214).

These grievances have turned into political violence, characterized by brutal and continuing confrontations be-

tween the Shias and the state because “the Bahraini government was viewed largely by the Shi’a community as a corrupt regime that favored the loyal factions close to it and utterly ignored the impoverished Shi’a areas of the country” (Abdo, 2017, p. 120).

During the 2011 uprising in Bahrain, the protesters (mainly the Shias) were confronted with the bloody counteraction by the security forces. Subsequently, due to the spread of unrest in Bahrain and the fear that the Shias would topple the Sunni ruler, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates intervened militarily under the operation “Peninsula Shield”. This intervention reinstated the Sunni power in Bahrain; as a result, the 2011 protest crushed down. This event clearly shows how far the Sunnis could go to consolidate their domination with their fellow Sunni affiliates to prevent the Shias from taking power. The issue is all about the use of sectarianism to preserve power and authoritarianism.

Saudi Arabia

With its wealth from oil production, Saudi Arabia has been ruled by an authoritarian monarch for over a half century, and “historically, the Saudi *rentier* state used economic largesse in return for loyalty to the regime” (Al-Rasheed, 2011, p. 513). To keep their wealth and power, the rulers have always used the sectarianism strategy against the Shia minority. Undoubtedly, discriminatory, and exclusionary policies against the Shias are embedded in the rulers’ religious discourse and strict version of Sharia (Islamic rules). Al-Rasheed (2011) argues, “in Saudi Arabia, deliberate, well-documented political exclusion and systematic religious discrimination against the Shia pushed this community to rally around its own sectarian leadership, which provides support and resources denied in the national” (p. 515). Consequently, these discriminatory policies have increased unity and solidarity among the Shias in the eastern province where they are concentrated. It is a systematic separation and repression led by the authoritarian regime and backed by the Salafist hardliner Sunnis (Wahhabis) in the kingdom. The intimate relationship between the rulers of Saudi Arabia and the Wahhabis began from the time of the establishment of the kingdom. However, this relationship has far more influence and implications in terms of constructing Saudi society and sectarianism. The kingdom “is the only Gulf monarchy where the identity of the state, based on a specific reading of Sunni religious orthodoxy, has led to a widespread state-sponsored policy

of sectarian discrimination. When such policies exist elsewhere, they are based on motives other than religious hatred or refusal of the Other” (Laurence , 2012, p. 8).

It is important to mention that Wahhabism is an extremist ideology of interpreting Islamic laws and teachings (jurisprudence). Therefore, the animosity toward and the repression of the Shias are unparalleled; moreover, “up until the early twentieth century, Wahhabi scholars often did not consider non-Wahhabis Muslims at all” (Hegghammer, 2010, p. 17). Evidently, the fact that the ideology is protected and supported by the rulers, dominating the religious discourse in the kingdom, is the main cradle of sectarianism.

During the Arab Uprising in 2011, activists and pro-reform protesters in some parts of the kingdom attempted to follow the lead of their neighbors in Egypt and Tunisia. The authoritarian regime used what Al-Rasheed calls “the pre-emptive counter-revolutionary strategy,” which is sectarianism. Al-Rasheed (2011) explains, “in response to the Arab Spring, sectarianism became a Saudi pre-emptive counter-revolutionary strategy that exaggerates religious difference and hatred and prevents the development of national non-sectarian politics” (p. 513).

Conclusion

Sectarianism is a prominent and contested issue in the politics of the Middle East, particularly the Arabian Gulf region, not because of the ancient division in Islam, but for the reasons and the effects of the dynamics in the local politics and the regional geopolitical factors. In the GCC monarchies, religion dominates every aspect of their political and social domains, and in the age-old Islamic division between Sunnis and Shias, the majority of the GCC countries follow the Sunni sect. The domination of religion in local politics has contributed to alienation by means of the discriminatory institutionalized policies against the “other,” as well as to the reinforcement of absolute loyalty to the elites and the rulers. Thus, authoritarianism has played a major role in using sectarianism as a tool for perpetuating power and dominance. Sectarianism is instrumentalized by local actors, mainly the religious “sectarian entrepreneurs,” (Dixon, 2017) to mobilize, politicize, and differentiate among identities and ethnicities. Likewise, elites play the sectarianism card to preserve their domination of power and deflect criticisms against their authoritarian policies and flawed governance.

The rise of the Iranian Revolution with complete domination by the Shias has profoundly changed the regional geopolitics and shifted the power in the Arabian Gulf region. This transformation in power has fundamental impacts on the development and the dynamics of local politics, in turn making authoritarianism the dominant form of government in the region.

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