

## Three Ways of Countering Sectarianism – Challenges and Dilemmas

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There is little consensus about how to define, understand and explain sectarianism.<sup>i</sup> Yet, there seems to be one area of agreement. Thus, most observers appear to share a negative view of sectarianism. As noticed by Haddad sectarianism is “mired in negativity”,<sup>ii</sup> and “sectarian” is usually something you are accusing your opponent of being. Against this background, it is hardly surprising that the recent interest in what has been labelled as “anti-sectarianism,” “counter-sectarianism,” “post-sectarianism,” “trans-sectarianism”, and “de-sectarianization” has been wrapped in positive connotations just as “non-sectarian,” “multi-sectarian” or “cross-sectarian” movements and initiatives generally have been viewed in very positive terms.

On closer inspection, however, the terminological confusion about which prefix to use turns out to reflect some more fundamental differences. Despite of the shared ambition of countering sectarianism it appears that there is not only little agreement about exactly *what* should be countered, e.g. any expression of sect-specificity or only radical forms of sectarian hatred and violence? When it comes to *how* to go about this, an examination of past and current discussions about the need for and actual attempts at countering sectarianism also reveals a considerable division. It is possible to identify at least, three different kind of strategies, each with its challenges and potential pitfalls.<sup>iii</sup>

### **Strategy #1: All that we share: unity, community, and homogeneity**

The basic aim of the first strategy is to make people aware of what unite rather than divide them. Unity, commonality, and community are therefore center stage. Over the years, this strategy has been very prominent and can be identified in various versions. Some have a top-down direction, while others are more bottom-up.

One of these might be called the “ecumenical unity discourse in Islam,” as it emphasizes how Shia- and Sunni Muslims are all Muslims. Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Sheikh Mahmoud Shaltut, Imam Khomeini, and the more recent Jordanian “Amman Message” initiative all belong to this ecumenical trend. In her study of debates on Islamic unity among Shiites, Corboz also identified a position that emphasizes commonalities between Shia and Sunni Islam and how the early Shiite imams were working for unity among Muslims.<sup>iv</sup> Another but quite similar version of this first strategy broadens the perspective beyond

a narrow Islamic context. The *Jordanian Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies* emphasizes commonalities between Islam, Judaism and Christianity as “Abrahamic religions.”<sup>v</sup>

Instead of focusing on religion, yet another variant of this strategy emphasizes another kind of uniting community: the nation. During Middle Eastern modern history, the idea that different groups in a society are united by being members of the same nation has been present in various versions. During parts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Arab nationalist idea about how Arab Christians, Shia and Sunni Muslims were all part of the same Arab nation played an important role regionally and domestically. Today, Arab nationalism plays a far less significant role than in the past, but a number of observers have pointed to how some of the Gulf regimes are currently replacing a sectarian rhetoric in favor of a new hyper or ultra-nationalism.<sup>vi</sup> Such attempts at strengthening a distinct national identity are supposed to enable inclusion of previously excluded groups.

In addition to such elitist top-down initiatives, the emphasis on national unity can also be identified among various grassroots initiatives. Among the most outspoken anti-sectarian movement in Lebanon, one finds *Laïque Pride*. During the last decade, they have called for an end to the country’s deep-rooted sectarian system in favor of a “secular Lebanon” with no role for sect-centric identities and a full separation between religion and politics not only in relation to the allocation of political positions but as in terms of personal status laws. During the 2011 uprisings, this strategy can also be identified at some of the demonstrations. In Bahrain, protesters at the Pearl Roundabout did, for instance, shout that they were “neither Shia, nor Sunni, but Bahrainis”,<sup>vii</sup> and in Syria, one of the popular slogans at the early demonstrations went “the Syrian people are one”. During the Lebanese 2018 elections, the coalition “Kulna Watanti” emphasized how “we are all patriots,” and in the fall 2019, the national anthem “Kulluna li-l-Watan” (All of us, for our country!) likewise resounded at the large demonstration across Lebanon, where protesters emphasized national unity in all kinds of creative ways.

## **Strategy #2: “Good vs Bad Muslims,” “people vs regime” and other alternative cleavages**

If one takes a look at past and current discussions about the need for and actual attempts at countering sectarianism, it appears that the first strategy might be prominent but far from the only one. Rather than emphasizing how we are all alike, another strategy does instead try to counter sectarianism by highlighting other kinds of cleavages that go across the Shia/Sunni divide.

This strategy also comes in different versions. Some draw on the classic “Good vs Bad Muslim” distinction.<sup>viii</sup> In her aforementioned study on Shiite unity discourses, Corboz, for instance, also identifies a discourse, which counters the Shia/Sunni schism by introducing a new distinction between what is presented as a minority strand in Islam represented by Wahhabi-Salafism and a majority strand of “mainstream Islam,” which includes both Shia and Sunni Muslims. Another version of this strategy, currently promoted by the Egyptian, Saudi and Bahraini regimes, makes a distinction between (their own) so-called “moderate official Islam” vs. what they label as “radical Islam.” The latter includes a rather diverse group of actors, including al-Qaida, Islamic State, Iran and Muslim Brothers, who have little in common except for their opposition to these regimes.

This strategy does also come in “bottom-up” versions. Here the purpose is to challenge rather than supporting those in power by stressing a divide between the elite/regime and the people. This was, for instance, the case in the early days of the 2011 uprisings in places like Syria, Yemen and Bahrain. By shouting that “the people want the downfall of the regime”, protesters emphasized how their grievances were directed at the regime rather another sect. During the Lebanese protests in 2015 the slogan “You

stink” did likewise not only refer to the rotting garbage in the streets, but also to what was considered a corrupt sectarian elite serving only their own narrow interests rather than those of the people.<sup>ix</sup> A similar critique can be identified in the 2019 protests in Lebanon, where the protesters’ slogan that “all of them, mean all of them” refers to a demand that the whole corrupt sectarian elite must leave.<sup>x</sup>

### **Strategy #3: The “banalization” of sectarianism and the promotion of inter/cross-sect cooperation**

The overall aim of the two former strategies is to challenge the negative consequences of sectarianism by focusing on all that we share or by emphasizing another kind of cleavage than the Shia/Sunni divide. However, it is also possible to identify a third strategy addressing the challenge in a quite different way. Thus, rather than denying the existence or importance of sect-centric identities, this strategy does instead aim at promoting a more “banal” – rather than “radical doctrinal” – form of sectarianism.<sup>xi</sup> This is supposed to enable co-existence and promote cooperation across sectarian divides. This strategy also comes in various and quite different versions.

Maybe surprisingly, the Lebanese political system can be seen as an example of this third strategy. In this system, representing a specific version of the power-sharing system Arendt Lijphart labelled as “consociationalism,”<sup>xii</sup> political positions are allocated according to a kind of “sectarian apportionment key.” In this way, the various sects are guaranteed a certain political representation in the political system. While the Lebanese form of consociationalism is sometime criticized for representing everything that is wrong about sectarianism, it is also possible to find the diametrical opposite view. In a Middle East, where the Arab uprisings have contributed to a sectarianization of regional politics with weak states and divided societies ravaged by a “radical doctrinal sectarianism,” some have argued that Lebanon represents a form of “prototype” for how co-existence and cooperation can be promoted in places, where sect-centric identities have become important.<sup>xiii</sup> From this perspective, a system similar to the Lebanese does not only ensure political representation of all groups in society. The principle of segmented autonomy also allows different sectarian groups to organize social relations according to their own traditions and enables at the same time considerable cross-sectarian cooperation at an elite level. As a result, sect-centric identities may persist, but - advocates of this perspective argue - instead of being “doctrinal” they will more likely be “instrumentalist” or maybe even “banal,” and this will enhance the chance of cooperation and co-existence between groups.

Somewhat paradoxically, some of the grassroots groups that have been highly critical of the sectarian nature of Lebanon’s consociational political system can also be perceived as an example of this third strategy. A case in point is Beirut Madinati (“Beirut, my city”). At the local elections in 2016, they tried to challenge the sect-centric political elites through a program that focused on the need to make Beirut “more livable” for its residents. Instead of “anti-sectarian”, the movement has been described as “multi-sectarian.”<sup>xiv</sup> Thus, while highly critical of the existing political system and its sectarian elites, it did not deny the existence and importance of sect-centric identities for people. In order to counter charges of only representing some segments of the city, they did therefore not only strive for representation from all sectarian groups, but did allegedly also try to ensure a 50/50 divide between Christians and Muslims in the leadership – just like in the parliament and other Lebanese institutions.

A final variant of this last strategy can be found in the idea of “sectarian de-escalation” suggested in a report from the so-called “Project on Shi’ism and Global Affairs”.<sup>xv</sup> Here, sectarianism is perceived as an “intrinsic part of any religious tradition and reflects the plurality of interpretations.” Instead of viewing sectarianism solely in negative terms and as something to be countered as such, it is therefore argued that the “goal should not necessarily be to encourage Muslims to eliminate or resolve different sectarian

points of view but rather to eliminate or resolve the destructive and harmful aspects of sectarianism.” From this perspective, sectarian de-escalation is about “acknowledgment and respect for diverse interpretations of Islam” and the expansion of pluralistic spaces in which different strands of Islam can “co-exist and grow alongside one another.”

### **Be careful what you wish for...**

By taking a closer look at past and current discussions about the need for and attempts at countering sectarianism, it does not only become clear that a shared ambition does not have to translate into an agreement about how to realize this. It also turns out that a sympathetic ambition – about countering the negative implications of sectarianism – may be burdened by its own challenges and pitfalls.

At first sight, the *first* strategy with its focus on what we all share may sound as something nobody can be against. However, on closer inspection a number of issues emerge. Thus, this strategy has a very homogenizing ambition and in its more excessive versions, it does not leave much space for diversity, pluralism, and difference. Depending on one’s stand on the question about the fluidity/stickiness of sect-centric identities, this also raises the question about whether a denial or maybe even suppression of such identities is possible. If history provides any lessons for the future, homogenizing strategies may instead trigger resistance and may end up strengthening these very identities, e.g., various Arabization campaigns suppressing, for instance, Kurdish or Amazigh identities during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Another related issue concerns the question about who are supposed to define what unites “us” and to what extent that will also entail exclusions; in other words, who have the right of speaking on behalf of “Islam,” “the nation,” “humanity,” “the people”? As Haddad has shown in his examination of “antagonistic visions of unity,” this question has been highly contested in the Iraqi context, where the fall of Saddam Hussein gave way to a new national narrative, where the previous Sunni-centrism was replaced by a Shia-centric Iraqi nationalism, within which the Sunni population has struggled to find their place.<sup>xvi</sup> The question about “whose nation” is also relevant in Saudi Arabia, where a new Saudi nationalism might become less anti-Shia, but it is still hard to imagine that the regime will accept the promotion of any uniting nationalism, where the Saud family is not center stage.

As for the *second* strategy, some of the alternative cleavages supposed to replace the Shia/Sunni schism can involve just as much exclusion and repression as when various authoritarian rulers in recent years have played the “sectarian card” as part of a regime survival strategy.<sup>xvii</sup> Both European and Middle Eastern history provides countless of examples of how nationalism does not necessarily have only to entail inclusion. It can just as well promote exclusion of those who are not “loyal to the nation” or “patriots.” This does also seem to be the case today. Thus, the recent rise of hyper-nationalism in the Gulf has been accompanied with rhetoric emphasizing a distinction between those loyal to (the regime’s vision about) the nation and the “traitors”.<sup>xviii</sup> Likewise, the “Good/Bad Muslims” distinction has been frequently used to repress various forms of critics (across the Shia/Sunni divide).

When it comes to the *third* strategy, it may leave more space for pluralism and diversity. At the same time, the strong attentiveness to existing sect-centric identities entails the risk of unintentionally reproducing the many well-known problems of sectarianism, which it is supposed to challenge. For example, rather than viewing Lebanese “consociationalism” as a prototype to be followed elsewhere, where sect-centric identities have become important, Bassel Salloukh<sup>xix</sup> has described Lebanon with its many problems as a “textbook case of how *not* to engineer post-conflict power-sharing arrangements.” Owing to its earlier mentioned “multi-sectarian” internal structure, this criticism about how one may

unintentionally end up reproducing and internalizing the kind of sectarianism, which is supposed to be countered, has also been directed at the grassroots initiative Beirut Madinati. Their limited success in the local elections in 2016 points to another challenge: Many of these “multi-sectarian” grassroots movements are by nature very heterogeneous. This has not only made it difficult for them to come up with a shared vision for how a system different from the present one should look like. It has furthermore made them vulnerable to internal fragmentation and infiltration from political forces representing the existing sectarian system.

If a growing consensus about the need for countering (some forms of) sectarianism does not have to produce agreement about how to go about this, and if some attempts at doing this are beset with their own challenges and pitfalls, it might be tempting to conclude that the current interest in “anti-sectarianism,” “counter-sectarianism,” “post-sectarianism,” “trans-sectarianism”, and “de-sectarianization” is a dead-end. The protests in Iraq and Lebanon in 2019, which revolved around demands about “the end sectarianism” and calls for “breaking the sectarian chain”, do, however, serve as a reminder about how efforts at countering sectarianism constitute an important trend, which should not be dismissed. Instead, it is time for a deeper and not at least more critical engagement in what it means to challenge sectarianism. This requires a recognition not only of the existence of multiple possible avenues to proceed at, but also stronger attention to some of the potential pitfalls and dilemmas associated with this endeavor, and serious discussions about how they can be addressed in a way where the cure does not end up being almost as bad as the disease.

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<sup>i</sup> For an overview Valbjørn, M., “Observing (the Debate on) Sectarianism: On Conceptualizing, Grasping and Explaining Sectarian Politics in a New Middle East,” *Mediterranean Politics*, no. first-view (2021).

<sup>ii</sup> Haddad, F., *Understanding 'Sectarianism': Sunni–Shi'a Relations in the Modern Arab World* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2020).

<sup>iii</sup> A more elaborated discussion of these three strategies can be found in: Valbjørn, M., “Countering Sectarianism: The Many Paths, Promises, and Pitfalls of De-Sectarianization,” *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 18, no. 1 (2020).

<sup>iv</sup> Corboz, E., “Islamisk Enhedsdiskurs: Et Studie Af Sunni-Shiarelationer Fra Britiske Shiamuslimers Perspektiv ” *TIFO: Tidsskrift for Islamforskning (Islamic Studies Journal)* 13, no. 1 (2019).

<sup>v</sup> see <http://english.riifs.org>

<sup>vi</sup> Alhussein, E., “Saudi First: How Hyper-Nationalism Is Transforming Saudi Arabia,” in *ECFR Policy Brief* (2019); Ardemagni, E., “Gulf Monarchies’ Militarized Nationalism”, *Sada - Analysis on Arab Reform*, February 28, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/78472>.

<sup>vii</sup> Matthiesen, T., *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab Spring That Wasn't* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2013).

<sup>viii</sup> cf. Mamdani, M., *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004).

<sup>ix</sup> Salloukh, B. F., “Lebanese Protesters United against Garbage... and Sectarianism”, *Washington Post - The Monkey Cage*, September 16, 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/09/14/lebanese-protesters-united-against-garbage-and-sectarianism/>; Yahya, M., “The Summer of Our Discontent: Sects and Citizens in Lebanon and Iraq,” in *Carnegie Middle East Center* (2017).

<sup>x</sup> Cham, Y. and M. Salem, “Breaking the Sectarian Chains: Lebanon Revolts against Its Corrupt Leaders”, *LSE Middle East Centre - Blog*, October 22, 2019, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2019/10/22/breaking-the-sectarian-chains-lebanon-revolts-against-its-corrupt-leaders/>.

<sup>xi</sup> On “radical doctrinal”, “instrumentalist” and “banal” sectarianism, see, for instance Hinnebusch, R., “The Sectarian Revolution in the Middle East,” *R/evolutions: Global Trends & Regional Issues* 4, no. 1 (2016). For an overview of the discussion about whether and how to subdivide sectarianism see Valbjørn, “Observing (the Debate on) Sectarianism: On Conceptualizing, Grasping and Explaining Sectarian Politics in a New Middle East.”

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- <sup>xii</sup> Lijphart, A., "Consociational Democracy," *World Politics* 21, no. 2 (1969). For a recent discussion on this kind of political system see Salloukh, B. F., "Consociational Power-Sharing in the Arab World: A Critical Stocktaking," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 20, no. 2 (2020).
- <sup>xiii</sup> Salamey, I., "The Double Movement & Post-Arab Spring Consociationalism," *The Muslim World* 106, no. 1 (2016).
- <sup>xiv</sup> Yahya, "The Summer of Our Discontent: Sects and Citizens in Lebanon and Iraq."
- <sup>xv</sup> Mohseni, P., "Engaging Sectarian De-Escalation: Proceedings of the Symposium on Islam and Sectarian De-Escalation at Harvard Kennedy School," in *Project on Shi'ism and Global Affairs* (Cambridge, MA, USA: Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2019).
- <sup>xvi</sup> Haddad, F., *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2011).
- <sup>xvii</sup> Valbjørn, M. and R. Hinnebusch, "Playing 'the Sectarian Card' in a Sectarianized New Middle East," *Babylon - Nordic Journal for Middle East Studies* 16, no. 2 (2018).
- <sup>xviii</sup> England, A. and A. Al Omran, "Activists Warn Social Media Being Used to Foster 'with Us or against Us' Mentality in Kingdom", *Financial Times*, May 7, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/31845386-6cb9-11e9-80c7-60ee53e6681d>.
- <sup>xix</sup> Salloukh, "Lebanese Protesters United against Garbage... and Sectarianism"; see also Salloukh, B. F. et al., *The Politics of Sectarianism in Postwar Lebanon* (London: Pluto Press, 2015).