

# JIHADISM, SECTARIANISM AND POLITICS IN A CHANGING MIDDLE EAST

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Eburon  
Utrecht 2021

ISBN 978-94-6301-344-4

Eburon Academic Publishers, Utrecht, The Netherlands  
[www.eburon.nl](http://www.eburon.nl)

Cover design: Textcetera, The Hague  
Graphic design: Studio Iris, Leende

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Middle East has encountered multiple challenges over the recent years, including armed conflicts and political rivalries, that are believed to hold serious consequences for the region's future landscape on political, social and economic levels. *Sectarianism* seems to have played a main role in the mounting rivalries and confrontations between key players in the Middle East, coupled with the formation of variable alliances in response to the surrounding developments. Meanwhile, the rise of various Islamist organizations across crisis-afflicted parts of the region raised questions about *Jihadism*-related doctrinal tenets to which such organizations claim attachment. Above all, the potentially devastating consequences of such developments on the populations inhabiting the region increase the interest in gaining a better understanding of the origins of the multifaceted crisis storming the region.

The cultural diversity that once enriched the Middle East on various levels, and the historic coexistence among the region's different communities, have been threatened and jeopardized by a few sectarian extremist groups whose atrocities reached every single social component with distinct religious, doctrinal or ideological tenets. Ethnic and religious minorities have become a target to radical groups, and sedition has been ignited and reinforced by the extremist discourse of sectarian organizations in the region, amid considerable failures by political leaderships.

*Sectarianism* forms one of the major challenges facing the Middle East, frequently arising in debates about geopolitical rifts and tensions throughout the region. Given the fact that the sectarian narrative

has become one of the main features of the crises that continue to beset the region, delving into the notion of sectarianism, its evolution throughout the history of the region, and the associated conceptions, interpretations and developments, appears inescapable if one tries to understand the background of the contemporary Middle Eastern landscape.

Furthermore, the rise of Islamic militancy over the past few decades and the alleged attachment of various extremist groups to *Islamic jihad* (*jihād Islāmī*) have paved the way for a widespread controversy about the actual relationship between *jihād*, as a concept, and *Jihadism*, as a movement characterized by a radical worldview. Hence, exploring the origins of *jihād* in the Islamic tradition, the various interpretations of this notion and its eventual employment by Islamist extremists as a doctrinal basis to justify their actions, seems crucial.

In order to rise and establish itself, extremism undoubtedly requires a fertile ground. As two of the major hotspots of the Middle East, Iraq and Syria emerged in the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as main incubators to extremist Islamist groups in the region. In the aftermath of the 2003 war, Iraq suffered from a widespread chaos and security vacuum, coupled with intensifying sectarian rifts, which erupted at a governmental level and later reached the very core of the society. These were key factors that led to the rise of sectarian Shia militias such as al-Hashd al-Shaabi and the radical Sunni ISIS group. Meanwhile, as the Syrian uprising of 2011 descended into a civil war, extremist organizations like al-Qaeda and ISIS found a sufficient foothold and joined the conflict under the pretext of protecting fellow Muslims. The rise of religious extremism considerably deprived the people of the region of their legitimate aspirations in establishing a pluralistic form of government based on democratic principles and willing to demonstrate

respect to basic human rights. Thus, this anti-tyranny revolutionary age has been largely infiltrated and hijacked by some radical movements that tirelessly sought to forcibly impose their extremist agenda on exhausted populations, particularly in war-ravaged areas.

The emergence and growth of sectarian Islamist militant organizations such as Sunni-based al-Qaeda and ISIS, and Shia-guided al-Hashd al-Shaabi, whose leaders have constantly emphasized their commitment to an extremist version of *jihād*, can be seen as a fruit of the emerging radical theorizations, interpretations and elucidations on the conception of *jihād*, which have continued to flow and unfold throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the evolution of the movement of *Islamism* in general. The tactics, targets and arenas of operation pursued by such groups in the recent years indicate the dramatic evolution of the movement of *Jihadism*. Such a development constitutes an unprecedented transformation of the basic idea of *jihād* into a radical concept upon which some of the most fanatic and atrocious organizations are based in terms of thought, ideology, discourse and course of action. Besides, globalization and the digital age surface at the heart of the propaganda and recruitment campaigns launched by such radical groups to attract as many members and sympathizers to their alleged cause as possible, and *jihād* has been hereby exploited as a brand to provide a religious legitimacy to their cause and emotionally manipulate the recipients of their increasingly ideological discourse.

In order to understand the emergence of the contemporary political landscape in the Middle East and the developments attached to it, beside the rise of *Jihadism* and *sectarianism* as major challenges, shedding light on the modern history of the region seems vital in terms of studying, understanding and analyzing the multifaceted topic at hand.

This book tackles questions of core significance for the comprehension of the current religio-political scenery in the Middle East, the doctrinal tenets associated with the emergence of influential Islamist organizations, the ultimate rise of sectarian-based extremist groups, and the challenges encountered by the culturally-diverse populations amid such developments. It provides the reader with a study of *sectarianism*, *Islamism*, *Salafism* and *Jihadism*. It also delves into the historical events that have shaped the Middle East as we know it today. It further explores the key factors behind the rise of the most influential extremist sectarian-guided, jihādi-based groups in the recent years.

The main objective of this book is to help the reader understand the complex religio-political scene in today's Middle East and the ideological tenets of key influential movements whose beliefs and actions ultimately jeopardize the cultural diversity in the region. This is accomplished through a comprehensive literature-based study and analysis of the various aspects associated with *sectarianism*, *Islamism*, *Salafism* and *jihadism*, the multifaceted context within which these concepts and currents evolved, and their eventual impact on the political landscape and the society at large. This book also strives to thoroughly identify and analyze the main factors behind the rise and expansion of sectarian-guided extremist Islamist organizations and the associated threat to the cultural diversity in crisis-stricken parts of the region, particularly Syria and Iraq.

This book comprises five parts. *Part I* primarily focuses on the concept of *sectarianism*, sheds light on the emergence and development of *sectarianism* in the Islamic history, and further delves into the cultural diversity in the Middle East and the threats encountering this melting-pot. *Part II* explores the multifaceted notion of *jihād*, the



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various interpretations of the concept, the rise of *Salafi-Jihadism* and the eventual employment of Islamic *jihād* by militants. *Part III* investigates the emergence and development of the movements of *Islamism* and *Salafism*. *Part IV* looks into the historical events that have contributed to the rise of the modern Middle East, including the emergence of national borders, the Western influence, the state of turmoil across post-independence states, the aspirations associated with recent revolutionary movements and the challenges accompanying the Islamization of popular uprisings. *Part V* thoroughly scrutinizes the politico-sectarian roots of contemporary Islamist extremism.

# Part I

## SECTARIANISM

Sectarianism constitutes one of the significant challenges encountering the Middle East. The concept emerges frequently in debates about the geopolitical tensions and rivalries among major powers and key players in the region. It arises at the core of the crises that hit various parts of the Middle East over the recent years. While the roots of the sectarian divide, as tackled in the context of this volume, originate in the early history of Islam, its manifestations have taken various forms and continue to re-emerge as one of the defining dimensions of the political rifts and armed conflicts that persist to afflict the region today. Given the fact that the sectarian narrative has become a defining feature of major crises striking the Middle East, it seems crucial to tackle the notion of sectarianism, its evolution throughout the history of the region, and the associated conceptions, interpretations and developments.

## 2. SECTARIANISM: CONCEPT AND CHARACTERISTICS

In discussions about the Middle East and regional rifts and conflicts such as the case of Syria and Iraq, the term *sectarianism* (*al-Ṭāʿifiyya*) is frequently mentioned, often without a sufficient explanation or a sharp definition.<sup>1</sup> Although the concept of *sectarianism* remains largely undertheorized, several definitions of the term and explanations of its characteristics have been produced over the years.<sup>2</sup> *Sectarianism* is defined by Liechty and Clegg as a system of “attitudes, actions, beliefs and structures, which arises as a distorted expression of positive, human needs especially for belonging, identity and the free expression of difference and is expressed in destructive patterns of relating.”<sup>3</sup> It is believed to function at personal, communal and institutional levels, constantly involving a religious element as well as a negative mixture of politics and religion.<sup>4</sup> According to Brewer, *sectarianism* can be considered as “the determination of actions, attitudes and practices by practices about religious difference, which results in them invoked as the boundary marker to represent social stratification and conflict.”<sup>5</sup> The term thus refers to a bunch of beliefs, ideas and myths about religious difference mainly used to turn religion into a social marker and make disdainful comments and statements about other groups. In tensions between Sunni Muslims and Shia Muslims, or between one religious group and another like between Muslims and Christians, each group tends to identify itself with the religious and political features displayed in the discourse of its leadership, separating it from other communities in the area they inhabit and leading to some discriminatory statements about the alleged ‘other’. *Sectarianism*

is further deemed to be a set of prejudiced attitudes, policies and types of treatment based on religious difference, occurring at the levels of ideas, individual action and social structure.<sup>6</sup> In its modern context, *sectarianism* implies reference to the deployment of religious heritage as a key marker of modern political identity. It is ultimately “an act of interpretation that shapes as well as is shaped by religious mobilizations and violence in the modern world.”<sup>7</sup> *Sectarianism* is described by Makdisi in his *The Culture of Sectarianism* as “a disease that prevents modernization.”<sup>8</sup>

The academic discussion around the notion of *sectarianism* in the recent years has been increasingly driven by the rise and development of intra-religious strife, whether within Islam, Christianity or Judaism, leading many scholars to study and explore the nature and origins of sectarian rifts and struggle. One of the key aspects of *sectarianism* is the growth of in-group sentiments and an extreme attachment to a certain set of values and beliefs that emerge in contrast with that of other groups within the same society. Despite the various disagreements within the scholarly discussion of *sectarianism*, there is a relevant degree of agreement on what defines belongingness to a particular sect, which implicates “being a member of a group that has a shared identity, belief or ideology that defines them from the rest of the society.”<sup>9</sup> While the term is basically employed in the context of discussing differences among religious communities with negative connotations involved, the concept of *sectarianism* has further expanded to include political as well as ethnic minorities. In order to understand the fundamental dynamics of *sectarianism*, it is of great importance to consider Ibn Khaldun’s idea of *‘aṣabiyya* or group feeling, which entails a process of developing group relations and ties as a key factor for empowering a community and ensuring the

survival of its identity and basic values against any outside danger.<sup>10</sup> Hence, attributing negative connotations to the perceived “others” and subsequently excluding other groups for not sharing similar values, beliefs and ideological tenets emerge at the core of the notion of *sectarianism*. Its discriminative nature often leads to social divide that may eventually manifest itself in the form of violent strife aimed at the survival and prevalence of one’s own sectarian identity over others.

Although the term is basically used in reference to animosity, grudge and prejudice toward individuals or groups with different beliefs, *sectarianism* also holds a political dimension. Mabon and Royle strongly disagree with the narrative that suggests that *sectarianism* is inherently violent, arguing that violence only occurs when the sectarian differences or identities are politicized.<sup>11</sup> The notion of *sectarianism* is widely used in describing a country’s social and political divisions with religious implications involved. The Middle East has witnessed numerous of such examples. Saudi Arabia, the major Sunni power in the region, has repeatedly witnessed suppression of predominantly-Shia movements in the Kingdom, where the authorities accused Iran, the major Shia power in the Middle East, of supporting such movements to destabilize the region. In Syria, rebel groups fighting the regime of Bashar al-Assad in the aftermath of the 2011 uprising were mainly characterized by their Sunni-based struggle, striving to overthrow the Alawites from power. In Iraq and Bahrain, tensions and struggle for power are mainly based on the deep Sunni-Shia cleavage. Another example of the political dimension of the concept of *sectarianism* is Lebanon, where the political system is formally based on the distribution of power between Maronite Christians, Shia and Sunni Muslims. In this context, competitive or

hostile political relationships between communities defined by their religious characteristics and traits are expressed through a sectarian discourse. This basically applies to tensions and conflicts between groups adhering to a broad faith community such as Muslims, where widespread disputes and clashes between Sunni and Shia have been taking place, similar to tensions between Protestants and Catholics in Europe, and also between completely different faiths like between Muslims and Christians.<sup>12</sup> Hence, a religious identity is employed as a marker of difference among diverse communities, leading to rifts and tensions over power and political matters, where questions of marginalization, discrimination and exclusion on the basis of religious affiliation are raised. Illustrative cases are to be found in different parts of the Middle East, taking various forms and bearing multiple consequences. As a minority religious group in northern Iraq, the Yezidi Kurds were exposed to socioeconomic marginalization by Sunni Kurds in the Kurdistan Region. This led many Yezidis to deny the ethnic and cultural ties they share with the Kurds and claim to constitute a unique ethnoreligious community with own history, culture, religious customs and traditions. Under Saddam Hussein, the Shia suffered exclusion and suppression by the Sunni-led regime, and in post-2003 Iraq the situation reversed as the Shia took power and pursued oppressive and exclusionary policies against the Sunnis. In Syria, the Alawite regime of Assad excluded Sunnis from power circles for decades. The Lebanese suffered over fifteen years from a sectarian-based civil war that exhausted the country and devastated its people.

### 3. EMERGENCE AND DEVELOPMENT OF SECTARIANISM IN THE ISLAMIC HISTORY

In the Islamic world, *sectarianism* has for long played a defining role with regard to key rifts and differences that have emerged and surfaced within the Muslim society over centuries in the aftermath of the major Sunni-Shia split. Issues of rightful religious authority and eligible political leadership arise at the heart of intra-Islamic *sectarianism*. In the early history of Islam, strong disagreements erupted between the Islamic elite regarding grave issues affecting the 'umma. One of the most bitter and definitely the longest lasting issues was the rift that occurred over the political succession to the Prophet Muhammad. A Sunni-Shia split emerged as a consequence of the different claims to the leadership of political Islam. Other political disputes occurred between those who had been the earliest converts and companions of the Prophet (*Ṣaḥāba*) and those who had joined Islam much later on, mainly the elders of the Quraysh tribe. These disagreements threatened to tear apart the community.<sup>13</sup>

Subsequent to the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 A.D., a split within the Muslim community took place, mainly due to political disagreements. Two major branches of Islam emerged, the largest of which was the Sunni, the followers of *Sunna* or tradition and known as 'Ahl al-Sunna or the People of the Tradition, and the second was the Shi'a or Shi'ites, a name derived from the Arabic *Shi'at 'Ali* or the party of 'Ali. Controversy and dispute arose at the *Saqīfa*<sup>14</sup> assembly following Muhammad's death over the required qualifications and the precise functions and duties of his successors to lead the Muslim community. Hence, the question of the succession of the Prophet Muhammad was

a central issue that divided the Muslim community between those who favored allegiance to successors from the Prophet's household and those who considered the political leaders of the pre-Islamic era as the more eligible candidates.<sup>15</sup>

The Shi'ites stressed the spiritual function of the Prophet's *Caliph* or successor, referred to as *Imām*, who reflects the Prophetic Light.<sup>16</sup> According to the Shia, Imāms are divinely safeguarded against error and sin and possess an impeccable and infallible knowledge and understanding of the Qur'ān. They considered members of the Prophet's family or *'Ahl al-Bayt*, basically descendants of his daughter Fatima and her husband 'Ali ibn Abi Talib (the prophet's cousin and son-in-law), as the only ones qualified to become Imāms. The Shia insisted that Muhammad had on several occasions referred to 'Ali and his male descendants as the righteous successors of the Prophet. One of these occasions, which has been mentioned in authentic and authoritative Shia and Sunni sources, has been interpreted by the Shia as a formal approval and authorization of 'Ali's right to succession by the Prophet. While on his way back from his last pilgrimage to Mecca, on the eighteenth day of the month *Dhul-ḥijja* of the eleventh year of his Hijra in 632 A.D., at a place called *Ghadīr of Khumm*, the Prophet Muhammad reportedly made a crucial declaration, stating: "He for whom I was the master, should hence have 'Ali as his master (*fa-hādha 'Alīyun mawlāh man kuntu mawlāh*)."<sup>17</sup> For the Shia, the alleged circumstances that took place at the *Ghadīr of Khumm*, referred to as *Waṣīyyat 'Ali*, constituted the single significant piece of evidence on the basis of which they legitimized the succession of 'Ali and his descendants.<sup>18</sup>

Although the Sunni Muslims recognize the authenticity of the *Ghadīr of Khumm* story, they have interpreted the Prophet's use of the