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Politics of Sectarianism: Rethinking Religion and Politics in the Middle East

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Abstract

Allegations of sectarian violence and discrimination saturate popular and scholarly accounts of developments in the MENA region, particularly in the wake of renewed violence in Syria and Iraq. These accounts should sound a warning bell to scholars of religion and politics. The discourse of sectarianism is a modern discourse of religion-in-politics authorized by particular authorities in particular times and places. It relies on a fixed and stable representation of the shifting roles played by that which is named as “religion” or “sect” in politics and society. The complex and often conflicting forces that come together in any given episode of violence or discrimination subvert the stable notions of sectarian motivation and causation that form the bedrock in which such accounts rest. This essay disaggregates and politicizes the discourse of sectarianism, drawing on examples from Egypt, Bahrain, and Israel. It argues for distinguishing between religious difference as construed by those in positions of power, and religious difference as construed and experienced—and at times downplayed or ignored—by individuals and communities that are subjected to, and shaped by, sectarian projects, policies, and narratives.

Keywords

sectarianism – religion – politics – Middle East – violence – politics of knowledge

* This essay expands on part of the concluding chapter of my book, *Beyond Religious Freedom: The New Global Politics of Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

Sectarianism as a Discourse of Religion-in-Politics

In late 2013, a group of armed men on a motorbike attacked a Christian wedding at the Coptic Orthodox Church of the Virgin Mary in Cairo's Warraq district. Four people were killed and several wounded. The Egyptian government blamed the Muslim Brotherhood for the attack.¹ The Muslim Brotherhood denied involvement and accused the army of using the accusation to justify a crackdown. Investigating the attack for the Egyptian newspaper *Aswat Masriya*, journalist Yasmine Saleh went to Warraq and interviewed local residents of the lower-class neighborhood of Cairo in which the Virgin Church is located. Church officials told Saleh that they had informed the police about threats received before the shooting but to no avail. According to a guard at the church compound, "the Interior Ministry is not equipped to station a police car outside each church." Eyewitnesses said that despite numerous distress calls, police and ambulances did not arrive on the scene until two hours after the shooting began. Security personnel sent by the Ministry of the Interior to protect the building were seen fleeing up a side street during the attack, leaving the church unguarded. Addressing the possibility that the authorities had a role in this and possibly other attacks, Ishaq Ibrahim of the Cairo-based Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights stated that, "churches were torched, Christians kidnapped and now gunned down, and there is no security guarding the churches. I believe there is collaboration."² Interestingly, Yasmine Saleh reported that there had been "no signs of Muslim-Christian tension" in the neighborhood prior to the attack. To the contrary, as one resident explained, "Muslims would protect Christians whenever pro-Mursi supporters held protests in the dusty area, where piles of garbage lie in narrow dirt lanes beside crudely built brick homes. Some fear that such cross-sectarian solidarity was the real target of the perpetrators of the wedding shooting." The supervisor of the church library, Essam Iskander, concluded similarly that, "those who carried out the attack were not only tackling Christians, but both Christians and Muslims, to spread terrorism and make the new state fail. Some of the injured people were Muslims. And many Muslims who sit in a nearby cafe protect the church."³

1 Yasmine Saleh, "Egyptian Christians Fear Chaos after Wedding Bloodshed," *Aswat Masriya*, October 21, 2013, <http://en.aswatmasriya.com/news/view.aspx?id=2b5d83ba-d465-4a56-9128-4adb73c24d69>.

2 Quoted in Hamza Hendawi, "Christians Mourn Cairo Shooting that Killed 4," AP, The Big Story, October 21, 2013, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/egyptian-pm-condemns-deadly-attack-copts>.

3 Quoted in Saleh, "Egyptian Christians Fear Chaos."

International media and other observers have described the attacks on the Virgin Church as sectarian in nature.⁴ Christians are being persecuted in Egypt, it is said, just as Muslims are persecuted in Myanmar. Allegations of religious violence and discrimination saturate popular and scholarly accounts of developments in the MENA region, particularly in the wake of the renewed violence in Syria and Iraq. Yet such accounts should sound a warning bell to scholars seeking a sophisticated understanding of religion and politics, and the specific terms of their entanglement, in the MENA region and elsewhere. The discourse of sectarianism is a modern discourse of religion-in-politics invoked in specific times and places and authorized by particular authorities. It relies on and reproduces a fixed representation of what are in fact complex and unstable relations between (that which is designated as) religious or sectarian affiliation, belief and belonging, on the one hand, and politics, violence, conflict, and co-existence, on the other. Dethroning religion as a singular and stable interpretive and policy category, as my work seeks to do, means reconsidering claims of religion or sect as viable explanations of violence, discrimination, and persecution—or, for that matter, freedom, peace, and toleration. Sectarianism, then, is a particular political discourse and project that actively transforms the complexities and contingencies of human affiliation, behavior, and motivation into a singular explanation of political outcomes: “religion (or sect) made them do it.”

This essay pursues an alternative that politicizes discourses of sectarianism by rendering such accounts part of the object of study. It disaggregates sectarianism by exploring the tensions and incongruities between sectarian discourses of religious difference as authorized by those in positions of power, including, oftentimes, the state, and nonsectarian approaches to living with social and religious diversity. Sectarianism appears as one among many actual and potential discourses of religion-in-politics. Dethroning sectarianism underscores not only the instability of the category of religion but also the sociological implausibility of narratives that rely on the modifiers “religious” or “sectarian” as explanations of violence or persecution. These categories are too unstable to bear the causal weight that they are often asked to assume. Many aspects of individual and collective belief, being and belonging simply fail to conform to the fixed and stable understandings of “religion” or “sect” that are presupposed and produced in such accounts. This becomes clear in delving more deeply into the circumstances surrounding a particular

4 Kristen Chick, “Sectarian Violence in Cairo Has Egypt on Edge,” *Christian Science Monitor*, May 8, 2011, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2011/0508/Sectarian-violence-in-Cairo-has-Egypt-on-edge>.

episode that is named as sectarian violence. It is evident in Saleh's reporting on the lack of Muslim-Christian tension in the local neighborhood before the attack in Warraq, for example, as well as in her description of Muslims in a nearby café who protected the church. The complex and conflicting amalgamation of interests, fears, motivations, and forms of agency that materialize in such an event undercut the stable presuppositions about religious motivation and causation that form the bedrock in which sectarian accounts comfortably rest.

This essay chips away at this bedrock on several fronts. It insists on the instability of the category of religion, citing the complex interplay and fluid distinctions between religion and religious difference as authorized by those in power, and as lived by those without it. It approaches sectarianism as a specific, modern discourse of religion-in-politics. Sectarianism is a political project, and sectarianization is a political process. Rather than replicating the terms and assumptions of sectarian discursive frames, analysts should reconsider religious or sectarian motivation as a legitimate explanation of violence, discord, and persecution—or, for that matter, of freedom, peace, and toleration. Instead, accounts that rely on such explanations should *themselves* become part of the object of study. Not to do so is to reproduce the very assumptions about religion-in-politics that are most in need of interpretation and critique.

A second strategy for chipping away at the bedrock in which sectarian explanations rest is to approach sectarianism genealogically as a political and discursive formation with a specific history. As Ussama Makdisi has shown, the advent of modern sectarian discourse and practice only became possible due to what he describes as a “rupture, a birth of a new culture that singled out religious affiliation as the defining public and political characteristic of a modern subject and citizen.”⁵ Specific contingencies have to come together to give sectarian discourses and projects socio-political traction in a particular time and place. Political sectarianism requires singling out religious affiliation as the defining public and political characteristic of the modern subject and citizen. It can take hold only in a context in which a relatively stable understanding of religion has become plausible, such that subjects and citizens can be publically and politically identified in religious terms. Makdisi's study of the outbreak of violence in the Shuf, in Lebanon in 1841, illuminates these enabling conditions in a particular set of historical circumstances in which, as he explains, religion became “detached from its social environment” and treated by those in positions of power as “a cohesive, exclusivist, and organic

5 Ussama Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 174.

force.”⁶ As Makdisi, Benjamin Kaplan, Evan Haefeli, and others have shown, and as I have emphasized elsewhere, the drive to isolate and privilege “religion” as a cohesive social force detached from its local environment is a political gesture, it is a distinctive form of politics.⁷ It is neither inevitable, nor is it a timeless feature of polities and societies in the Middle East or any other part of the world.

A third strategy to disaggregate sectarianism, paving the way for new analytical and critical possibilities in the study of religion-in-politics, is to explore non-sectarian modes of construing and living with social and religious diversity that exist alongside sectarian rivals. Such alternatives compete with, subvert, ignore, and/or challenge sectarian narratives of religious being and belonging—while also never escaping their influence entirely. Makdisi hints at this broader landscape when he suggests that sectarian accounts of violence marginalize its spontaneity and minimize the agency of its perpetrators.⁸ Like persecution narratives, sectarian explanations simplify messy, complex, and heterogeneous social and religious landscapes. Such accounts mask the broader political and historical contexts in which particular histories unfold. They eclipse other modes of sociality and relationality—religious, secular, both, neither—which compete with, downplay, or subvert sectarian divisions that are defended by individuals and groups invested in them. They silence dissenting individuals and groups who cannot or choose not to assent to dominant, sectarian renderings of religion-in-politics.⁹ Such alternate sociabilities and religiosities often escape the field of vision of scholars and analysts trained to focus on “big R” religion and “big P” politics: legal guarantees for religious freedom, religious peace making, religious tolerance, interfaith dialogue, the politics of persecution, constitutionalizing religion, and so on. Expanding the lens to take in a broader social, historical, and interpretive field requires not simply deconstructing sectarian explanations—which will remain powerful—but pulling

6 Ibid., 65. Even in such charged situations, Makdisi shows, it is also often the case that co-religionists refuse to aid one another, subverting the narrative of sectarian unity from another angle.

7 Benjamin J. Kaplan, *Divided by Faith: Religious Conflict and the Practice of Toleration in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 2010), Evan Haefeli, *New Netherland and the Dutch Origins of American Religious Liberty* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), Hurd, *Beyond Religious Freedom*.

8 Makdisi, *Culture of Sectarianism*, 71.

9 For an attempt to bring some of these individuals and groups back into history see Orit Bashkin, *The Other Iraq: Pluralism and Culture in Hashemite Iraq* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010) and *New Babylonians: A History of Jews in Modern Iraq* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).

back, looking elsewhere, and allowing such narratives to de-stabilize themselves by drawing attention to other possibilities. In this context, as discussed below, religious, political, social, and communal practices that downplay or are indifferent to the rigidity of confessional boundaries, doctrinal purity, and identity markers take on heightened significance.

Sectarianizing States: Bahrain and Israel

Approaching sectarianism as a particular discourse of religion-in-politics that participates in a broader and always contested field of religion-in-politics yields analytical benefits for scholars of the MENA region. Disaggregating sectarian projects, policies and narratives allows us to account more fully for the complex, variable, and multiple intersections of and entanglements between religion, governance, conflict, and co-existence in specific contexts. In the case of the popular mobilization for democratic reform in Bahrain, for example, there is a significant disjuncture between the regime's mobilization of a sectarian discourse of religion-in-politics, on one hand, and the nonsectarian agenda of much of the Bahraini democratic opposition on the other. Acknowledging this distinction makes it impossible to describe this conflict as fundamentally "sectarian" in nature because to do so is to reproduce rather than interrogate the assumptions of the reigning Al-Khalifa narrative.

As is well known, the Bahraini authorities have struggled to frame the uprising as sectarian in origin and motivation since its inception on February 14, 2011, relying on the claim that the opposition embodies a Shi'i political agenda that seeks to replace the Al Khalifa regime with a theocratic state beholden to Iran. The regime has sought to co-opt and retrench perceived sectarian differences for political ends to maintain power despite little evidence that Bahrain's opposition takes its marching orders from Tehran. Given that the vast majority of the opposition in Bahrain comes from the Shi'a community, which is demographically dominant, and that Bahrain's largest opposition bloc, *Al Wefaq*, is exclusively Shi'a, the regime's effort to paint the opposition in sectarian terms has met with considerable success. Writing in *Foreign Policy*, Ala'a Shehabi, founder of the NGO Bahrain Watch, observes that, "for three years, the regime has destroyed Shiite mosques, carried out sectarian profiling, and 'cleansed' state institutions in a crackdown during which up to 15,000 people have been arrested; around 3,000 remain in prison."¹⁰ As Toby Jones puts it, "the claim

10 Ala'a Shehabi, "Why Is Bahrain Outsourcing Extremism?" *Foreign Policy*, October 29, 2014, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/10/29/why_is_bahrain_outsourcing_extremism_isis_democracy. Shehabi connects the Bahraini regime to IS, despite the latter's frustrations

that this is a sectarian conflict has been uncritically accepted by those who either share the regime's agenda or have a limited understanding of Bahraini politics."¹¹ Toby Matthiesen explains further that, "the Saudis used their Arabic-language media empire to spread a narrative of an Iranian-engineered takeover of Bahrain that would endanger all the Arab Gulf states. The other GCC states largely followed suit. Gulf ruling families intermarry, and so criticism of the Bahraini ruling family is seen as an insult to other royals as well (and is treated as a crime throughout the GCC countries)."¹²

Regime opponents have not only denounced a sectarian agenda but many have worked deliberately to promote cross-sectarian cooperation. Shehabi echoes many other commentators in observing that, "the opposition does include Shiites, who are justly aggrieved by decades of exclusion, but also many others whose longstanding demand has been for a constitutional monarchy and human and civil rights." In rejecting the regime's sectarianizing politics, Bahraini rights activists, according to Jones, have been "a particularly troublesome irritant to the regime's public relations and narrative machine." The opposition has demanded, and continues to demand at the time of this writing, judicial and electoral reform, the release of opposition political prisoners, increased political participation, and an elected government with full legislative powers. The detention and repression of the opposition by the regime has amounted as Jones concludes to "little more than a brazen effort to silence a set of critics, but also those who have most effectively laid bare the distortions peddled by the government." Acknowledging these distortions, Matthiesen also stresses the economic bases of the revolt, attributing it to the rise of a "crony capitalism class made up of the ruling family and a small group of Sunni and Shi'i business families" resulting in a situation in which "the wealth of the few visibly contrasted with the circumstances of most Bahrainis."¹³ As he explains:

Without the windfall oil profits enjoyed by its neighbors, Bahrain could not afford the high civil service salaries and massive infrastructure and

with the former, suggesting that "the Bahraini government had also been nurturing and nourishing extremist groups and their sectarian ideology to counter the so-called 'Shiite threat' posed by the pro-democracy uprising."

11 Toby C. Jones, "Bahrain: Human Rights and Political Wrongs" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (Sept. 25, 2012). <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/09/25/bahrain%2Dhuman%2Drights%2Dand%2Dpolitical%2Dwrongs/dwgi>

12 Toby Matthiesen, "(No) Dialogue in Bahrain," *Middle East Report Online* (February 13, 2014), <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero021314>.

13 Matthiesen, "(No) Dialogue in Bahrain."

social service programs that its GCC partners put into place to cushion the blows of neoliberalism. The inequality was highlighted further by corruption on a grand scale, as shown by the results of an international investigation of ties between Alcoa, the largest US aluminum producer, and Bahraini officials and royals.¹⁴

The Bahraini government imported cheap labor in part to quash the indigenous Bahraini unionized working class. Many of these newer workers—Sunnis from South Asia or impoverished Arab countries dependent on regime sponsors—have been understandably reticent to speak out for workers' rights. This labor policy, Matthiesen concludes, "fueled resentment among poorer Bahrainis, many but not all of whom are Shi'a."¹⁵

De-centering, without disregarding, sectarian accounts of the conflict in Bahrain leads to a more nuanced and multi-faceted understanding of the current impasse between the regime and opposition forces. It signals the importance of distinguishing in this and other cases between religious and sectarian difference as construed by those in positions of power, in this case the regime, and religious and sectarian difference as construed and experienced—and at times downplayed or ignored—by individuals and communities that are *subjected to* these sectarian projects, policies, and narratives. In Bahrain and elsewhere, sectarian representations of conflict and violence are always part of a larger political project—in this case, efforts by the regime to retain power. Attributing the opposition's grievances to religious or sectarian motivation serves the regime's interests by reducing the complexities of the opposition's affiliations and demands into a singular narrative of so-called religious or sectarian motivation that resonates regionally and internationally. Rather than uncritically reproducing this narrative scholars should approach it as a particular mobilization of religion-in-politics, and seek to understand whose interests it serves, how and by whom it is mobilized, and with what consequences.

The same holds in other contexts. The Israeli government's military recruitment policies, for example, invoke and instantiate sectarian divisions in the service of the political and strategic objectives of the Israeli state. This is not new. Conscription in Israel has been structured around confessional identities since the founding of the state.¹⁶ Under this system, Israeli Jewish men are

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Lisa Hajjar, "Israel's Interventions among the Druzes," *Middle East Report* 200 (Spring, 1996), <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer200/israels-interventions-among-druze>.

conscripted for three years and women for two, though individuals may be exempted from service for different reasons. Among Palestinians, it varies by community. In an attempt secure the patronage of the new Israeli state, Druze leaders signed an agreement with Israel in 1956 to draft all males from their community, or roughly one tenth of the Palestinian population.¹⁷ The tiny Circassian population followed suit. Sunni Muslims, who comprise 80% of the Palestinian minority, were not conscripted because they were considered a threat to the state. Both Muslims and Christians (about 1/10 of Israel's current Palestinian population) were initially exempt from the draft.

This changed in 2012 with the emergence of a Christian Palestinian recruitment campaign. In spring of 2014 the Israeli military began issuing enlistment notices to Christians graduating from secondary school. A number of interests stand behind the campaign. Some Christian Palestinians, as Jonathan Cook explains, have sought to emulate the Druze's historic relationship with the Israeli state, in which in exchange for cooperation and enlistment the Druze receive limited recognition as a sub-national community.¹⁸ Another factor is the American Christian Zionist lobby, and a small but vocal group of pro-government Palestinian Christians, the Forum for Christian Recruitment, who are strong supporters of the recruitment strategy. Former Israeli paratrooper and spokesman for the Forum, Shadi Khaloul, stresses the need for Christians to "live freely [and] rediscover our identity and history," calling for a separate school system for Christians, reviving and teaching in the ancient and near-extinct language of Aramaic, which, like Hebrew, preceded Arabic in the Levant. With this backing, and tapping into rising anxieties about the fate of Christians in an unstable post-Arab spring Middle East, Benjamin Netanyahu announced in a 2014 press conference that, "members of the Christian community must be allowed to enlist in the Israel Defense Forces. You are loyal citizens who want to defend the state. I salute you and support you. We will not tolerate threats against you and we will act to enforce the law with a heavy hand against those who persecute you." At his side during the press conference stood a senior—now defrocked—Nazareth priest, Jibril Nadaf, leader and founder of the Forum for Christian Recruitment.

17 Hajjar explains: "Druze were the only non-Jews to be conscripted (aside from the tiny Circassian community), making military service the single most important factor in their relationship with the Jewish majority, and the most obvious marker distinguishing the Druze from other Israeli non-Jews."

18 Jonathan Cook, "Onward, Christian Soldiers" *Middle East Report Online*, May 13, 2014, http://www.merip.org/mero/mero051314?ip_login_no_cache=519fa174ed39f3c3566446ca db4d3f5b.

Cook describes the Christian recruitment campaign as a “major shift” on the Israeli political landscape, observing that historically “Palestinian Christian leaders, far from adopting Zionist positions, have taken a prominent role in Palestinian national movements, whether through figures like George Habash, founder of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, or Azmi Bishara, who led the political campaign inside Israel to end its status as a Jewish state. Religious leaders, too, like Elias Chacour, the Greek Catholic archbishop of the Galilee, have had a profound effect on educating Christian communities abroad about the injustices perpetrated by Israel on the Palestinian minority.” The Israeli right, Cook concludes, is attempting to reposition Palestinian Christians on Israel’s “side” through “a mixture of financial incentives, legislated privileges and mounting sectarian pressures derived from a presumed Muslim backlash.”

As in Bahrain, the Israeli military’s simultaneous sectarianizing and securitizing strategies are part of a broader political project—in this case, strengthening the current regime through a sharpened sectarian “divide and rule” strategy involving the attempted co-optation of Palestinian Christians. As is the case in Bahrain, however, state-sponsored secularization politics and policies do not exhaust the field of possibility. Alternative modes of construing and living with social and religious diversity compete with, subvert or in some cases openly disregard the sectarian narratives of being and belonging propagated by the authorities. An example from the Israeli context is a non-profit group called Hagar: Jewish-Arab Education for Equality, which in 2007 founded a non-segregated Jewish-Arab school in southern Israel, in the Negev. According to its website Hagar’s mission is to serve as a “springboard for social change through its bilingual, multicultural school and community programming.” Hagar/Hajjar (in Arabic) is the only non-segregated daycare and school in the Negev, where a third of the area’s 600,000 inhabitants are Palestinian citizens of Israel. Writing in *The Nation*, the school’s founders, Neve Gordon and Catherine Rottenberg, describe its mission.

Hagar’s uniqueness stems from the fact that it has created a space in which Jewish and Palestinian children not only encounter one another on a daily basis (each ethnic group makes up 50 percent of the student body) but learn together in a bilingual atmosphere of mutual respect. To ensure that Hebrew and Arabic are awarded equal status, two teachers, one Jewish and the other Palestinian, are present in every classroom... Within this bilingual space Hagar encourages direct contact with the heritage, customs and historical narrative of both ethnic groups...By the age of 2, children in the daycare are already celebrating the holidays of

the three monotheistic religions as well as marking the national memorial days of both cultures.¹⁹

In contrast to the Israeli military's sectarianizing recruitment policy, and like much of the Bahraini opposition, Hagar/Hajjar has sought to downplay the rigidity and socio-political relevance of communal and sectarian boundaries, without ignoring them, in favor of an ethos of understanding across confessional divides and a focus on shared communal and educational objectives. This approach contrasts with the government's co-optation and retrenchment of religious difference in the interest of a particular form of Israeli nationalist-Zionist politics.

The power imbalance between the Israeli state and the Hagar Association cannot be overstated. As a public school recognized by the Israeli Ministry of Education, the school is shaped, and its mission delimited, by Israeli law, public policy, and a broader climate in which segregation between Jews and Arabs is the norm. This hostile climate has deteriorated recently, and the school has suffered from vandalism and threats of violence as a result. In the spring of 2014, organized vandals desecrated the school in Be'er-Sheva during the night, covering the outside walls, main entrance, and surrounding fence of the school with stickers in Hebrew and Arabic. In Hebrew, the stickers read "Don't you even dare to think about a Jewess," and in Arabic they read, "Don't you dare touch a Jewess." On the stickers, under the threats, a phone number was listed to "report incidents of assimilation and provide donations." Gordon and Rottenberg's article in *The Nation* recounts the fear and anxiety circulating in the school community as a result of the attack.

The Israeli government's military recruitment campaign, the Forum for Christian Recruitment, and the broader socio-political ethos of sectarian exclusivity and intimidation engendered by these developments contributes to the confessionalization of Israeli politics and public life. It works against the possibilities for co-existence represented by the Hagar/Hajjar school. And yet, as in Bahrain, sectarianizing projects and policies can never completely eradicate the multiple sites of resistance to them.²⁰ There have been widespread protests against the military recruitment campaign, with the overwhelming

19 Neve Gordon and Catherine Rottenberg, "Why Would Bigots Attack a Jewish-Arab School in Israel that Teaches Tolerance and Mutual Respect?" *The Nation*, June 5, 2014, <http://www.thenation.com/article/180138/why-would-bigots-attack-jewish-arab-school-israel-teaches-tolerance-and-mutual-respect#>.

20 On the need to re-fashion citizenship and co-existence in Israel/Palestine beyond received entanglements of Zionism, nationalism, and territorialism see Atalia Omer, *When Peace Is Not Enough: How the Israeli Peace Camp Thinks about Religion, Nationalism, and Justice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

majority of Palestinian Christians opposing military service. According to Cook, “the main political parties representing Palestinian citizens of Israel have staged protests in the city, including one in April at which youths dressed as soldiers and carried toy rifles. They declared the area a closed military zone, setting up barbed wire and a mock checkpoint. The ‘soldiers’ then acted out a show in which they harassed other youths as a way to highlight what military service in the Occupied Territories entails. A pamphlet handed out to passersby warned that Israel sought to achieve ‘the disintegration of the Palestinian national minority into warring sects.’” The Higher Follow-Up Committee, the main political body representing the Palestinian minority, called for a major rally against the enlistment drive. Other leaders urged Christian youngsters publicly to burn their call-up papers. Jibril Nadaf, the priest who stood with Netanyahu at the press conference, was de-frocked by the Greek Orthodox patriarch in the spring of 2014 after a public campaign criticized him for his support for Christian recruitment. Church authorities in Israel and abroad remain caught between the laity and the Israeli government, fearful of antagonizing the latter but attentive to local dissent. Rather than retrenching the Israeli state’s narrative by focusing on the plight of communities defined in sectarian terms, scholars should set their sights on this broader field of religio-political practice and possibility. This includes dissenters that challenge, confound, or ignore the social and political relevance of sectarian boundaries and communities as defined by the state and other authorities.²¹

The Codification of Religion-as-Difference

Sectarian discourse conceals the ways in which social, economic and political divisions cut across alleged sectarian divides. It obscures the ways forward when the focus is not on beliefs or communities of believers, but on shared human needs and goals. It engenders what Sarah Shields describes as “the codification of religion-as-difference,” contributing to the disfiguration of heterogeneous polities and societies.²² Scholars of the MENA region need to resist being

21 For an interesting attempt to reread recent political developments in Yemen along these lines see Stacey Philbrick Yadav, “The Limits of the ‘Sectarian’ Framing in Yemen,” *The Washington Post*, September 25, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/09/25/the-limits-of-the-sectarian-framing-in-yemen/>.

22 As Peter Harling and Sarah Birke conclude:
 Syria’s all-out civil war... will no doubt go down in conventional wisdom as an outburst of communal hatred inevitable within a mixed society. Nothing could be further from the

drawn into the baseline assumptions of sectarianizing narratives, politics and policies. To confine explanatory or interpretive accounts to the “religion box” not only fails to bring clarity and understanding to complex outcomes and processes, but also reinforces and deepens the divisions it claims to discover “out there” in the world. There is no unitary or universal conception of religion or sect, in any tradition, that can be conjured once and for all to stabilize the shaky foundations of sectarian accounts of action, decision, desire, persecution, violence, or affiliation—in the Middle East or anywhere else. In the words of American religious historian Robert Orsi, there is “no such thing as a ‘Methodist’ or a ‘Southern Baptist’ who can be neatly summarized by an account of the denomination’s history or theology.”²³ There are Methodists and Southern Baptists in particular times and places immersed in their worlds and struggling with local realities and contingencies of work, life, gender, politics, illness, sexuality, race, class, violence, and other constraints and possibilities. The same holds for Sunnis, Druze, Jews, Alevis, atheists, Zoroastrians, and Buddhists.

Sectarianism is a particular, modern discourse of religion-in-politics. It is authorized and often institutionalized by those in positions of power in the service of particular political needs, desires, and agendas. To invoke or impose a sectarian narrative has different consequences depending on context. In contemporary Bahrain, its invocation depoliticizes the conflict between the regime and the opposition, in Wendy Brown’s sense of the term, by “removing a political phenomenon from comprehension of its *historical* emergence and from a recognition of the *powers* that produce and contour it.”²⁴ In these circumstances identifying sectarian affiliation as the cause of the conflict obscures a broader and more complex field of contestation. A similar dynamic characterizes current debates over the so-called Islamic State, most of which, as Alireza Doostdar has persuasively suggested, reduce a complex field of contestation and violence to a question of doctrines and beliefs said to be rooted in Salafi Islam.²⁵ In the

truth. It is the product of an international standoff and cannot be rolled back without an international tradeoff. However much Syrians suffer, the war in their country is not in their hands. It is a conflict that disfigures Syrian society more than reflects it.

Peter Harling and Sarah Birke, “The Syrian Heartbreak,” *Middle East Report*, April 16, 2013, <http://www.merip.org/mero/mer0041613>.

- 23 Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 167.
- 24 Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 15.
- 25 Alireza Doostdar, “How Not to Understand ISIS,” Sightings, The University of Chicago Divinity School, Oct. 2, 2014, <http://divinity.uchicago.edu/sightings/how-not-understand-isis-alireza-doostdar>.

case of contemporary Israel, state sectarianizing projects work to naturalize lines of sectarian difference in the service of a particular understanding of the Israeli nationalist project, marginalizing and rendering inaudible a range of dissenters including individuals and groups that represent nonsectarian modes of sociality, being, and belonging.

To access these dynamics scholars need to step back and ask a different set of questions. Which discourses of religion-in-politics are mobilized in particular contexts, by whom, and with what consequences? What happens to constructs of religious or sectarian violence when sectarian being and belonging as authorized by those in positions of power are distinguished from religious and communal practices of the opposition, or of other voices, and particularly aspects of those practices that downplay or are indifferent to the rigidity of confessional boundaries, doctrinal purity, and identity markers? What if, rather than allowing the most vocal parties to a conflict define the terms in which it is studied, scholars were to turn their attention to the multiple, shifting, and dissenting formations of religion-in-politics that take shape alongside and outside of the dominant frames? What if we were to acknowledge, as Orit Bashkin has observed in regard to Israel, that, “to the extent that sectarianism is bound up with secular state governance, then challenges to sectarianism are received and repressed as challenges to state power?”²⁶

Newspaper headlines, government and think tank reports, and many academic accounts make it difficult to ask these kinds of questions. Many rely on and reproduce unsustainable assumptions about religion, taking for granted that something called religion or sect causes individuals and groups to act in certain ways regardless of circumstance. This is particularly the case when it comes to Islam. Calls for religious reform, religious moderation, and religious freedom are deafening. Yet if, as I am suggesting, along with many scholars of

26 Orit Bashkin, Comments at the Symposium on “Sectarianism in the Modern Middle East,” Rice University, April 12, 2014. Citing Makdisi, in *The Other Iraq* Bashkin argues that in early twentieth-century Iraqi nationalist discourse “the battle against sectarianism (*ta’ifiyya*) was often used to reduce acts of resistance against the state’s power (revolts, refusal to be conscripted or to pay taxes) to irrational sectarian deeds inspired by dissatisfied Kurdish and Shi’i sheikhs.” Bashkin, *The Other Iraq*, 7. On the modern and colonial construction of sectarianism in Lebanon see Max Weiss, *In the Shadow of Sectarianism: Law, Shi’ism, and the Making of Modern Lebanon* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010). On the politics of the deployment of welfare benefits by sectarian groups in contemporary Lebanon see Melani Cammett, *Compassionate Communalism: Welfare and Sectarianism in Lebanon* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014.)

religion, religious belonging, belief, and practice are embedded in and entangled with other human forms of sociality, law, and politics, and cannot simply be distilled as *a priori* features of human identity and sociality, then the question of sectarian violence and sectarianism is a question of politics, and more specifically, of particular authorizations of religion-in-politics. To subscribe uncritically to sectarian explanations is to reproduce those authorizations. It re-instantiates the very narratives of religion-in-politics that it is the job of academics and analysts to understand, to contextualize, and, in some circumstances, to criticize. There is no singular, stable conception of religion or sect that can be conjured to secure the foundations of sectarian accounts of political action, decision, and affiliation. There is no *one* thing that can be identified as “sectarian.” Rather than helping us to understand the world around us, such accounts retrench the very authorizations of religion-in-politics that they claim to diagnose and describe.