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# The Question of Sectarianism and the Manufacturing of Minorities in the Greater Arab Mashreq

Azmi Bishara | June 2018

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## Introduction

In its contemporary definition, Bishara argues that political sectarianism is the product of the interaction between a pre-existing social system, modern colonialism, the postcolonial state, and the way in which the state was constructed. Based on institutionalized, or semi-institutionalized quotas for sects, political sectarianism, though primarily operating within the framework of the state, may also be employed transnationally to strengthen ties of solidarity, or for external interference in other states. The paper observes the difference between the Arab-nationalist path (a unifying national culture founded upon a common language) and that of the nation-state (based on citizenship enshrining political and social rights) on the one hand, and sectarianism on the other. These two historical paths represent a means for assimilation that cut across the division of society into tribal or regional groups. In sum, in the Arab Mashreq, Arab nationalism is not the antithesis of the nation state, but rather one of the foundations for its unity. The alternative, argues Bishara, is sectarian, tribal or regional fragmentation. Bishara offers the case of Lebanon and Iraq as examples in the transformation of the religious or confessional community into the political sect and refers to political religiosity, noting that in multi-confessional societies, politicized religiosity automatically turns into political sectarianism. This can be seen in the process of the transformation and dismantling of “other” groups, religions, or confessions into minorities, and the behavior of the majorities as a sect; as if they were minorities. Monitoring these transformations, warns Bishara, constitutes the biggest challenge confronting Arab researchers examining sectarianism. It is sectarianism that produces sects, as imagined entities, and not vice versa in the contemporary period.

- I -

Some researchers may find the premise that *al-Ta'ifiya* (sectarianism) in contemporary Arab political discourse is a modern phenomenon somewhat strange. It is true that religious communities and communal solidarity or fervor (*Asabiya*) are not modern phenomena per se, both being intrinsic to the notion of sectarianism. Sectarianism, however, is set apart from the quintessential religious affiliation to a group of coreligionists and their fervor in this analysis. Namely, the notion of political sectarianism in our present Arab political discourse, whether it is a concept we are attempting to establish for the sake of analyzing social phenomena or whether it is a value judgement of a reprehensible phenomenon. This is different from the notion of *taasub* (roughly zealous fervor or blind loyalty) pertaining to any group. It is certainly different too from the notion of the *Taifa* that is used in contemporary Arabic to designate people who share religious or confessional affiliation, and that originally meant a group representing a faction of a whole, a specific group of people within a larger group.

Across the Quran, connotations of the term *Taifa* carry a descriptive meaning without a value judgment, and consistently refer to a faction, or a part of a whole. The term did not acquire a derogatory denotation until the 4th century A.H. (10th century A.D), which contemporary historians mark as the beginning of the Second Abbasid Era. That era saw the authority of the Abbasid caliph in Baghdad weakened, beginning with the third decade of that century, and the rise of emirates and fiefdoms in the peripheries. The caliph was weakened inside the capital Baghdad itself, with three separate caliphs vying for this title to represent the entire Muslim community across the Islamic world: The Abbasid caliph in Baghdad, the Umayyad caliph in Andalusia, and the Fatimid Al-Mahdi in Kairouan<sup>1</sup>. This formed the basis of the coalescence of the term *Muluk al-Tawa'if*, (roughly translated as factional kings) in classical documents produced in that century and thereafter, in a sort of projection of the divisions of Alexander's lieutenants following his death or similar cases in Persia, upon the *Mutaghalliba*, the usurpers of the power of the caliph. The connotation here being fragmentation, powerlessness, and usurpation; versus unity, centrality, and authority<sup>2</sup>. Historically, *Taifa* and the plural *Tawa'if*

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<sup>1</sup> Jalal al-Din Abdul-Rahman bin Abi Bakr al-Sayuti, *Tarikh al-Khulafaa*, edited by Mohammed bu al-Fadhl (Beirut, Saida: Al-Maktaba al-Asriya, 2010), p.343.

<sup>2</sup> Miskawayh describes the shrinking of the central political authority of the caliph Ar-Radi Billah as follows: The world was in the hands of the usurpers, who have become *Muluk al-Tawa'if* (kings of the sects), and in the hands of

were also used to describe organized craftsmen and traders in fraternities in Muslim Medieval cities that also overlapped with some Sufi orders.

In researching sectarianism as a modern phenomenon, we investigate a context in which the community of followers of a religion or a school of sharia *madhab* has become part of a whole, namely, the national entity or state and where sectarianism has become a driving force for it as a faction, shaping its character and history (and memory), setting up its interests in separation from the new 'whole' (the state, the nation, the people) of which it forms part.

In truth, sectarianism in its contemporary form had been preceded by a pre-modern process of coalescence of religious folk as distinct separate groups. But sectarianism's distinguishing trait is that it resurrects these groups with an identity that goes beyond religious association to encompass politics and common interests of the *Taifa* within the nation state and national culture. Sectarianization was thus a process of fragmentation, at least from the perspective of the historic assumption of the emergence of nation states. Or, it is an overt claim of the failure of this assumption, or that the latter's pretenses have been a false illusion to begin with.

The sectarianism in question follows the view that the followers of a particular faith\confession (religion or *madhab*) represent a historic extension or continuation of an imagined history with social boundaries and representatives (be they clerics or laities) defending it and fending for its interests, pursuant to a discourse of coexistence and rivalry with the other groups. This creates a perception of the existence of an entity, with foundational myths, and narratives that include notions of victimhood and pride, martyrdom and heroism. To establish the historical contiguity, the sectarian terminology used to understand itself and its surroundings in the present time are projected upon past events and vice versa: past events, real or imagined are projected on the present reality. This is something referred to in critical historical terms as an 'anachronistic falsehood', or 'historical anachronism'.

More importantly, the context of political sectarianism in its specific quota-apportioning sense is linked to recent historic developments that saw the emergence of the nation state and the nation. In this framework it became possible to speak of the bond binding certain segments based on religion and religious denomination and the creation of the *Taifa* as an imagined community. Thereupon it became possible for these groups to conceptualize themselves and

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all those who seized control of a country's rule and its wealth". See: Abu Ali Miskawayh Ar-Razi, *Tajârib al-Umam*, edited by Abu al-Qasim Imami, (Tehran: Dar Surush, 2001) V.5/6, p459.

demand their share in the state, in some cases even before states were formed and prior to decolonization and independence.

Contemporary political sectarianism thus differs from the confessionalism underpinning the Ottoman *millet* (religious communities) system, in that it is based on political institutional, or quasi-institutional, quota-allotment among imagined sects, while the *millet* system was a regulatory framework that could entail marginalization/integration of *dhimmis* and the delineation thereof but not shares in the state and its institution.

A distinction is drawn between the *Taifa* as a community of people familiar to the individual in his or her local and communal surroundings, and the constructed *Taifa* in the imaginations of the masses, whether as a non-local imagined community spread across or even transcending a nation state. Generally, we tend to deal with political sectarianism and sectarian systems as state phenomena not as cross-border phenomena. However, these may well include transnational sectarian bonds that strengthen cross-border solidarity or as a tool and justification for the intervention in other states. This is seen in the use of sectarianism in foreign relations, which inevitably ends up affecting internal dynamics, despite everything known about the ultimate dependence of state foreign policy on their interests, or the logic of national interests. In Islamic history this has also been illustrated during the Ottoman-Safavid conflict as well as in the historical legal and political relations between the Ottoman empire and the Western powers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In this case, European countries used the *Millets* they claimed to protect as part of their foreign policies, as a means of intervention in the Ottoman state and in the conflict over its fate. It is possible that this system currently exists in different forms, merging the sectarian dimension in the policies of some countries in the region (like Iran and Saudi Arabia). This can be seen as the projection of a sectarian dimension on foreign relations deployed in actual policies. In all these cases, the sectarianization of foreign relations is used in the context of fulfilling the interests of the states, even if it is simply performative.

When the *Taifa* as an imaginary constructed homogenous group that follows a certain *madhab* or religion that it believes to be also static and coherent, terminology, instruments, and manifestations of nationalism are also projected upon the religious affiliation. Together, these constitute a political act with implications for sectarian unity, and the participation of the masses in politics through a distinct so-called identity shared with the elites of their respective sects. In some cases, this act may even appear revolutionary, producing demands of an egalitarian nature within the *Taifa*, with continued emphasis on difference from the other confessional communities (*Tawaif*) and on the shared traits within the same sect.

When the relations between state and individual are not regulated by citizenship, the *Taifa's* relationship with the state and other confessional groups in society is manifested primarily in the competition for a bigger share than that determined by the state. Be it for the *Taifa's* demographic weight, or economic and cultural power, or to redress historical injustice and so on. When redressing historical injustice is used to collect privileges (rather than equal rights) or to justify an alliance with foreign powers (a type of privilege), then history from this angle becomes subject to political interests, ideological tendencies, and the requirements of identity-consolidation. In short, it becomes a discursive matter for practical or political motives.

Historically, local confessional communities were often characterized by religious zeal, but also by coexistence mechanisms, patterns of self-administration – economic and political – linked to the historic organization of the community in Islamic cities in particular, and sometimes in rural communities too. No doubt, the important characteristic here was the affiliation to the communal group, whether a clan/tribe or *Taifa*, as was prevalent prior to the modern age. Typically, this affiliation was based on the primacy of 'vertical relations' (denominational, sectarian, tribal, etc.) as opposed to horizontal – class – relations. According to this typification, the vertical groupings were pre-civil communities while there is a question whether the so-called horizontal groupings are communities at all. However sectarianism is a phenomenon attributed to the modern state. It capitalizes on affiliation to a religion, *madhab* or denomination to transform the followers thereof into a self-preserving community in the face of threats and challenges emanating from the forces of both integration and marginalization, translating into a political force that carries demands vis-à-vis the modern state in the name of an imagined sect, a "community" that it created.

Modern political sectarianism did not emerge from a vacuum. Indeed, along with other phenomena it had – incomplete – beginnings rooted in the past. Upon close examination these beginnings is enough to reveal the seeds of these phenomena. In some sense, political sectarianism has roots that are self-fulfilling within the conditions it summons. No doubt, rivalry over power and religious leadership had played a key role in the sectarian splits and the crystallization of sectarian affiliations. Consequently, politics has been a major determinant in shaping sectarianism. The foundation of the Shia-Sunni conflict in Islamic history for instance can be traced to a political origin in the rivalry over the *imamate* – that is the right to lead the Muslim *ummah* (nation) politically and religiously–this much is widely agreed upon and has received a fair share of study. The political right to lead was transformed from a tribal rivalry into a religious discourse at a time when the dominant culture was religious.

The political dimension increases according to the internal dynamics of sectarianism, by moving from zeal for a religion or denomination towards zeal for the group of people who share this belief, from confession to identity. The spiritual element however declines in this case, for despite sectarianism being a social division that follows from affiliation to religions and religious denominations, the loyalty to the group renders the latter closer to being a secular religion, whether its leaders are from the clergy or are laities<sup>3</sup>. If we extrapolate sectarianism into its contemporary conclusions, we will find that the community is sacred rather than the faith itself.

This group is a *Taifa* to begin with; a 'part' of a 'whole'. However, modern sectarianism resulted from the fact that this new whole is historically different and is competing with local groups for affiliation and loyalty, and trajectories that are empowered by modernity. These aspects of modernity include public education, military service, and state services as well as modern communications which allow the state to directly communicate with the individual. By contrast, in the past, the imperial polity could not directly communicate with the constituencies of which communal groups were comprised, including at the level of provinces, except through local intermediaries, and had to recognize or accommodate these groups' autonomy.

On the other hand, if the whole were to be considered the Islamic *ummah*, as it was once called, then Christians and Jews cannot be considered fractions of this whole, because they are not part of it. Rather, they were *dhimmis* [or the "the people of the *dhimma*", i.e. protected non-Muslim persons], a term that can be interpreted positively or negatively according to the respective political eras. Either way, the term itself in classical Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) excludes these communities from the *ummah*.

However, if the definition of the whole has changed, and is now rooted in language, culture, or the nation state where citizenship should be the other side of sovereignty, then all these religious communities indeed become sectarianized when they insist to appear, not only religiously, but also socially and politically as groups. That is if they behave like minorities instead of behaving as the majority. They may fragment into several sects, each of which claims to represent 'true Islam', which could lead to attempts at politically or otherwise merging or purging other sects. Generally, one of the consequences of the emergence of religious political movements is that they face the risk of becoming insular sects that perceive their doctrines as the true *madhab*, and that are bound by zeal for the group. If so, they are neither religious

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<sup>3</sup> I tackle the issue of political and civil religions in the third volume of my book *Religion and Secularism in a Historic Context*, yet to be published

traditions that can accommodate different interpretations and *madhabs*, nor political groups like conventional political parties, and risk becoming a type of sect. Such risk does not only affect religious movements, but also totalitarian secular parties that hallow secular values, and sanctify the party itself.

Because the 'whole' in nationalist or pan-Arab thinking is the new reference frame for legitimacy, whether it represents a nation or a state, affiliation to it becomes the norm, and secessionist and particularistic tendencies become deplorable. Sectarianism, by definition, is an affront to national unity. Even when nationalist Arab thinking were to endorse liberalism or communitarian democracy, and even when diversity within it becomes legitimate if not desirable, zeal for identity politics remain unwelcome at the value level and the political level.

This normative judgment has a basis in theoretical analysis, which can be summed up with the premise that dividing society into religious communities with pre-determined boundaries differs from the plurality of political and ideological currents and parties, which is open to change and development. If sectarian divisions were to replace the diversity of views and programs meant to fulfil the interests of the whole, sectarian pluralism becomes the antithesis of ideological and partisan pluralism, and of political and democratic pluralism. This is not to mention the fact that it would suppress the freedom of individual choice, by reducing the individual to being a subject of his religious affiliation.

Communal democracy recognizes the existence of communities and collective rights. Even some schools in liberal democracy recognize this as possible and legitimate, but it considers the rights of the individual citizen to be the basis from which collective rights derive. In both cases, sectarianism as an ideology is deplored.

Thus we could have resorted to theorizing the meaning of sectarianism and its contradictions with the nationalist Arab bond, especially in its early stages if certain factors were not fully known. These include the link between colonialism and the emergence of political sectarianism and sectarian quota-apportion in our region; the transformation of the Ottoman *millet* communities into political sects to justify foreign meddling, and the pursuit of this during the mandate era in the Arab Mashreq; and the emergence before this of the Ottoman-era Mutasarrifate (self-rule) administration in Mount Lebanon on the basis of blatant sectarian quota-apportion and representation. In other words, political sectarianism did indeed have historic roots, but in its contemporary meaning it is the result of the interaction between the pre-existing social structure and modern colonialism, and the conditions of post-colonial state building.

Indeed, the two historical developments contradicting the emergence of political sectarianism in our countries were the rise of pan-Arabism, or the Arab identity in its cultural-political sense before it turned to party ideology that justified authoritarianism; and the emergence of the nation state, which built national institutions that breached the walls of local communal groups. It is not a coincidence therefore that the two developments, where they converged, intersected, or where they diverged and departed from each other, constituted a valuable source of renaissance ideas and literary and artistic creativity, and for civil manifestations that transcended religious and sectarian affiliations in a manner that still elicits nostalgia among some, despite often being labelled through inaccurate descriptions, such as the ‘liberal age’ and the ‘pan-Arab era’, or even ‘the beautiful times’ and so forth.

None of those who question the contradiction between these two tracks and sectarianism have come up with a better alternative to inclusive culture based on common language, and to a nation state based on citizenship, and political and social rights, as instruments of integration that avoids dividing society into clans, factions, or religious confessional affiliations that either co-exist or fight among themselves to become the fodder of political conflicts. One of the oddest developments of present era for example is to see Iraqi Arabs divided into such affiliations in identity- political sense, while the Kurds in Iraq insist their Kurdish national identity goes beyond Iraqi civic identity, thereby surpassing Iraqi citizenship and fragmenting Iraqi Arabs simultaneously. In the Syrian case, the Syrian academic and national activist, member of the Syrian National Bloc, Edmond Rabbat, has since the 1920s warned us that Syria without Arabism is a group of confessional communities and minorities, and that Arabism is its path to real state-building. He argued that the ““idea” that can confront the sectarian system, unite the Syrians, and guide them towards a common goal is the “Arab sentiment” .<sup>4</sup>”

I have already tackled the issue in 2007 in my book *The Arab Question* and perhaps some might point out to me that the solution consists of a complex of democracy, liberalism, and citizen rights. Although I principally agree with this, my answer is that I am not talking about solutions, but the historical contexts and the frameworks in which such solutions become plausible. Indeed, democracy and liberalism, taken separately as well as jointly, i.e. as the so-called liberal democracy, are not feasible outside the context of the common denominator among people, in which we build the constructed ‘us’, that traverses local groups, and allows pluralism within it, instead of fragmenting through civil wars – nor are they possible outside the modern nation state based on citizenship. Any serious research into the rise of political sectarianism in Arab

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<sup>4</sup> Edmond Rabbath, *L'Evolution politique de la Syrie sous mandat* (Paris: Marcel Rivière, 1928), pp. 20-21.

East must conclude with one final and broad statement, namely, that political sectarianism managed to rear its head in Arab countries and flourish because of the failure of these two tracks in the past five or six decades – Arabism and the nation state project.

It seems that Arabism – and I would like to insist on this point – is not the antithesis of the nation state in the Arab Mashreq, rather, it is a component of its unity. The alternative therefore is not country-specific nationalism (*al-Qutriya*), but sectarian, social, and even regional disintegration. The Arab Idea and nation state (patriotism if you want) are in fact complementary notions. It is not the Arab Idea that has undermined the nation state in the Arab Mashriq, but it was tyranny, which deployed pan-Arabist political ideology to consolidate its power and regime(s), imposing it on Arabs and non-Arabs alike. These authoritarian regimes fueled sectarianism and prevented the coalescence of citizenship as a sense of belonging to the state and a rights-based construct that enforces the individual, as a citizen, to avoid seeking recourse in a religious community, clan, or to show loyalty to those in power in order to exercise citizenship.

There is an infinite stream of Arab critical literature tackling the failure of these two paths. I will not reference them here, except to note two important observations:

Firstly, the Arab idea transcending religious and confessional affiliations and adopting a discourse that some characterize as secular (as the antithesis of sectarianism which is not the historically and conceptually accurate meaning of the term secularism), however, pan-Arabism often appeased popular religious sentiment (the type of religiosity most prone to sectarianization). It also took a stance against religious minorities, especially when it needed to flatter mass sentiments during its struggle with political Islamic Movements, or it built loyalties by relying on sectarian minorities, especially in those cases where it carried an apologist ideology of military juntas originating from the countryside and relying on their social support base there, while in power.

Many Arab intellectuals who supported tyranny have not only justified this, but also considered the reliance on religious and confessional minorities as a form of secularism and the criticism of this as a betrayal of secularism. To them, the sectarianism of the minorities was akin to secularism, while the imperative of keeping the state neutral in religious affairs did not receive their due attention, especially since secularism in their view practically meant sanctifying the state and accepting tyrant cult. On the other hand, many opponents of tyranny fell into the delusion of doing away with democracy and its primary condition based on the rule of law, equality before the law, and civil rights, and emphasized instead of these the rule of the sectarian majority as a form of democracy.

Secondly, the nation state failed to build a citizenship-based nation for many reasons, which differ between military dictatorships carrying pan-Arab ideologies and traditional monarchial authoritarian regimes, which also relied on loyalty for privileges on one hand, and on repression of the other hand as the basis of their power.

-II-

It is my view that one of the biggest challenges facing Arab researchers today when examining sectarianism in the Arab Mashreq, is twofold. The first is monitoring the transformation of the religious or confessional community into political sectarian groups that go beyond the distinctions of the *millet* system and its policies, towards studying its coalescence as a group. The second is monitoring the transformation and deconstruction of “other” groups, religions, or confessions into sectarian minorities versus sectarian majorities, all the way to the emergence of majorities with a sectarian mindset. Indeed, none of the above had always been applicable.

There are two processes by which a group is transformed into a minority. The first involves a historical transformation of groups into minorities following a long and complex process, with larger demographic groups shrinking in size into minorities. Current majorities rarely remember these historical processes, hindering the understanding of the difference between an authentic minority and a ‘displaced’ minority and prevents understanding the memory of a minority that was once a majority and the effect of this on its grievances. The second process is the transformation of citizens into minorities without an alteration in their demographic weight, by classifying them in accordance to prevailing political discourse on religious affiliations. This alone is sufficient to turn them from citizens into minorities.

The division of citizens into majorities and minorities labeling them in accordance with their religious backgrounds, regardless of whether they are believers or non-believers, is a process of creating majorities and minorities. Indeed, classification and statistics are instruments of control that express policies of power of a certain kind and contribute to the manufacturing of reality, not just its portrayal and analysis. The majority that sees itself as a sectarian majority is

an ‘inverse’ minority, because sectarian discourse in politics is a discourse of victimhood based on narratives of grievances.

Theoretically, we can imagine a religious community as a social entity with a structure, function, and boundaries. Its functions in traditional societies are considered legitimate, and in some cases, necessary. But it becomes an imagined community at the national level as a political force with grievances and demands related to its participation in power wealth and even history.

As a political force it demands to guarantee its own participation, this being the only criterion for ‘justice’ as it understands it. Justice in this case means sectarian quota system, and the relationship with power here is not one involving the rotation of power among political forces or a relationship of coalition-building among forces to govern but is a relationship of acquisition and possession on the part of the so-called majority, and a demand for a share by the minority. In truth, here, majorities and minorities are both actually minorities, and the rulers are not the majority or the minority but are the representatives of both after they are transformed into identities that need representation.

The structures, functions, and social boundaries of the religious and confessional communities are known in their social and historic context. This may show at the level of protection and solidarity, or at the level of the rituals that constantly reproduced them, or at the level of preventing intermarriage with other communities. It may even appear at the level of specializing in specific economic functions in some cases because of the relationship with issues like ownership of the land, artisanship, commerce, and so on. Moreover, the religious community, by definition, was of a local character, in my opinion. However, the problem lies in its transformation into an imagined one that goes beyond the boundaries of locality, a process often accompanied with the emergence of tools that can help crystallize an imagined group, such as is the case with nationalism. It is also usually accompanied with the emergence of mass society and its atomic individuals, that is, individuals who are “emancipated” from their affiliation to any organic group.

In the circumstances surrounding the rise of mass society, it is not possible to re-produce the religious community using only the instruments of affiliation to the local organic group. Here, the *Taifa* is ideologized by reproducing it as a homogenous bloc that transcends time and place, using modern tools of communication and organization. This is often linked to a political role and function, especially since the imagined group is based on affiliation to a confession or a religion, and it competes with the other imagined groups, such as nationalist entities, political parties, and various ideologies. I believe that it is possible to verify this historically by examining

how and when *local Taifa* in towns or cities became national if not transnational. In certain cases like the *Shia- Sunni* division this can't be done without a special attention to the role of sectarianism sponsored by regional powers.

Yet it is not necessary for this theoretical sequence to be historical. The historical sequence differs from the theoretical sequence, and it has no pure examples of standalone social or political sectarianism, functions that have separated gradually several times. The historical emergence of Islamic confessional divisions (*Firqa, Firaq*) is, however, observable with relative ease, with well-developed studies on this subject. Observing the transformation of their followers into communities with relatively stable boundaries is a more difficult task in the historical context. For example, in the case of 4<sup>th</sup> century Baghdad (A.H.; 10<sup>th</sup> century A.D), or in the justifications of the protracted Ottoman-Safavid conflict and its implications, and the accompanying forcible conversions to Sunni or Shia Islam.

However, the notion of the transformation of these confessional divisions into groups with a political function aspiring and striving for a quota within the political system should be approached with caution, because in that era, politics was not a standalone function. Yet the notion still applies if what is meant is rivalry over recognition of their right to interpret scripture, and their right to practice their rituals – and more importantly, rivalry over power, or proximity to it and gaining favor with it.

It is thus possible to observe the beginnings of this transformation in the emergence of the Fatimid state. Likewise this appears in the transformation of the Sunnis from a group of scholars and *Hadith* narrators opposed to the Mu'tazilites, and other 'innovators', into the only 'saved faction' that will be spared from hellfire (*al-Firqa al-Najiya*), or as a mobilized mass of people against the Fatimid state. We can also accurately pinpoint when the Twelver Shia confession emerged and became an authentic *madhab* in history in the same historical period. However, it is more difficult to determine when the followers of this faction became a fully-fledged community through confessionalization of the people, a process that unfolded over a longer period of time. It is possible to say that it crystallized as an *Imami madhab* (emphasizing the role of Imams as successors of the prophets) as opposed to other branches of Shia Islam, but its main transformation from *Firqa* into a *Taifa* took place in later periods. It was influenced by various events and shifts related to demographics and geography, and only became close to full confessionalization/sectarianization, in the sense of mass rituals by a large group of people, in the context of the conflict between the Ottoman Empire and the Safavid State over Iraq. This

dynamic was the most serious and influential, despite the peace accords and international treaties signed by both sides.

During the *Tanzimat* reforms in the Ottoman Empire, the *dhimmis* were transformed to become a part of the whole in both senses, that is, as religious communities and as partial citizens at once. Then the colonial powers subsequently intervened to protect these communities who were suddenly referred to as minorities (in the European terminology), and then institutionalizing sectarian quota system in the administration of Mount Lebanon following the massacres of 1860.

In this stage, religious communities in Lebanon gradually transformed into political sectarianism, with the West appropriating or manipulating the Ottoman *Capitulations* system. In the latter years of the Ottoman Empire, the western powers intervened to 'protect' these Christian communities, then fully politicized them to lay the foundations of the only existing sectarian political system, from the creation of the first sectarian quota system in the Mutasarrifate to the present day. Although the current Lebanese constitution drafted following at-Taif Accords calls for abolishing political sectarianism, it continues to reproduce it. In truth, in the early years of post-independence Lebanon, sectarian power-sharing was an informal norm. An Orthodox Christian like Habib Abu Shahla in 1947 was able to serve as parliament speaker (a position reserved for Shia Muslims today), for example. The Lebanese state instituted sectarian quota systems in its agencies and established sectarian councils that held powers within their respective communities in a manner that went far beyond what was practiced by the French Mandate authorities that had laid the seeds for modern sectarian quota system in this country.

In contrast, it is possible to study the history of sectarianism in Iraq and easily come to the conclusion that the country had no history of political sectarianism, despite a history of rivalries of local sectarian communities. In Iraq, the transformation of social sectarianism into political sectarianism is the result of failed nation building by despotic regimes, US intervention that dismantled the Iraqi state, and the Iranian manipulation of Iraq's opposition before the invasion and their interference with the post-invasion Iraqi regime.

The Iraqi political system did not only turn into a sectarian system, but something worse happened. It encouraged sectarian political culture and sectarian political elites without acknowledging sectarianism. The constitutional sectarian system prevents democratic transition, and cements the quota system in a way that renders it impervious to changes, even demographic ones. However, it does at least ensure the representation of minorities and their

rights, which are often safeguarded by organized sectarian consensus until this becomes too fragile to sustain. In other words, Iraq adopted a democratic system but only superficially, imposed by the occupation, along with the administration of the population, on sectarian bases. Sectarianism renders democracy a tool for the sectarianization of the state and its instruments of repression, and for the marginalization of certain groups. This is worse than the sectarian system, it doesn't acknowledge what it practices and thus has no regulations nor legal protection from it. Democracy is appropriated as a majoritarian rule while providing no protection for minorities. It is important to note that in Iraq, the governing council recognizes Kurds as an ethnicity, while Arabs are seen as either Shia or Sunnis.

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The modern history of the Arab Mashreq demonstrates that when political religiosity emerges in multi-confessional multi-religious societies where the issue of Nation-Citizenship is not yet settled in the national civic identity, it inexorably leads to political sectarianism regardless of its roots. It carries with it its religious political ideology, whether it is Salafist, fundamentalist, or reformist, using sectarianism to mobilize support. In the case of Salafist-Jihadism, which has recently spread to the Arab Mashreq countries, and converged with soaring sectarianism along with the decline of the nation state and its weakness in the era of revolutions where the state unity was associated with tyranny, all this made for an explosive intersection between Salafist-Jihadism and sectarianism.

Social and political sectarianism resulting from the marginalization of the majority under tyranny, thus turning it politically into a minority, in a multi-sectarian society had already deviated the struggle for emancipation from tyranny and the establishment of a political system that would safeguard civil rights, dignities, and freedoms and from that goal. However, the Salafist-Jihadism, in the case of political sectarianism, does not only marginalize elements of emancipation in the struggle against tyranny and deviates revolutionary struggle from its original goal for liberty. Not only are sectarian demands made regarding the inclusion of marginalized sects with larger shares, but ‘others’ are proscribed and declared apostates, something that is not characteristic of the classical sectarian pattern.

Salafist-Jihadism does not recognize other confessions to begin with, and enforces the most extreme and appalling rulings pertaining to *dhimmi*s upon them, inspired by some of the worst examples in Islamic history. These periods are often, in the discourse of some Islamist groups, attributed to the most ‘pious’ rulers affiliated to extremist scholars in search for legitimacy. For example, Al-Mutawakkil; the *fatwas* of Ibn Taymiyya in the massacre of Kesserwan in 507 AH/1305 AD; the zealotry of the Mamluk Sultans against other groups, both Muslim and Christian; and the *fatwas* of Şemseddin Ahmed ibn Kamal Pasha (1468–1536 A.D) against the Shia “rafidah” during the first three decades of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Interestingly, the latter *fatwas* have been revived despite their very specific and complicated Ottoman-Safavid context, from the old annals of history of *fatwas*, or from some phases of the Ottoman-Safavid conflict, in the neo-sectarianist framework. This latter phenomenon thus creates a new climate of sectarian fervor and intolerance characterized by its self-perpetuating nature, and it should not come as a surprise that some of its proponents are non-religious populists.

Regardless of the differences between the interpretations of the rulings on *dhimmi*s since the Caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab until present day, the premise remains that these *dhimmi*s are not part of the same *Ummah* of the Muslims. Hence, the proscription not only includes what these religious communities can and cannot do in the exercise of their beliefs, or their different social and legal status, but also includes the forced distinction between them and Muslims in all aspects. Indeed, they and Muslims are not together *Tawaif*, factions of a single whole, in this view. Therefore, reviving the rulings concerning the *dhimmi*s regardless of interpretations contradicts not only citizenship but also notions like the homeland, nationality, and the modern notion of statehood.

In addition, sectarianism is historically linked to the delineation and stabilization of the boundaries of religious affiliations (not necessarily expanding them) before they proceed to secure a certain status and share as part of the new whole, namely, the nation state, even if at the expense of the individual rights of their constituents. The hybrid form of sectarianism and Salafist-Jihadism is therefore a distorted and politicized imitation of the early religious conquests and proselytization campaigns. Its link to sectarianism per se is tenuous, if we exclude the construction of this political phenomenon through political factors. At any rate, this appalling phenomenon has attracted a lot of attention from the media and both real and exaggerated fears, which helped paper over much more appalling crimes (in both scale and nature) perpetrated by the tyrannical regimes. Yet although it is not in and of itself a strictly sectarian phenomenon, it is difficult to understand how this brand of Salafist-Jihadism has spread without looking at the context of sectarian victimhood and grievances at large.

Furthermore, the adherents of this phenomenon have murdered more Sunnis in Syria and Iraq; that is, from their own assumed and imagined “sect”, than members of other confessions. They are not only sectarian, but also *Takfirists*. They represent a regression to a stage that predates sectarianism as we know it, the stage of religious wars. In addition, they do not genuinely belong within the known boundaries of confessions, but rather represent a disastrous and distorted revival of the notions of the *umma* and the Caliphate that existed prior to the modern state by a small and marginal group of people who claim to be the *Ummah* or to speak on its behalf, at least, against the factually existing *Ummah*, thus calling to mind the Weberian definition of sect as a split group of believers directed against the existing order. This major regression from Arab modernization cannot succeed and will only end in tragedy. It has also triggered an ongoing debate regarding its distortion of ‘true Islam’ – is there any such thing as true religion?

No doubt, every act by ISIL has foundations in the writings of the early generations of Muslims (*Al-Salaf*) and their actions that have been chosen selectively and arbitrarily outside their contexts. In my opinion, the issue of the claim to represent true religion is a false one, because it confuses religion (or the understanding thereof) and political patterns of religiosity and sectarianism. With ISIL, this has reached catastrophic conclusions, and I have no doubt that after ISIL there will be several open reassessments of many issues that have been hitherto ignored in our history.