Undoubtedly, Syria has suffered from acute sectarianism, grappling with tumultuous religious polarization, particularly from the year 2011-12 onwards. Still in flux, the Syrian civil war has rippled across the regional landscapes, exacting a severe toll on the entire Middle East and enabling state and non-state actors alike to amplify Sunni-Shia partisanship. But is it illusory to characterize the sectarian nature and internal dynamics of the Syrian conflict as being fueled by neighboring Gulf States exploiting sectarianism to advance regional grounds? On the contrary, as it turns out, sectarianism is an adverse reverberation of the internal Syrian political deadlock, which has engulfed and entrenched Sunni-Shia passions across Syria and the Gulf states. The Syrian crisis has indeed witnessed sectarian patterns but only as a by-product of the original conflict.

The 2011 Syrian uprising was a key event that along with major revolts in neighboring countries manifested into the Arab Spring. With a tentative beginning, the initial demonstrators were unsuccessful in translating their protests into concrete, institutionalized political action. Soon enough, the anti-Assad revolts simmered and spiraled wildly, degenerating into civil anarchy. With the gulf between the various factions deepening, bridging the gap through a political solution became hard to imagine while zero-sum negotiations were more attractive. Interestingly, Syria is the epitome of presenting the singular scenario where the prevention of civil war through a change of leadership (e.g. as in Tunisia or Libya) may not have been sufficient. It is most likely that a new government would have been a mere further empowerment of the minority Alawite elites, still perpetuating the throes of war and making Syrian rebels a satellite to foreign opposition command.

With increasingly distinct sectarian camps pitted against each other, the “Syrian” conflict has fast deteriorated into a regional crisis with Damascus as the focal point. The pro-Assad Shia axis consists of Iran, Lebanon’s Hezbollah, the hordes of Shia foreign fighters, and the tacit backing of the Iraqi Shia government. Iran’s Supreme National Security Council’s leader, Saeed Jalili, has applauded this club as the “axis of resistance” against Israel and the West. The
anti-Assad or Pro-Western Sunni bloc comprising of Qatar, Turkey, Jordan, the Lebanese and Iraqi Sunni opposition, is led by Saudi Arabia.

Perhaps the critical question pertains to whether the religiously homogeneous nature of these alignments is a cause of the Syrian crisis or its consequence. It may be noted here that apart from Saudi Arabia, none of the Sunni axis employed a distinct sectarian or “Sunni” foreign policy approach before the Syrian crisis exploded. For instance, Turkey’s foreign policy concerning the Middle East adopted a sectarian blend after the Syrian conflict began, with Prime Minister Recep Erdoğan proclaimed as the “champion of the Sunnis”. For Turkey, as with Jordan, geopolitical realities have frequently served to “correct” this sectarian stance in foreign policy. In mid-2011, Turkey hosted the anti-Assad Syrian National Council (SNC) in Istanbul and made no secret to support the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood.

More critically, a purely sectarian analysis of the Syrian conflict softens and covers the rather profound tensions within the Sunni camp itself. The discord between Salafis and relatively “moderate” Islamists and its broader implications for Saudi Arabia and Qatar can’t be ignored when considering the regional impact of the Syrian war. Most critically, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, both Sunni and anti-Assad, are backing different Sunni oppositions in Syria. Realizing the true impact of the Syrian mess, Saudi Arabia is desperately pulling the like-minded Sunni governments of Bahrain, Oman and Kuwait closer. Qatar is mapping its own independent path with active support for the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, effectively employing its Al-Jazeera news channel. The Emir of Qatar even visited Gaza in October 2012. To complicate the mess further, as Professor Dalacoura of the London School of Economics (LSE) states, “Syria has also been divided on ethnic grounds such as the Kurdish and Arab components as well as ideological lines such as between the Islamists and secularists.”

Some analysts argue that the Syrian rebellion underscores that political adjustments can rise through ordinary citizens rather than extremist violence, which may have “delegitimized” radical Islamist groups including Al-Qaeda. Other experts claim that the revolt has increased the extremist sectarian activity: Jordan’s King Abdullah warned of a “Shia crescent” emerging from the aftermath of the Arab Spring. The fragmentation and chaos ensuing the uprising has created a space for foreign militant groups, introducing the local radicals to international terrorist networks. In December 2012, Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham, a Sunni terrorist outfit in Syria was placed on the US State Department’s list of terrorist networks, illustrating the threat and potency of such radical groups.

Therefore, it appears that sectarianism is an unfortunate by-product of the Syrian conflict and the Arab Spring more generally. The “success of sectarian organizations is a mark of the weakness of the state”. Fragile state control, insincere politicians, and massive political vacuum are in abundance, religious and sectarian chauvinists make the power plays brazen, while foreign demagogues and states step in to unabashedly play sectarian cards to stoke the Syrian conflict.

Steven Simon at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) summed up the ground situation as “for terrorists, it’s like Christmas, New Year’s and their birthdays rolled into one”. Even more alarming is a contagious spillover effect of sectarianism from Syria: sectarianism has a fluid nature and isn’t limited to the battle zones, a view also echoed by Professor Melanie Cammett of Harvard University. The already explicitly sectarian Lebanon and Iraq in particular are highly susceptible to neighboring sectarianism, with animated radicals such as the Sunni Brigades of Aisha, Umm al-Momineen.

An intriguing political observation regarding the Middle East has been that quite frequently, politicians have championed their communities as “victims of discrimination” rather than
working to heal national divisions. Call it narrow mindedness or selfishness or even a short-term political masterstroke, this design has generated power and in the process, enhanced prejudices, animated extremist voices and fostered animosity, particularly in Iraq and Syria.

Bashar Al-Assad primarily sees himself as leading the Shia community, and only secondarily as leading Syria. Furthermore, Assad placed communal loyalists (Shia minority groups and Alawites) into key government positions. Likewise, the Maliki government in Iraq had occasionally raised the issue of “Ba’athists” to unite all Sunnis as a threat to the Shia community. Therefore, with Assad losing power exponentially and the civil war raging on, Syrian domestic politics have convoluted the anti-Assad protests as “demonization” and “victimization” of the minority Alawites.

Another peculiar yet defining feature in the Syrian crisis, as emphasized by Henri Barkey, has been that “in the Middle East, perceptions are realities”. As “sectarian consciousness” has evolved in the region, political institutions have been perceived with a sectarian lens, creating scholar Charles Tripp’s “sectarianism by default”. In Syria, Assad’s reliance on communal Alawite loyalists has deceptively simplified the political tensions into the view that the government operates with a sectarian agenda. Julie Peteet of the University of Louisville effectively claims that every community or nation has “subterranean fractures”, which may be ethnic, regional, racial, tribal, or sectarian.

The Syrian conflict has amassed the correct confluence of events in a timely fashion to cause such fractures to erupt and the elites, Salafi clerics and extremists to make sectarianism instrumental in particular. Peteet proposes that colonial and imperial agendas have historically pushed for a regional remapping in the Middle East, which has suppressed increasingly complex and fluid social groups into ominously simple, bounded camps (such as Shia and Sunni groups). Peteet’s view further accentuates the concerns arising from Tripp’s “sectarianism by default”. This phase is a severe time bomb with a holistic detrimental impact, waiting to exacerbate through chilling rhetoric and violence when conditions are ripe, as in Syria.

Ultimately, sectarianism is not a primordial or innate feature of the Middle East. Various ills in society have co-existed including caste segregation, class subjugation, indigenous peoples’ discrimination, sectarian identity, etc. Occasionally, one affliction trumps the others and rises to prominence. In this case, Syria’s most current crisis regurgitated the malady of sectarianism. With the elites and radicals instrumentally using it, sectarianism has in fact become a strategic haven of protection from the civil anarchy and oppression.

In this context, it is critical not to discount the violence and repression that has necessitated Syrians to pursue safety in sectarian enclaves. Moreover, the Gulf regimes didn’t conjure sectarianism from thin air. Rather, as Syria has illustrated, sectarianism may arise from decades of chronic ailments, which have plagued the Middle East, particularly rickety and discriminating governance, with little or no economic development, civil society, and most crucially, a complete lack of inclusive or participatory government bodies. As such, bloating the role and character of Syria’s Gulf neighbors in the “sectarian-making” of the civil war may not be prudent. Internal peace, constitutional order and negotiating mechanisms need to be revived and restored locally in Syria to refurbish state power and pare the “deeply sectarian” nature of the region rather than chasing the opposite strategy.

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