The Myth of Sectarianism in the "New Middle East"

One of the lasting legacies of the failed US-led war on Iraq is without doubt the rise of sectarianism in the general discourse on Middle Eastern politics. Sectarianism has been pitched as *the* 'modern' story of the Middle East, yet its driving causes and true nature remain subject to sweeping and misplaced generalizations, particularly in the Western media. The subsequent rooting of a sectarian political discourse in understanding the dynamics of the Middle East, flavoured by myths and fallacies, primarily serves to further the interests of imperialist and colonialist powers in the region. At another level, this discourse seeks to insulate discredited Arab leaders (i.e. Moderate "allies") from the grievances of their own peoples as invented threats posed by an "other" are hyped up to disorientate the power of the masses.

In this regard, the recent scathing attack launched by the Egyptian Public Prosecutor (EPP) against Hizbullah, despite being somewhat expected, was revealing insofar as its sectarian dimension is concerned. Buried in between a long list of accusations against a "Hizbullah cell" uncovered in Egypt, the EPP stated the accused were "planning to carry out hostile operations within the country (Egypt) and attempting to spread Shiite thought in Egypt".

During recent times, it has become fashionable for Middle Eastern premiers and oil-kings to protest against an ethereal threat posed by Shiism. The summoning of the "spread of Shiism" pretext, as seen above in the case of Egypt, is essentially used as a political tool. Further, the Egyptian line of attack in this respect is by no means an anomaly. In mid-March of this year, the kingdom of Morocco severed diplomatic ties with Iran accusing Tehran of "cultural infiltration" and attempts to "implant the Shiite Muslim ideology" in the country. In the emirate kingdoms of Bahrain and Kuwait, allegations of Iranian interference in the former, and charges claiming the formation of an insidious "Kuwaiti-Hizbullah" in the latter, are similarly propped up and *dealt with* within a strictly sectarian context.

Politically, the use of sectarianism in the present Middle Eastern context serves several purposes which can broadly be divided into local, regional and international dimensions. To identify these dimensions, it is necessary to probe below the surface of this worn out, yet doggishly resurgent, charge of Arab leaders against the threat posed by "Shiism" in order to reveal the causative factors behind this renewed focus on sectarianism.

First, by positing a so-called "threat" posed by a Shiite sectarian agenda, Arab leaders conveniently conceal and deflect attention from the deeply entrenched socio-economic disparity that exists between Shiite communities and their counterparts in several Gulf nations. In countries like Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, Shiites are forced to locate themselves on the peripheries of society under the juggernaut of systemic discrimination. Further, an environment of heightened sectarianism also provides an effective red herring for these kingdoms to silence demands calling for fairer representation and accordance of rights.

With respect to Shiite communities and their development in the Arab and national contexts, this factor presents a massive hurdle in the way of reform. As an example, the case of Lebanon underlines the central importance that the ability to pressure the central government plays in effecting change. Until the late Seventies of the last century, i.e. more than three decades after the National Pact (*al-Mithaq al-Watani*) was signed, Shiites found themselves relegated to the outer rims of Lebanese society. Downtrodden and ignored by the state, Lebanese Shiites bottled up their grievances within a sub-national narrative. In this milieu of resignation, the dynamism brought in by the charismatic Shiite leader, Sayyed Musa Al-Sadr, relied primarily on *matlabiyya* (a politics of demand) to transform the fortunes of Lebanese Shiites. Thus, the present-day hyping up of sectarian polemics by Arab leaders in the Gulf, acts as a significant stumbling block in the way of urgently needed, and long overdue reform of internal political and socio-economic structures. Demands for fair representation and equal rights that ought to be accorded by virtue of citizenship are instead silenced through the use of a sectarian deception.

Second, by reinforcing an image of a whole-scale invasion of the "Shiite" school of thought in traditionally majority-"Sunni" areas (or what was termed the Shii tide; *al-madd al-Shii*), Arab leaders promote an inherently confrontational and other-excluding relationship between the two major religious sects of Islam. This strategy thus aims to provoke a "religious" reaction hence providing credibility to the statements of highly unpopular and discredited leaders.

It has to be noted that this strategy has not only failed so far, but has done so miserably. Contrary to what Arab leaders like Mubarak hoped for, Sunni and Shia religious figures have stood by each other and together lambasted Arab leaders for their criminal silence and treachery towards the Palestinian cause. Notably, Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak was accused of "apostasy" and "grand treason" by more than two-hundred Sunni religious scholars in the wake of the brutal war on Gaza.

Third, in logical continuity from the previous point, Arab leaders like Mubarak who suffer from serious popularity deficits amongst their peoples, attempt to revitalize and give credibility to their sinking images by marketing themselves as safe keepers of "Sunnism". The "spread of Shiism" accusation made by the EPP thus makes the case that the highly unpopular Mubarak in fact plays the role of a gatekeeper who faithfully ensures that the "Sunni" identity of Egypt is preserved.

At this level the strategy has again been met with ridicule from the Egyptian public. In a radio interview, the head of the Muslim Brotherhood, Mahdi Akef, termed the allegations levelled against Hizbullah as unfounded and utterly baseless. The secretary general of the Islamic Action Front (IAF), the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood movement in Jordan, minced less into his words when he praised the actions of Hizbullah as a "national, legitimate, and pan-Arab duty and an attempt to bolster the Islamic resistance in the Gaza Strip". Instead of taking Mubarak for his word, public focus in Egypt has shifted to the involvement of Israeli intelligence in the operation targeted at Hizbullah. This factor by itself provides sufficient proof to the Egyptian and Arab streets that the actions of Hizbullah were in fact limited to supporting the resistance in Palestine, rather than the whimsically invented charge made by the EPP citing "spread of Shiism" in Egypt amongst others.

Fourth, the "spread of Shiism" pretext at the regional level is not sold merely as a sectarian phenomenon, but one that occurs in the backdrop of a growing Shiite presence in Middle

Eastern politics. Shiite so-called "expansionism" is pitched as an extension of a wider political agenda, or what the Saudi Prince Turki Al-Faisal chooses to call "Iranian obstructionism". Giving saliency to this aspect interlocks with the interests of the US and Israeli governments as was wittily articulated by an Arab writer who described the Egyptian government's policy with the words: "Rescue! The Shiites are coming!" By openly declaring an anti-Shiite (read: anti-Iranian, anti resistance) platform, these Arab leaders seek to provide reassurance to the US and Israel that they continue to remain useful and relevant on the Middle Eastern chessboard.

Fifth, one of the more troubling usages of sectarianism in the present Middle East has been the enframent of political and national struggles within the mould of a sectarian identity-politics. The so-called "Moderate" Arab leaders in Cairo, Riyadh and Amman pass off differing stances as sectarian-qua-sectarian agendas. More accurately, political stances that clash with US-inspired "moderate" scripts of how things ought to play out in the Gulf, are pointed to as manifestations of the intrusion of a Shiite tidal wave under direct orders from an aspirant Shiite regional hegemon i.e. Iran.

Fuelling the fires of sectarianism in this way has meant that even pre-eminent struggles and causes in the Arab world have not remained impervious from the burdens of a sectarian-politics discourse. According to leading officials in Egypt, Gaza is seen as a 'mini Islamic Republic of Iran', and Hamas an abiding servant of the Iranian agenda. In order to discredit the path of resistance, the likes of Egypt and Saudi Arabia have chosen to mark it off as an Iranian-Shiite conspiracy, which if left unchecked will extend to devour the entire Arab homeland.

Largely due to this self-destructing polarization, admiration for Iran on the Arab street has skyrocketed. In the world of Arab satellite channels, live phone-ins on political talk shows are flooded by voices of solidarity with Iran and total contempt for "sell-out" Arab leaders. Sayyed Hasan Nasrallah, Bashar Al-Assad and Ismail Haniyeh are viewed as *the* symbols of remaining Arab dignity, and their indisputable popularity, heads and shoulders above the rest, is evidenced in every poll.

Finally, there remains the relation between imperialism and the rise of sectarian rhetoric in the Middle East i.e. the elephant in the room. It is said that sectarianism can be narrated "only by continually acknowledging and referring to both indigenous and imperial" histories and imperatives. Iraq has been the theatre on, and from, which the image of an ongoing sectarian struggle for the heart of the Middle East has been propagated. In the wake of the collapse of Baghdad in 2003, leading Arab intellectual Dr. Azmi Bishara took to the podium at UC Berkeley and said:

"Of course we don't buy what they say about their sensitivity to democracy [...]; what they call 'building a democratic Iraq', because I hear the accent. This is not [...] the language of democrats. You don't go to a country to build a democracy by splitting the country into three major religions (sects) [...]; this is not pluralism, this is a recipe for civil war."

The 'Balkanization' of the Middle East has for long been an unswerving desire of imperialist powers. The oft-quoted words of Oded Yinon about the "far-reaching opportunities" presented by the "very stormy situation [that] surrounds Israel", published in 1982 by the World Zionist Organization, are instructive in this regard:

"The dissolution of Syria and Iraq into ethnically or religiously unique areas such as in

Lebanon is Israel's primary target on the Eastern front. Iraq, rich in oil on the one hand and internally torn on the other is guaranteed as a candidate for Israel's targets. Its dissolution is even more important for us than that of Syria. Iraq is stronger than Syria. In the short run, it is Iraqi power which constitutes the greatest threat to Israel."

Today, the political tensions of the Middle East are driven minimally by indigenous inter-sectarian factors. The systematic and organized attempt – by imperialists and their regional clients – to amplify the myth of an ongoing, all-out sectarian war is precisely in order to cover for the evident absence of actual rifts between the peoples of the Middle East. Why the likes of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Morocco are not waiting around for second invitations to jump on to this sectarian bandwagon should in itself provoke a lot of questioning. Not in the least surprising, and another reason to look into this subject more critically, has been the failure of Western media from putting forth these simple and straight-forward questions.

Sectarianism constitutes an important chapter in the 'divide and conquer' strategy. Whilst it could be said that the US viewed the Middle East through a more *ethnic prism* in the past, it is clear that the sectarian divide has provided the way forward. The declaration of the "New Middle East" agenda during the Bush administration, and its failure in infancy during the 2006 war on Lebanon, essentially served to overload the sectarian aspect in a bid to foster the right conditions for the implementation of this agenda.

So-called "moderate" Arab leaders shamefully find themselves not only aligned with the most rightist, racist coalition in Israel (which continues to steal more Palestinian land by the day), but they in fact work hand in hand with Israel to conspire against resistance movements. Netanyahu and Liebermann have taken it upon themselves to scare the world into insanity, under the pretext of an imminent Iranian nuclear weapon capability. Mubarak, Abdullah and cohorts on the other hand, are pioneering the project of spreading fear against a sinister Iranian-led "Shiite" agenda aimed at taking over the Arab heartland which, needless to state, is implemented by resistance movements such as Hizbullah and Hamas.

Sadly, for the imperialists and discredited Arab leaders, the masses no longer buy such crackpot machinations. In the Middle East, we are now witness to a post-sectarian phase; the unity and solidarity that exists between its' peoples – in identifying the key challenges that face this region – is palpable in whichever direction you turn. Western discourse on the Middle East however, remains fixated on talk of civil wars, sectarian strife and religious tension.

The failure of the US (and other Western powers) to move away from a sectarian discourse in accounting for the dynamics of the Middle East, and the failure to impress this reality upon regional Arab clients, will predictably have significant repercussions. There are several very real issues that need to be resolved in this region, and they have precious little to do with the myth of sectarianism. Political agendas can not forever be implemented in the shadow of sectarianism. The sooner the White House realizes this, the better.

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