

Fanar Haddad. *Understanding 'Sectarianism': Sunni-Shi'a Relations in the Modern Arab World*. London: Hurst, 2020. ISBN: 978-1-7873-8206-0. Pp. 368. Hardback £30.00.

Over the past two decades, particularly since the 2003 invasion of Iraq, few sub-fields of Middle Eastern studies generated more academic, and some not so academic, debate than the concept of sectarianism. Anyone with a sustained interest in the subject cannot but recognize the massive growth in the literature on sectarianism which, paradoxically, has been one of the least conceptualized concepts. This lack of theorization of sectarianism has been noted in Fanar Haddad's latest study, *Understanding 'Sectarianism': Sunni-Shi'a Relations in the Modern Arab World*, which is among the most comprehensive and theoretically sophisticated studies seeking to explain the concept of sectarianism. Haddad's book should be read by well-established scholars and students alike. The author is a leading scholar on the literature on sectarianism, featuring in the main conferences and editorial collections on this topic since releasing his first book, *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity* (London: Hurst, 2011), which was then considered a ground breaking work on the topic. This certainly puts him in an excellent position to reflect on the concept's enduring shortcomings and frustrations.

Haddad's new study is an attempt to move beyond the broad literature on sectarianism, a term that became "so opaque, circuitous, negatively charged, politically controversial and emotive as to be meaningless" (p. 1). The author identifies a set of problems with the term that have prevented the scholarly discussion from moving to more fertile grounds. First, the lack of a theorization and definition of sectarianism gave the term a "shapeshifting quality", allowing it to apply to a range of "issues, behaviours, forms of expression, organizations, people, and events" (p. 43). Accordingly, the presumed negativity of the term turned accusations of 'sectarianism' into an efficient tool with which some expressions of sectarian identity can be suppressed and even criminalized. This has especially been detrimental where issues of political participation and political activism are involved. Moreover, according to Haddad, the term 'sectarianism' increases the distance between students of sectarian relations and the broader social sciences. In other words, the term denies scholars of the field significant analytical depth coming "from a comparative perspective that can draw upon several rich bodies of literature dealing with phenomena relevant to and, in some cases, reflective of modern sectarian identities: nationalism, identity theory, ethnic conflicts, critical race theory, state formation, and so forth" (p. 320).

As a solution for all these issues, Haddad suggests discarding the -ism in 'sectarianism' and rather adopting the term sectarian, although "only as a modifier relating to sects or the relationships between or within them: sectarian identity, sectarian dynamics, sectarian mobilization, and so forth"

(p. 45). Essentially, what he is suggesting is the “demystification of sectarian categories” by moving the debate of “sectarian relations and sectarian identity beyond the rather dated and circuitous debates that continue to dominate the field” (p. 6). For Haddad, what is required is examining the inherent multidimensionality of sectarian identity and failing to do so is particularly problematic where it becomes definitional: “unidimensional definition of ‘sectarianism’ ends up painting sectarian dynamics, and by extension sectarian identity, in unrealistically monochrome ways” (p. 3). The author proposes a new theoretical framework that reflects the fundamental multidimensionality of sectarian identity. The theoretical perspective suggested by Haddad frames sectarian identity as the sum of its parts, one that is “simultaneously formulated along four overlapping, interconnected and mutually informing dimensions: doctrinal, subnational, national and transnational” (p. 5). The relevance of each dimension is entirely context-dependent – with the condition that no single dimension can be taken into consideration in complete isolation from the others. Thus, according to this approach, acknowledging that sectarian identity is both multi-dimensional and malleable is crucial to appreciating not only its dynamic nature, but also to examine what is at stake from one context to another, as well as to explore the drivers shaping sectarian relations.

The book is composed of seven main chapters. The first four chapters, spanning across 125 pages, set the theoretical stage of this study. These chapters examine the shortcoming of the term ‘sectarianism’ (ch. 1) and surveys the main debates in the field, in particular the stultifying binaries preventing these debates from moving on to more productive grounds (ch. 2). Chapters 3 and 4 suggest an analytical shift by focusing on sectarian identity. In doing so, Haddad outlines the multidimensional approach by which sectarian identity can be best understood. Having set the theoretical stage, the remaining chapters use this framework to better appreciate the Sunni-Shi’a sectarian dynamics. Chapter 5 reviews the neglected question of demographics and how ideas of minorities and majorities shaped sectarian identity construction and intergroup sectarian relations. The last two chapters take Iraq as a case-study. Chapter 6 examines the sectarian wave following the 2003 US invasion of Iraq and the ensuing transformation of sectarian relations, as well as how the overthrow of the Ba’ath regime in Baghdad magnified the importance of sectarian categories in the Middle East and elsewhere. The final chapter takes Iraq as a case-study through which Haddad demonstrates many of the themes introduced in this study, particularly as he applies the four dimensions of sectarian identity to the Iraqi case.

Overall, the book constitutes the most comprehensive theoretical analysis on sectarianism and sectarian identity currently available. Such a comprehensive approach to studying sectarian identity also allows “to better match the correct analytical tools and the appropriate bodies of literature to meet the needs of a given context” (p. 88). This framework can thus be naturally conducive to an interdisciplinary methodology. In fact, one of the

study's most impressive quality is the range of literatures that the author has drawn upon: hundreds of studies on sectarianism alone, of which 56 were in Arabic and the rest in English (one in German as well). In addition, Haddad relies heavily on identity theory literature, critical race theory and theories of nationalism, which signifies "more than mere theoretical self-indulgence" (p 322); rather, the author explains, given the multidimensional nature of sectarian identity, no single body of scholarship is sufficient to fully appreciate sectarian dynamics. It should be noted that serious engagement across such wide range of topics, as well using both English Arabic sources has not been previously seen in this field, which signify the originality and brilliance of Haddad's study.

Another impressive strength of this study is that the theoretical framework introduced by Haddad can be used to examine the intra-group dynamics of sectarian identity, which has often been ignored by the literature on 'sectarianism'. Although Haddad's study focuses almost exclusively on the inter-group aspect of sectarian relations as a master frame to analyse sectarian politics, it can also be used to analyse the intra-group dimensions - particularly when it comes to how sectarian identities are shaped and contested from an intra-communal perspective - and their reciprocal relationship with the inter-sectarian sphere. In other words, by taking into consideration that sectarian identities are simultaneously formulated along four overlapping, interconnected and mutually informing dimensions - doctrinal, subnational, national and transnational - future studies can examine the development of sectarian identity from an intra-group perspective. What follows from this is the need to focus on the intra-communal aspect, one which will draw on debates about sectarianism, identity politics, group identity and nationalism. Most importantly, this approach will balance and complement the extensive literature on inter-communal dimensions to better recognize the reciprocal dialectic between these two aspects. This approach also raises some important questions regarding the concept of sectarianism, its association with intra-communal and inter-communal dimensions, and how to understand these.

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