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Beyond Sectarianism: Drivers of Conflict in the Middle East

CO-EXISTENCE

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Many of the crises currently facing the Middle East are being increasingly framed in terms of a conflict between the Sunni and Shia branches of Islam. However, a new report from the [Brookings Institution \(http://www.brookings.edu/\)](http://www.brookings.edu/), an American research and policy organisation, makes the case that the best framework for understanding the regional politics of the Middle East is as a cold war in which Iran and Saudi Arabia are the main protagonists.

This new report, [Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War \(http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Research/Files/Papers/2014/07/22%20beyond%20sectarianism%20cold%20war%20gause/English%20PDF.pdf\)](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Research/Files/Papers/2014/07/22%20beyond%20sectarianism%20cold%20war%20gause/English%20PDF.pdf), aims to demonstrate the complexities of this conflict that go beyond a simple divide between Sunni and Shia Muslims. These regional tensions are referred to as a 'cold war' in the report because the main protagonists are not (and most probably never will be) confronting each other militarily, but rather through proxy groups and conflicts.

Despite the perceived importance of sectarianism in the conflict, describing its source as a fundamental Sunni / Shia divide is an oversimplification, which plays into the political ambitions of Saudi Arabia and Iran. [Abdul-Azim Ahmed's opinion piece \(http://www.religionandgeopolitics.org/religion-geopolitics/commentaries/opinion/myth-islams-ancient-conflict\)](http://www.religionandgeopolitics.org/religion-geopolitics/commentaries/opinion/myth-islams-ancient-conflict) for the Centre on Religion & Geopolitics makes a similar claim, that those attempting to present this division as fundamental to conflict in the region are projecting a revisionist understanding of Islam's history.

Central to the report is countering the (often unstated) assumption in the sectarianism argument that these conflicts are primordial and therefore unresolvable. Sunni and Shia Muslims have lived in harmony for many more years of Islamic history than they have fought. As such, it is important to stress that these divisions are not beyond political solutions, and the report offers a number of foreign policy recommendations.

The report can be read in full [here \(http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Research/Files/Papers/2014/07/22%20beyond%20sectarianism%20cold%20war%20gause/English%20PDF.pdf\)](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Research/Files/Papers/2014/07/22%20beyond%20sectarianism%20cold%20war%20gause/English%20PDF.pdf).

KEY FINDINGS

The latest report from the Brookings Doha Center, 'Beyond Sectarianism', seeks to demonstrate that current conflicts in the Middle East cannot be accurately understood as arising from sectarian division between Sunni and Shia Muslims. It argues instead that the best framework for considering regional dynamics is as a cold war in which Iran and Saudi Arabia play leading roles.

KEY FINDINGS

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- Although the current confrontation has an important sectarian element, it cannot be accurately understood as simply a 'Sunni versus Shia' conflict. This oversimplifies regional dynamics and causes Iran and Saudi Arabia's motives to be misunderstood.
- The two main actors within the Middle East conflict are not confronting each other militarily; rather their contest for influence plays out in the domestic political systems of the region's weak states.
- Riyadh and Tehran are playing a balance of power game, in which

sectarianism is being used, but both Saudi Arabia and Iran have crossed the sectarian fault line in seeking regional allies. Iran has been building working relations with Hamas and Islamic Jihad as well as Kurds in Iraq. Similarly, sectarianism doesn't explain Saudi's hostility towards the Muslim Brotherhood.

- Regional media outlets, from Hizbullah's al Manar television stations, to Saudi owned newspapers and television stations, all play up to the sectarian nature of these struggles.
- The major catalyst for conflict in the Middle East, more than sectarianism or the rise of Islamist ideologies, is the weakening of Arab States, establishing the battlefields of the new Middle East cold war.
- The Saudis, the Muslim Brotherhood and its regional allies, al Qaeda and its affiliates, the emergent ISIS and other Sunni groups are locked in a conflict over what the proper political role of Islam should be in the Sunni world.
- One of the incentives of drawing a narrative of the conflict in terms of religious divide is the provision for fostering important transnational ideological and political connections. The report looks at the regional influences and dynamics between sectarian groups, and how this intersects (and equally importantly how it doesn't) with religious affiliation.
- The new Middle East cold war goes beyond the Arab world. Iran is a major protagonist; Turkey has made a bid for a greater regional role. It is not an ideological battle of progressives versus reactionaries, the line-ups are less ideological and more identity based.
- In this supposedly sectarian regional conflict, the Sunnis seem to distrust each other as much as they distrust the Shia. In March 2014, Saudi Arabia officially designated the Muslim Brotherhood, Al Qaeda and its affiliates, and ISIS as terrorist organisations.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Improvement in Saudi-Iranian relations would greatly enhance chances of political settlements in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Bahrain and would lessen the poisonous sectarianism that so dominates the region's politics.
- Multilateral (rather than bilateral) approaches will also be more effective in cutting ISIS down to size in Iraq. An immediate task of foreign policy is to make sure that the Islamic State is defeated on the battlefield, forcing allies in the Sunni community to distance themselves from the group.
- The Middle East is a multi-polar region with a number of important regional powers acting in its politics: Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Israel and Egypt. If one of them seems to be emerging as a dominant force, the others will naturally work to balance against it and limit the growth of its power. Middle Eastern power dynamics, rather than military intervention, can be relied on to block Iranian Hegemony.

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