

## **BOOK REVIEW**

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# Sectarianism in Iraq - Antagonistic Visions of Unity

**Fanar HADDAD**

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Much of recent policy analyses on Iraq seem overwhelmed by simple but insufficient explanatory patterns *vis-à-vis* the sectarianism problematique between the Shi'as and the Sunnis of Iraq. Haddad's work thus targets superficial approaches that portray Iraqi society as a fixed sectarian body. Whilst promoting a more sensitized perception of the sectarianism problem in Iraq, the author emphasizes how certain historical shifts, in particular the 1990-1991 and the post-2003 periods, have impacted sectarian sentiment within Iraqi society. In doing so, Haddad applies some constructivist analytical concepts such as the "myth-symbol complex"<sup>1</sup> which, he argues, explain the salience of sectarianism in given socio-political contexts.

The first of 8 chapters in total inducts the reader into the theoretical orientation of Haddad's study. Beyond, it highlights an often neglected nexus, the "interdependent relationship between Iraqi sectarian and national identities" (p.2), and cautions against misleading oversimplifications and generalizations that accompany public discourses on Iraqi politics, more so after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. "Iraqi sectarianism" as a politically conditioned determinant sedimented in a dominant discourse is, one could argue, Haddad's body of deconstruction. However, he does not pursue a critical discourse analysis here, he rather embeds the phenomenon of sectarianism into a wider web of socio-political circumstances that enhance its existence and salience.

Applying case to theory in the second chapter, one of Haddad's central claims is that being politically or economically discriminated or feeling less included creates a special thrust towards "sectarianized victimhood," what might be a repeatable pattern (p.16). What the author also sheds light on is the "competition for cultural ownership" in order to embody the "Iraqi Staatsvolk" that takes place when sectarian identities are politically activated against each other (p.21 and p.22). An interesting premise Haddad puts forth is the "inseparability of the divine from the temporal in Shi'a and Sunni historical narratives" (p.24), however, the former has a quite different career. More

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<sup>1</sup> Haddad borrows this from Stuart J. Kaufmann. Accordingly: "The core of the ethnic identity is the 'myth-symbol complex'—the combination of myths, memories, values and symbols that defines not only who is a member of the group but what it means to be a member. The existence, status and security of the group thus come to be seen to depend on the status of group symbols, which is why people are willing to fight and die for them—and why they are willing to follow leaders who manipulate those symbols for dubious or selfish purposes." (p.17). To see the referred author's review of Haddad's work: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/ISSF/PDF/RE12.pdf>, published by H-Diplo/ISSF on 20 September 2012, (Accessed on 28 February 2018).

precisely, the Shi'a belief was systematized quite late compared to the Sunni belief. While the roots of the Shi'a sect are to be traced in the 7th century, its systematization in form of the Twelver School (*Ithnā'ashariyyah*) took place from the 10th century onwards until the 12th century. Against this backdrop, the remark of historical narratives requires further clarification.

Moreover, defining Islamic history as “a prime case of ethnohistory” (p.24) leaves some doubts because Smith's concept of ethnohistory does not accurately address non-nation state contexts. The latter intends the era of nation-states, in which non-nation state actors/groups can of course exist. But far from being in a nation-state context, early Islamic governments reveal a looser concept of statehood, let alone citizenry. Nevertheless, political competition between different identity groups is a salient feature throughout Islamic history in which in-groups and out-groups often trade places. Therefore, in a non-academic sense a political history or “politicohistory” could be suggested in place of ethnohistory, for early Islamic history does not provide the genesis for national identities. What can be found as “*Shi'at-u 'Ali*” and “*Shi'at-u 'Uthman*” in both Sunni and Shi'a historiography rather liken political interest groups than distinct national identities. Insofar, this kind of retrospective analytical framing reveals factual flaws when applied to early Islamic history.

Another point worthy of criticism occurs when Haddad writes “When we consider Sunni-Shi'a polemics we find that the focus is far more centred on history, particularly Islamic history, than it is on theology or articles of faith.” (p.23). Here, Haddad loses sight of the historical making of religious systems. For, according to the Shi'a belief, *imamat* (religious and political leadership) is an indispensable pillar of faith what the Sunni belief system does not recognize as a compulsory condition of belief, and yet, Haddad rightly points out that either side - for the sake of its ontology - needs to adhere to its particular historiography, a point that cannot be overemphasized regarding the contestability of Islamic history.

Haddad rightly puts emphasis on the mobilization of sectarianism that is, he argues, not primarily invoked by faith. However, faith is preserved in culture and preserving a cultural identity depends on maintaining cultural practices. Regardless of whether somebody is a practicing Shi'a or Sunni, his/her feelings of belonging are summoned by means of the “myth-symbol complex” that is maintained through various and temporally transformable cultural practices, i.e. informed by faith. In this context, faith cannot be excluded from culture and thus cannot be less considered given its role as the backbone of a sectarian identity.

The third chapter broadly provides a historical overview of sectarianism in modern Iraq, particularly from the 1920s onwards. As Haddad strongly underlines several times, sectarianism as an antagonism against the national unity of Iraq has been a taboo subject. Interestingly, as manifested in many personal accounts or examples of bottom-up discourses, the sectarian identity of the other is either targeted inexplicitly or excluded from the victimhood of the self or blamed for the political weakening of Iraq as a national entity. Instead of direct slander, forms of inexplicit otherization for the sake of imaginations of an Iraqi unity (p.54) are more common at the societal level.

In the fourth chapter, Haddad argues that sectarianism is not a priori in a dynamic working process, rather it lingers within society in form of a discursive potential, and gets activated on political occasion. Though it is important to note that societal circles do not (re)produce discourse synchronously and in equal density. Also in this chapter, Haddad states that on the course of the

March 1991 uprisings, which at the end gained a Shi'a character, Ayatollah Khomeini took an apolitical stance as he interprets Khomeini's fatwa as "clearly apolitical" (p.71). But Khomeini's admonition to protect public good can theoretically fall into the category of political theology. If Khomeini had not issued any fatwa clearly siding against upheaval, and spared taking any stand, he could have been called apolitical. He on the contrary chose to disclose a standpoint as a religious leader in a political situation, which makes him quite political, in particular given the inseparability of religious and political leadership according to the Shi'a belief system.

Besides, Haddad on the one hand laments several times insufficient investigation on the March 1991 uprisings, however, on the other hand he suspends any idea that Iran could have been involved through whatever means or that Iran could have derived advantage from these events. This leaves an odd juxtaposition to the reader who among all described uncertainties is assured of only one thing, which is the neutrality of Iran regarding this historical period.

In chapter five, Haddad sheds light on the impact of political economy throughout the 1990s marked by economic sanctions what, he argues, has to be considered to understand the post-2003 increased sectarianism. While putting the main focus on bottom-up sectarian discourses, Haddad argues that political elites of the Ba'ath party on the one hand condemned the separatist potential of sectarian and tribal identities, however, they relied especially on the latter whenever the occasion was given (p.94-95). This demonstrates the paradoxical coexistence of sectarian, ethnic, and tribal identities with strong imaginations of Iraqi unity.

Beyond, Haddad describes the 1990s as an era of increased religiosity (p.102), stating that "As with tribalism, people fell back on religion as the state collapsed in 1990/1991." (p. 106). However, the fact that Haddad often admits that that no empirical data is available outruns him at this point because there is no evidence proving that religious life was less important to Iraqis prior to the 1990s. Consequently, one loses the point of the determining reason for an alleged "increased religiosity." So, rounding up such assumptions by stating for example "Perhaps a 'return to God' was part of Iraqis' way of making sense of the calamities that befell them in the Gulf War and immediately afterwards." (p.106) stands at best irritating.

In chapter six, Haddad mainly analyzes examples for the discourses that have fed into the sectarian relations and the actualization of myth-symbol complexes. Highlighting the pejorative keywords which the in-group and the out-group use against each other, the author explains what chosen traumas and glories both sides claim for themselves, and how the imagination of Iraqi unity has become the main driver to label each other as "traitor." While Shi'as are vilified as "Iranian infiltrators" due to their sectarian identity, Sunnis are quite similarly denounced as "*takfiri*" or "*Salafi*" to underpin a counter claim arguing that Iraqi Sunnis bow to Gulf influence.

Chapter seven likewise deals with the discursive data averring the "clash of symbolisms" (p.145). What the March 1991 uprisings triggered off on both the Sunnis and Shia's was foremost the mutual distrust, and this was stimulated anew in the post-2003 period. However, having said that national unity has been the linchpin, which the sectarian identities used to encircle, Haddad leaves out to say that the March 1991 events resulted in the victimhood of the Shi'as whereby no foreign actor was involved. Differently, in the post-2003 period, the Sunni-Shi'a competition for Iraq's ownership took place in the shadow of a foreign invader, the US. Since Haddad constantly argues that sectarianism

must be understood in the context of social, economic and political circumstances, the US invasion and presence after 2003 in Iraq should have been an important factor to consult in this study.

In chapter eight, the author discusses why the 2006-2007 period was a time of civil war in Iraq, and how symbols of assertive sectarianism prevailed (e.g.: p.191). In this vein, lines alongside national, sectarian and other identities became more evident because sectarianism underwent a more explicit otherization process. Crucially, in this chapter Haddad draws attention to the indispensability of memory for the myth-symbol complex, inside which each side (re)produces own historical narratives of made experiences. After all, the author concludes that “the importance of historical myths far outweighs that of theological difference in sectarian animosities.” (p.196).

In sum, Haddad’s book is an interesting work on the mechanisms of sectarian identities and how these operate under specific, foremost political circumstances. Given simplistic explanation patterns that find prominence in a range of political analyses and daily political debates, this book can be deemed a valuable contribution to a better understanding of the reality of Iraq’s sectarianism problem. Yet, a self-weakening point throughout this book is the dilemma between holding onto constructivist concepts while on the other hand empirical data is not available to make cases thereof.