Pensée 3: A Sectarian Middle East?

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The problem of "Middle East exceptionalism" is perhaps nowhere as apparent as in the study of Middle East politics, particularly its purported sectarian nature. Our understanding of Middle East politics suffers less from the lack of empirical data than the poverty of the conceptual and theoretical frameworks through which it is studied. Unlike other non-Western regions, the Middle East continues to be analyzed through a conceptual prism that has changed little since the collapse of colonial rule.

The rise and institutionalization of Middle East studies did not ameliorate this problem. The ethnoconfessional model continues to thrive whether in the conceptual emphasis on Sunnis, Shiʿa, and Kurds in Iraq; Muslims and Christians in Lebanon; Muslims and Copts in Egypt; Berbers and Arabs in North Africa; Turks and Kurds in Turkey; Sunnis and Shiʿa in Saudi Arabia and the Arab Gulf; or Persians, Kurds, Azerbaijanis, ethnic Arabs, and a variety of other minorities in Iran. To what can we attribute the durability of this model? What impact does its persistence have on our understandings of Middle Eastern politics and the policy decisions made by powerful domestic and external political actors?

The ethnoconfessional model's most basic assumption is that Middle Eastern society, especially its Muslim component, is comprised first and foremost of ethnic and confessional groups whose loyalties are subnational (ethnic) or supranational (Islamist) in character. Hence particularistic identities trump nationalist commitments. From this assumption, it is only a short conceptual leap to the theoretical conclusion that the region's political instability and violence are a function of a defective political culture. The dominant conceptual portrayal of the Middle East is one of insular peoples who are unable to develop the necessary empathy, civic commitments, and "social capital" required of a modern nation-state. Conversely, authoritarian rule is a "natural" outcome of the inability of the region's nation-states (Israel and Turkey are exceptions to this model) to develop the values of political tolerance and pluralism. When the day is done, democratization lacks the necessary fertile soil, given the dominance of a parochial political culture shaped by ethnicity, "Islam," and tribalism.

George W. Bush's November 2003 speech calling for the United States to support democracy in the Middle East notwithstanding, the ethnoconfessional model enables external actors, particularly the United States, to avoid taking responsibility for their contribution to the region's problems. Just as blaming poverty on African American family structure—the purported absent black male—allows white society to "blame the victim" rather than white racism, so too does constructing Middle East politics via ethnoconfessionalism allow

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Western pundits and policymakers to create a cultural hermeneutic in which the Middle East's ills become the sole responsibility of the region's peoples. Of course, such thinking serves the political needs of regional elites, all of whom benefit from a structure of political power based on vertical identities that works to undermine cross-ethnic and cross-confessional political cooperation.

The ethnoconfessional model's fallacies are most apparent in the concept of a "communal mind." Older titles such as *The Arab Mind, The Jewish Mind*, *Tribes with Flags*, and *What Went Wrong?* are indicative of this concept's historical pedigree. More recent studies have posited notions such as a "dream palace of the Arabs" (do all Arabs really think alike?) or a "Shiʿi revival." Such monochromatic thinking parallels the ideological pronouncements of regional elites, such as Jordanian king Abdallah's positing of a "Shiʿi crescent" (*hilāl Shiʿī*) stretching from Iran through southern Lebanon (but ignoring the problem that Syria's ʿAlawites are not Shiʿi).

Thus we see that, in both academic and elite circles, the idea that the Middle East's ethnic and confessional groups all think alike is alive and well and that culture, narrowly defined, constitutes the primary foundation in conceptualizing Middle East politics. Yet if a Middle Eastern scholar specializing in American politics were to argue that he or she could deduce an American citizen's political attitudes and behavior based solely on that individual's ethnic or religious origin, American scholars would find such an assertion bizarre, to say the least.

The idea that the Middle East's ethnic and religious groups march in communal lockstep is belied by changes in Lebanon's political landscape, in which former enemies during the 1975–90 civil war currently are allies, for example, General Michel Aoun's Maronite supporters and the Shiʿi political movement, Hizbullah. In Iraq, for many analysts the quintessential repository of sectarian identities, violence is overwhelmingly intra- rather than interethnic. On the one hand, the Mahdi Army fights the Shiʿi-dominated Iraqi Army and rival Badr Organization (the military wing of the Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council), while on the other hand al-Qaʿida and its insurgent affiliates are engaged in a struggle against the Sahwa (awakening) movement in Iraq's Sunni Arab areas. In Iraq's Kurdish region, intra-ethnic tensions continue to simmer between Marxist Kurdistan Workers Party guerillas and the Kurdish Regional Government.

The unidimensionalism of the notion of a communal mind is reinforced by that of "Islamic fundamentalism." That major Islamist figures such as Sayyid Qutb, Ayatollah Khomeini, and Abu Musʿab al-Zarqawi radically distorted basic tenets of Islam points more to an "invented religion" than a return to the fundamental principles of accepted orthodoxy. Advocates of "Islamic fundamentalism" largely ignore the fact that Islamist organizations such as the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood are experiencing internal power struggles between younger reformers (*islāḥiyūn*), some of whom are members of parliament, and older, more ideologically oriented leaders. Similar dynamics, in which younger Islamists argue for greater pragmatism and/or gaining power through electoral

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and nonviolent means, characterize Islamist organizations elsewhere, for example, in Turkey, Jordan, Morocco, and parts of the Arab Gulf.

In the study of sectarian identities, we need to recognize that, as the work of the political scientists James Fearon and David Laitin has shown, ethnically diverse societies are characterized more by cooperation than conflict. Further, all ethnically and religiously diverse societies experience communal tensions at one time or another. However, hostile feelings are conceptually and empirically distinct from ethnically or confessionally based violence, and the former need not lead to the latter. Even where such hostile attitudes exist, they are often crosscut by cleavages based in elite/mass, generational, educational, gender, regional, and/or social class differences.

The ethnoconfessional model has yet to grapple with the problem of weak states in many Middle Eastern countries. It fails to recognize the extent to which "sectarian entrepreneurs" exploit the political vacuum created by an absent state that is either unable or unwilling to deliver necessary social services or protect its citizenry. "Neighborhood effects"—the effort of powerful forces to thwart political and economic reforms in neighboring countries—are likewise ignored. Two of the more prominent examples of such effects are Saudi, Turkish, Syrian, and Iranian interference in Iraq and Israeli, Syrian, and Iranian influence in Lebanon. Finally, as previously indicated, the ethnoconfessional model continues to ignore political economy in favor of a narrow cultural approach. With 60 percent of the region's population under the age of thirty, often unemployed, and having little or no hope for the future, one answer to the problems of the Middle East is quite simple: use the region's massive hydrocarbon wealth to put young people to work. Such analysis requires little reference to constructs such as an Arab or Muslim mind or primordial notions of ethnic or confessional identities.

The ethnoconfessional model reflects both a comfort level that is "path dependent" and a degree of intellectual laziness. On the one hand, many analysts resort to the ethnoconfessional model because it represents the dominant framework through which Middle East politics has been viewed to date. On the other hand, it is much easier for analysts to avoid the political and socioeconomic complexities of the Middle East by reducing its social and political dynamics to those of innate or "primordial" sectarian identities. This unidimensional analysis fits the thinking of many Western policymakers who find that the ethnoconfessional model allows them to more easily "digest" Middle East politics and normatively avoid accepting responsibility for the West's complicity in impeding solutions to the Middle East's problems. A self-reinforcing cycle is created whereby analysts feed the proclivities of policymakers, whose thinking and decision making encourages further reductionist and simplistic approaches to Middle East politics.

In stressing the importance of ideas, we should not limit the focus to political forces that seek to spread sectarian identities: we should also highlight those that seek to promote civil-society building and democratic values. Why, for

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example, have hundreds of Iraqi journalists, academics, professionals, human rights activists, artists, and prominent entertainment figures been tortured and killed since 2003? These groups possess no militias, funds, or political power. What they do possess and propagate are *ideas*, those that promote cultural tolerance, political pluralism, and democratic governance. In an ABC/BBC poll conducted in Iraq in March 2007, 94 percent of Iraqis overall (and 78% of Kurds) rejected dividing Iraq according to sectarian criteria. In July 2007, Iraqis of all ethnic groups responded enthusiastically to Iraq winning the Asia Cup. Of most significance, the sectarian Kurdish Regional Government threatened Kurds who did not immediately lower Iraqi flags with imprisonment. That Iraqis are more openly expressing their rejection of sectarian political parties now that security conditions have improved not only underscores the constructed nature of sectarian identities but also the need for Western social scientists to recognize that positive developments are occurring in the region.

A social science that emphasizes only one side of the dialectic is deeply flawed. No society (or region) experiences only social and political decay without simultaneously experiencing regeneration. Middle East scholars need to step back from empirical research and engage in an extended self-examination centered on the conceptual and theoretical frameworks that currently dominate the field. The peoples of the Middle East seek democracy as much as those who live in the West. Iraqi democrats—betrayed by Bush-administration neoconservatives and attacked by insurgent groups and sectarian militias—provide just one example of many in which scholars of the region should be giving more support to those who are attempting to bring about positive change. Focusing only on the negative, such as sectarian identities, prevents that process from taking place.

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