

Countering Sectarianism in the Middle East

Lessons from Lebanon, Bahrain, Syria, and Iraq



Beirut Madinati candidates and delegates cheer while monitoring ballot counts after the close of polling stations during Beirut's municipal elections in May 2016.

REUTERS/MOHAMED AZAKIR

Sectarianism has become a destructive feature of the modern Middle East. Whether it is driven by political elites to preserve their regimes, by regional powers to build influence, or by religious leaders who are unwilling to accept the legitimacy of other faiths, sectarianism is likely to remain part of the Middle East's landscape for years to come. However, the results of a study by the RAND Corporation suggest that endless bouts of sectarian violence and religious conflict are not inevitable and that Middle Eastern

societies can become more resilient to sectarianism by pursuing a range of actions.

The study, which was funded by the Henry Luce Foundation's Religion in International Affairs program, arrives at a unique understanding of how communities inoculate against or recover from sectarianism. Collaborating with scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds, RAND researchers explored the experiences of four countries in the region with mixed sectarian populations and histories of sectarian tension or conflict—Lebanon, Bahrain,

Key Policies for Countering Sectarianism

States seeking to counter sectarianism should consider the following national and local measures:

- **Improve border controls.** Cutting off the flow of resources, supplies, and fighters coming from foreign sources to fuel sectarian conflict is critical.
- **Limit foreign funding of sectarian leaders and parties.** Crimping funds from external sources and patronage systems will tamp down sectarian tension and violence in the region.
- **Encourage civil-society development.** Pressing for freedom of expression and association in dialogues with regional partners is crucial.
- **Focus on governance.** Cultivating leaders who support domestic reforms aimed at benefiting the broader public—not just a particular group or tribe—will strengthen resilience.
- **Take urban planning seriously.** Developing urban areas that integrate different social sectors and increase economic and social interactions can create communities that are more stable and more peaceful.
- **Promote local media.** Broadening international donor investments to support media coverage with nonsectarian agendas can foster social dialogue and integration.

Syria, and Iraq. RAND researchers analyzed why some communities were better able to remain resilient in the face of sectarianism. Those findings informed the authors' identification of broader lessons and policy recommendations to bolster resilience and, ultimately, to prevent or reduce the intensity of violent conflict in the region.

Case Studies: Four Examples of Resilience in a Region of Sectarian Discord

Sectarian divisions and conflicts are taking place in every corner of the Middle East. The map depicts the levels of sectarian conflict, categorizing countries based on levels of violence and sectarian diversity. Countries shaded in orange have moderate levels of sectarian diversity and those in red have high levels of sectarian diversity. States that experienced more than 1,000 battle deaths as of 2016 (the last year for which data are available) are signified by diagonal lines.

Lebanon, Bahrain, Syria, and Iraq exhibit moderate or high levels of sectarian diversity. However, each offers insights into how resilience might already be at work in the Middle East and factors that might boost or undermine it. Identifying resilience at local community levels in highly

divided societies in the region is a critical first step in tackling the complex challenge of sectarianism.

Lebanon



The Lebanon case study uses Beirut's municipal politics as a lens into what accounts for the ebb and flow of sectarian voting. The case study contrasts the impressive showing of a cross-sectarian coalition, Beirut Madinati (which means "Beirut, My City"), in the 2016 municipal elections with the straight-line sectarian voting on display in the 2010 election cycle. This comparison allowed the authors to explore the different salience of sectarianism over time.

The authors found that two main factors explain this difference: the declining legitimacy of traditional elites, who are closely associated with sectarian constituencies, and the growing capacities of the Beirut Madinati challengers, which

Levels of Sectarian Division and Conflict in the Middle East



SOURCE: For minority sect populations, see Todd M. Johnson and Brian J. Grim, eds., *World Religion Database*, Boston, Mass.: Brill, 2015; for battle deaths, see Uppsala Conflict Data Program, "Armed Conflict Dataset," Uppsala, Sweden: Uppsala University, Department of Peace and Conflict Research, 2016.

were developed through civil society and professional networks. Thus, political opportunities combined in 2016 with experience accumulated by activists and professionals over decades to initiate Lebanon's move toward more-technocratic governance.

Whether Beirut Madinati can grow remains to be seen, but several trends point toward cautious optimism. Thus far, Beirut Madinati has avoided the internal schisms that often threaten new political groups. It has leveraged momentum from its second-place finish in the 2016 municipal contest to win important leadership positions in professional syndicate elections. Beirut Madinati also seems likely to take advantage of changes to Lebanon's electoral process—including the introduction of proportional representation at the national level—and of generational changes bringing forth younger cohorts who are less wedded to sectarian identities.

Bahrain



Although tensions between the ruling Sunni minority and Shi'a majority in Bahrain, particularly in light of the 2011 uprising, are often pointed to as a clear example of sectarian conflict in the Middle East, instances of community-level resilience to sectarianism exist. The authors of the case study argue that residential integration (i.e., mixed Sunni-Shi'a neighborhoods) is an important component of resilience to sectarianism.

Housing choices made by residents of different neighborhoods in Bahrain's sprawling townships outside of the capital—specifically, 'Isa Town, a mixed Sunni-Shi'a settlement, and Hamad Town, a virtual sectarian enclave—are a reflection of the community's openness to cross-sectarian mixing. During the 2011 uprising, 'Isa Town was less prone to sectarian violence than Hamad Town, which experienced violent clashes and sectarian militias.

The different experiences of 'Isa Town and Hamad Town during the uprising suggest that residential integration acts as a brake on violent conflict during periods of tension. This can be attributed to the cross-sectarian interactions and integration encouraged by shared physical space. Additionally, the mixed layout of 'Isa Town—where Sunni and Shi'a Bahrainis live alongside each other—thwarts regime efforts to provide benefits to fellow Sunnis only and reinforces the self-selection of inclusive-minded Bahrainis to live in mixed neighborhoods.

Syria



Although the civil war has undoubtedly sharpened sectarian identities in Syria, there have been important instances of resilience to sectarian violence. Idlib, located in the north, fell prey to sectarian actors, whereas Dara'a, in the south, has proven more resilient to the inroads of Sunni sectarian actors.

The authors of the case study found that the key distinction lies in the approach of neighboring foreign states. Northern Idlib borders Turkey and contains an important crossing point and resupply route for opposition forces in the governorate. Turkey has supported sectarian actors to achieve broader national security objectives, such as an early determination to overthrow the regime of Bashar al-Assad, which Ankara initially viewed as an opportunity to expand Turkish regional influence. Over time, that objective evolved into checking Kurdish autonomy, for which the Sunni-Arab opposition forces have become a useful partner.

In contrast, Dara'a borders Jordan, which provided sanctuary for some elements of the opposition and is an area from which the United States also exercised a degree of control via conditions-based assistance. Both Amman and Washington adopted a stricter approach to the opposition that operates on Jordan's border, using sanctuary and assistance to moderate opposition units and placing limits on the operations these units undertake in order to shift their focus from targeting the regime to countering the Islamic State. This approach accounts for the weak position of sectarian actors in Dara'a, in contrast with the more inviting territory of Idlib.

Iraq



Iraq's descent into an insurgency after the 2003 invasion reinforced sectarian divides. However, an examination of neighborhoods in Baghdad in 2010 and of two districts within the Dohuk governorate (in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq) during the rise of the Islamic State identified clear examples of resistance to sectarianism.

In Baghdad, the presence of sectarian militias and levels of violence varied across neighborhoods. But some neighborhoods—Al-Karadah, Al-Kuraiaat, Palestine Street, and Al-Dhubat—escaped the worst levels of violence because

of unique factors. Several of these variables were also at play in Dohuk, which saw an influx of internally displaced Iraqis after the Islamic State seized nearby Mosul, Iraq's second-most-populous city.

Two significant factors explained resilience in these areas and are necessary to create a strong buffer against sectarian conflict: the preexistence of social capital (levels of trust, norms around community cooperation, and social networks that bridge identity groups) and the creation of conflict-resolution processes, border-monitoring mechanisms, and other adaptive strategies during crises.

Five Broader Lessons

The authors identified the following five wider lessons from the four case studies:

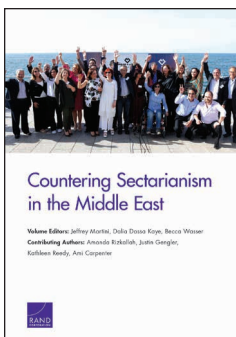
- **Geography matters.** Borders were critical in determining whether certain communities became more vulnerable to sectarian actors, often originating from outside the country. In Syria, for example, the ability of sectarian actors to cross over from Turkey was a key driver behind Idlib's higher levels of sectarian violence. In Iraq, the ability to prevent the physical entry of sectarian militias into some neighborhoods helps explain the different levels of sectarian violence in communities.
- **Political elites can both foster and impede sectarianism.** Political elites with patronage systems, particularly from external sources, can foster sectarianism and stymie cross-sectarian cooperation. However, when such elites lose legitimacy and cannot deliver to their constituencies, as was the case in Lebanon, opportunities can emerge for alternative leaders and movements with nonsectarian agendas.
- **Civil-society development is critical.** Nonsectarian movements require some opening of political space, at least at the local level, so that movements can form around issues that transcend sectarian identities, such as economic development, education reform, female

empowerment, and environmental challenges. In the case of Lebanon's Beirut Madinati movement, a trash collection crisis created the focal point for grassroots organization and political mobilization across sectarian lines.

- **Cross-sectarian interaction can be a buffer to sectarianism.** As the levels of trust and social connection among community members across sectarian lines increase, social capital also increases, which can better equip communities to resist the slide into sectarianism when conflict emerges. Conversely, when communities are built to segregate citizens along sectarian lines and create economic disparities, as occurred in Bahrain's Hamad Town, prospects for sectarian division and conflict increase.
- **Less pronounced socioeconomic gaps improve a community's ability to resist sectarianism.** The 'Isa Town example from Bahrain demonstrates that as the socioeconomic gaps between Sunni and Shi'a residents narrow, sectarian grievances and violence are less likely to emerge. But in neighborhoods where economic grievances and discrimination are greater, communities are vulnerable to sectarian violence.

Conclusion

In conducting this study, RAND researchers did not aim to solve the problem of sectarianism in the Middle East or to pretend that it does not exist. Rather, this effort sought to fill important gaps in policymakers' understanding of how resilience might already be at work and the factors that might boost or undermine it. Although research has already illuminated what might be driving sectarianism in the region, policymakers have far less understanding about how they might counter it. Identifying resilience at local community levels in highly divided societies in the Middle East is a step in that direction, but it is only the beginning in tackling a complex challenge that is likely to stay with the region for years to come. ■



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