Sectarian Politics in The Gulf

Summary Report

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Cover image: a Shi'i graveyard in Bahrain.

Sectarian Politics in the Gulf
Working Group Summary Report

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Certain streams of scholarship have suggested that conflicts around sectarian identity lie at the very crux of Middle Eastern politics. Sectarianism may be broadly defined as the process through which forms of ethnic and/or religious identity are politicized. While certain scholars over-emphasize the enduring ideological divides in the region and their continuing influence on socio-political instability, others downplay their significance entirely. There are those who argue that sectarian issues in the region are not the age-old dilemmas that they are often perceived as, but rather are a modern phenomenon, and that sectarian affiliation was not a particular marker of identification, nor a cause for open conflict a century ago.

While there can be no single-factor explanation of Middle Eastern politics, the fact remains that identity on the basis of a common national affiliation has often been a contested realm in the Middle East. Sectarian identifications have impacted on the fractious course of modern politics in the region, with visible repercussions felt within both the domestic and international spheres. In one form or the other, contemporary Middle Eastern states have often had to confront transnational ideologies and identities.

There are an estimated 2 million Shia within the six states of the Gulf Cooperation Council. In Bahrain, the Shia citizens vastly outnumber Sunni; Kuwait has a sizeable 25-30% Shias; and Yemen's Shia Zaydis account for about 25% of the population. The four remaining GCC states also have minority Shia populations of roughly around 10-20%. The numbers for the Persian Gulf in total are much greater when including the Shia populations of Iran (70 million) and Iraq (22 million).

Undoubtedly, reverberations from the dramatic uprisings in the Arab world are being felt throughout the Persian Gulf. The ongoing situation in Bahrain is one recent locus that has brought the dynamics of sectarian politics back to the forefront of the discussion. There is potential for the situation in Bahrain to actively enflame sectarian sentiments across the region. Questions arise around whether it may be a deliberate regime strategy to frame the Bahrain protest movement as Sunni-Shia conflict and also whether the anti-Shia rhetoric that has been vociferously spreading through Arab media outlets, particularly through the dominant Saudi news channels, may be a consequence of existing geopolitical realities and rivalries.

With the reinvigoration of the subject brought about by current events, CIRS launched a research initiative on the "Sectarian Politics in the Gulf." The central aim of this study is to examine the dynamic ways in which evolving sectarian identities and politics in the Gulf region intersect. Encompassing Iran and the states of the Arabian Peninsula, the research project includes topics that focus on how sectarian issues play out in the realms of domestic politics within Gulf states, as well as those that address sectarianism's impact on inter-state relations within the region. This project brings together a renowned group of scholars to examine the issues of religious, communal, and ethnic identities in the Persian Gulf, and how these impose themselves on both the domestic and international politics of the Gulf.

One of the aims of this research project will be to determine the extent to which sectarian identity affects the ongoing political developments within the Gulf. The dynamics of sectarianism have changed dramatically over recent decades in the Gulf, corresponding often to political upheavals within the region. The Arab revolts that began in the spring of 2011 have largely been secular in their spirit and nature. Given that the final chapters of the "Arab Spring" are yet to be written, the nature and consequences of the intersection between sectarian identities and politics in the Gulf remains to be seen. Nevertheless, the CIRS research initiative highlights some of the most critical dynamics and patterns that are beginning to emerge in the region's sectarian politics.

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1. *Introduction*
   Lawrence G. Potter

This book seeks to explore the relationship between politics and sectarian identity in the Persian Gulf. The theme of sectarianism is considered broadly and may include ethnic and tribal as well as religious groups. It might alternatively be thought of as the politics of identity, which in recent years has gained increasing prominence in the Middle East in general and the Persian Gulf in particular. Contributing factors to current sectarian tensions include the Iran-Iraq War, the fall of Saddam Hussein and most recently the Arab Spring.

Despite the importance of the subject, there is an obvious lack of analysis and a number of issues need clarification. For example, is sectarianism a modern phenomenon or one that has persisted throughout history? At present, years of warfare have politicized identity groups, especially those based on ethnicity. How does identity move from a passive to an assertive state? What are the triggering mechanisms that set off conflict? Do outside powers play a role, and how does their response color the outcome? How much have major movements such as the Islamic revival or the Arab Spring served to obscure the continued salience of religious and ethnic cleavages?

One characteristic of sectarianism in the Persian Gulf is that many groups are transnational, and often located in border areas where in the past they enjoyed considerable autonomy. Before the modern era, peoples in the Persian Gulf shared a common maritime culture and religious and linguistic groups were intermingled, with many Arabic speakers and Sunni Muslims located on the Persian side of the Gulf, and a Shiʻi, Persian-speaking community on the Arab side. This causes difficulty when speaking of identity, for in this region people have multiple identities that may be activated at different times.

The project of governments to invent national identities and traditions is a significant factor affecting sectarian relations. In the Gulf monarchies, for example, the Shia have been written out of official accounts. Also, they are not permitted to serve in the police and army, which has opened a role for neighboring Sunnis, especially the Baluch, in Gulf militaries. In Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, Shia communities cherish the memory of a "golden age" before their conquest by Sunni outsiders in the 18th century. The excluded groups, needless to say, such as the Swahili and Baluch in Oman, the Africans and Persians in the UAE, and the native Baharna in Bahrain, are alienated by this.

The fall of the Saddam government in Iraq in 2003 led to a major change in the religious balance in the region and enhanced the power of Iran. For the first time Iraq had a Shia-led government, which frightened Sunni governments who were apprehensive about the loyalty of their own Shia minorities. But does the Shia revival pose a threat? The Shia do not constitute a united bloc, and those living in the Arab Gulf states are divided over their allegiance to Iran.

The Arab awakening that began in early 2011 and rapidly spread throughout the Middle East again called attention to sectarian issues. Interestingly, the calls for change in the leadership of Arab states were largely of secular, not religious inspiration. Whereas demands by the opposition in the past were fueled by slogans like "Islam is the solution" and advocated the creation of Islamic states, this time a religious agenda was conspicuously absent. But the fall of dictators has also reignited sectarian tensions as people seek to settle scores and reach for power, notably in Egypt.

The factors that trigger sectarian conflict are important to explore. There appears to be a pattern of challenge and response in which increased activity on the part of one group stimulates activity by another, often

counter group. Thus in Iraq the rise of the Shia since 2003 and the recent troubles in Bahrain have stimulated interest on the part of Sunnis in their own identity, and have led to a search for cultural symbols that they can identity with. Likewise, relentless government-promoted Shiism in Iran and Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia has led to greater popularity for Sufism.

It is clear that ethnicity is never fixed; it is always adaptable and redefining itself. An important point made in this book is that sectarian differences and competition are encouraged by governments which benefit from them politically. In the absence of alternative options to form civil society groups and political parties which could threaten the government on ideological grounds, people are driven back into primordial identities such as tribe and religion.

The upsurge of sectarian and ethnic conflict in the Persian Gulf states is likely to continue since the factors that foster it persist: heated rhetoric as reflected in the media, conflict or potential conflict, questionable political legitimacy for rulers, and a longing for security and participation that is not being met. Such tensions are being exploited by governments which seek to divide in order to rule, and in the misguided attempts by outside powers, most recently the US, to redress minority discrimination. It is important to note the US role in reinforcing sectarian identity after the wars to "liberate" Iraq and Afghanistan.

To strike a more positive note, multiethnic states are the historical norm in the region and it seems unlikely that they will break up à la Yugoslavia. For example, although outsiders have speculated on whether Iraq will remain a unified state, this has not been a question for Iraqis who are secure in a national identity. Nationalism is indeed compatible with sectarian identity, as shown by the Arab Shia, and conflict is not inevitable.

Because of its history and location, the Persian Gulf will always remain a region characterized by transnational religious, ethnic and political groups. Sadly, an inability to acknowledge the Other is the root of many problems. In a region with great disparity in the size and wealth of states, all will feel vulnerable in some ways and at some times. The roots of ethnic and sectarian conflict, however, are not obscure, and a range of confidence-building measures can easily be taken to reduce conflict. The papers in this volume shed considerable light on this little-explored problem and why solutions cannot wait. It deserves to be read by all students and policymakers of the region.

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2. *Understanding Sectarianism in the Persian Gulf*
   Justin J. Gengler

The study of sectarianism in the current Middle East context demands a delicate, even cautious approach. Although the salience of ethnic and religious categories in shaping political outcomes across the region is clear, less well understood are the nature and functions of sectarianism as a political phenomenon, and how the processes that underlie it vary under different institutional constraints. This lack of an objective analytical framework with which to study the politicization of ascriptive group identities across country contexts has given rise to two analytical roadblocks. The first is a tendency toward description or narration of the phenomenon of sectarianism, rather than explanation. Religious and ethnic identities are said to influence politics via "entrenched hatreds," "group solidarities," and other deeply-rooted emotions.

This proclivity to explain sectarianism tautologically as a result of itself—a line of argument not restricted to self-interested Persian Gulf rulers—has encouraged on the other hand the opposite tendency: to deny the independent significance of ethnic or religious distinctions, and indeed to avoid altogether the word "sectarianism," now criticized as simplistic, derogatory, and smacking of Orientalism. As illustrated by the competing narratives of Bahrain's uprising, the upshot of this analytical polarization is that explanations that should combine aspects of both interpretations tend instead to prefer one militantly over the other. Either sectarianism stems from tensions and loyalties better suited to the field of psychology than political science, or else it is entirely epiphenomenal, the deceptive façade of some generic political conflict explicable by anyone versed in game theory and new institutional economics.

The present study aims to resolve these two reinforcing problems by sharpening the theoretical precision with which sectarianism is studied in the Persian Gulf context. It elaborates an analytical framework that differs from extant treatments in three crucial ways. First, in attempting to identify the actual mechanisms by which sectarianism affects political outcomes in the region, it does not appeal speciously to some description of the phenomenon itself. This way, not only does it avoid the logical error of positing that sectarianism influences politics via "tensions," "rivalries," and other ill-defined passions—that is, via sectarianism—but in helping to clarify what one means when one speaks of "sectarianism," it hopefully will serve also to rescue the concept from its current connotation as crude and outmoded. The second way this account differs, then, is that it explains how the causal processes in question are specific to the phenomenon of sectarianism, and how these differ qualitatively from non-sectarian dynamics. Finally, it emphasizes the conditional nature of the process, examining how country-level variation in history, demographics, and political institutions helps explain why ethnic and religious differences become magnified in some societies but not in others.

In explaining the nature and function of sectarianism in the context of the Persian Gulf, this revised framework combines three defining features of the region: unique political and economic institutions that encourage group mobilization on the basis of ascriptive social categories, as well as the unequal distribution of state resources along these same lines; a historical legacy of religious-*cum*-political fracture followed by a deliberate but selective process of nation-building; and, lastly, a pervasive geopolitical competition for ideological and material influence involving Iran, the Arab states of the Gulf, and their respective clients and patrons. By this conceptualization, the politicization of religious and ethnic identities is understood not as a cause of the political experiences of the states, but rather a systematic *effect* of their particular societal and institutional characteristics as well as external environment.

This rethinking of sectarianism is rooted in no less than a basic theoretical revision of the prevailing understanding of the Gulf state. Challenging some four decades of received wisdom from *rentier* state theory, it begins by rejecting the notion of a universal *rentier* social contract, whereby the rulers of rent-based economies endeavor to purchase the universal political support of citizens using economic benefits. Rather than deploy limited resources inefficiently upon the whole of society, this revised account observes, most rulers of distributive states such as those of the Gulf instead seek to maximize their own share by rewarding a finite category of citizens whose support is sufficient to keep them in power, while the remaining population is disproportionately excluded from the private *rentier* benefits of citizenship. This incentive for targeted redistribution is especially great in countries in which a high population and/or low per capita resource revenues would limit the political utility of a more egalitarian allocation.

In the barren political landscape of the Persian Gulf states, lacking both an economic basis for mass coordination as well as institutions that might channel group interests, this process of coalition-building favors alliances based on outwardly-observable, ascriptive social categories such as family and tribal descent, regional origin, and ethnic and religious affiliation. As a result, political cooperation becomes most likely among citizens of similar ethno-religious makeup, and, in distributive states with diverse and/or regionally-diffuse populations, political winners and losers tend to be decided among these same ascriptive categories. Not only is there no universal *rentier* bargain tying all citizens to rulers of distributive states, therefore, but the lines separating those who are party to the agreement from those who are disqualified are not drawn arbitrarily.

Having elaborated this modified account of the strategic logic underlying the allocative state, the chapter proceeds in the remaining two sections to examine how the region's structural tendency toward ethnic and religious political dividing lines has been reinforced by several internal and external conditions, respectively, that have helped give rise to the contemporary phenomenon of sectarianism. The first domestic factor is political institutions that privilege and in many cases are designed to encourage political competition on the basis of latent social distinctions rather than shared issue preferences. A second internal condition is an enduring legacy of competing religious-*cum*-political narratives that has complicated the modern process of nation-building. In seeking to cultivate coherent national identities within borders determined largely by fate and by colonial regents, most of the Gulf states have been forced to invent official accounts of local history that in glorifying certain events, traditions, and ideals, inevitably privilege particular versions of citizenship and of nationhood. While no national mythology can hope to resemble perfectly the diversity of people it is meant to encompass, one community consistently and conspicuously absent from the majority of these narratives emphasizing Sunni, tribal identity is Arab Shi'a. Excluded from identities crafted in the image of ruling families, Arab Shi'a in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia have even constructed their own national folklore that draws on shared notions of political injustice and betrayal rooted in the very foundations of Islam. In this way does a millennium-old politico-religious schism continue to overlap with ongoing processes of national marginalization to reinforce societal polarization along Sunni-Shi'i lines.

A final section situates these internal dynamics in the larger regional competition for ideological and material influence being fought between Saudi Arabia, Iran, and their respective clients and great power patrons. Initiated after the Islamic Revolution threatened to bring its brand of Shiʻa populism to the Gulf; and augmented when successive regime changes in Afghanistan and Iraq made the prospect appear considerably less fanciful, this geopolitical rivalry has given further substance to the latent distinction between Sunni and Shiʻi. Once mere religious deviants, now the Arab and Persian Shiʻa of the Arabian peninsula are viewed by nervous rulers and citizens as political heretics as well—indeed, as veritable fifth columns serving an expansionist Iran and united by a transnational solidarity and the common goal of Shiʻa empowerment. Emboldened Shiʻa populations in Iraq, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait, combined with the prospect of a nuclear-armed Islamic Republic, have only amplified such existential fears, quickening plans for deeper politico-military integration among the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). With the latter thrust into the political driver's seat by the events of the Arab Spring, the entire region is increasingly consumed by what has been termed the "new Middle East Cold War": a conflict pitting the Sunni Arab monarchies against Shiʻa-led regimes in Iran, Iraq, and most recently Syria.

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3. *Sectarian Relations and Sunni Identity in Post–Civil War Iraq*
   Fanar Haddad

Based on field research in early 2012, this study attempts to, firstly, understand sectarian relations generally as a form of inter-group competition that is intimately related to nationalism and empowerment and manifested in competing symbols and narratives of self, nation, and state. Secondly, this study analyzes the ongoing evolution of sectarian relations in the new Iraq. Finally, the evolution of a specifically Sunni Arab Iraqi identity is explored; specifically, this chapter will illustrate attempts to articulate and mobilize Sunni Arab Iraqi identity in response to robust, often state-sponsored, assertions of Shi'a identity and to better deal with the realities of identity politics in the new Iraq.

Attempts to understand the complex nature of sectarian dynamics in Iraq remain paralyzed by ideological conviction and emotional prejudice. Discourse on the subject still tends to either deny the relevance of sectarian identity, opting instead to blame outsiders and politicians or, alternatively, to reduce Iraq and Iraqis to a Manichean sectarian struggle that pervades all facets of Iraqi state and society. This intellectual awkwardness is noticeable in much of the commentary on sectarian identity and sectarian relations not just in Iraq but across the region.

Like any other communal divide that is perceived as "primordial" (race, color, tribe, religion, and so forth), the form, content, meaning, and, above all, salience of sectarian identities are far from static; rather, they respond to and are dictated by a range of ever-changing contextual factors. It is this inherent ambiguity that renders superfluous essentialist arguments that either inflate or ignore the relevance of sectarian identities across time and space.

To understand sectarian relations we must first recognize the constantly fluctuating nature of sectarian identity—being an Iraqi Sunni or Shi'a today is not what it meant in 2006, let alone in 1906. Secondly, sectarian relations cannot be divorced from relations of power. Relative empowerment or dominance dictates how sectarian relations are experienced on the societal level and influences conceptions of self and other—a dynamic noticeable in other societal cleavages such as race or gender. Thirdly, and particularly in the context of Iraq, sectarian identity cannot be divorced from national identity. When activated, the competition between Sunni and Shi'a Iraqis is intimately connected to national historical memories and competing senses of entitlements to, and ownerships of, the nation-state. Therefore, rather than an innate religious contest, sectarian competition, when it arises, has very little to do with theology and jurisprudence or even Islamic historical memory and everything to do with the configurations of power within the nation-state and the competing visions of, and claims to, a mutually claimed national space.

In 2003, Sunni Arab Iraqis found themselves singularly ill equipped to compete in the new Iraq. The language of ethno-sectarian victimhood and ethno-sectarian demographic percentages was alien to most Sunni Arab Iraqis. Consequently, the post-2003 culture of communal identity and communal victimhood came, intentionally or not, at the expense of Sunni Arabs precisely because the latter did not have a myth of unique communal victimhood in a political environment that, to a significant extent, defined victims along ethno-sectarian lines. Since then, the political relevance of sectarian identity, the policies of Iraqi and occupation authorities and the continued instability—not least the civil war of 2006-2007—have nurtured a sense of encirclement amongst Sunni Arab Iraqis that in turn has seen Sunni identity in Iraq being articulated and asserted in an unprecedented way. Prior to 2003, the facts of relative empowerment negated the need for the creation of a coherent and specifically Sunni Iraqi identity: as far as many Sunnis were concerned—and in stark contrast to many of their Shi'a compatriots—sectarian identity simply lacked political relevance. Needless to say, this placed Sunnis at a distinct disadvantage in the sectarian competition that has flourished since 2003.

This study's consideration of sectarian politics and sectarian competition focuses on the symbolism of identity politics and the symbolism of sect. Sect-centric imaginings of Iraq—or sectarian Iraqi nationalisms—seek ultimately to validate the group's representativeness of Iraq and vice versa. This is primarily achieved through an assertion of sect-specific symbols and historical imaginations in public spaces and through organs of state that ultimately aim to foster congruence between sectarian nationalism and official state nationalism. Sunni Arab Iraqis entered this contest with a handicap: the novelty of Sunni Iraqi group-identity means that Sunni identity had little in the way of group-defining myths and symbols to compete with the rich symbolic heritage enjoined in Shi'a Iraqi identity. In this study, the evolution of a distinct Sunni Iraqi sense of "we-ness" grounded in a profound feeling of victimhood is charted; more importantly, this study considers the creation of symbols and methods with which to express this developing sense of self.

Iraq's immediate future is unlikely to see the relevance of sectarian identity significantly diminished. Here it should be noted that sectarian competition is not necessarily the antithesis of social cohesion. Given the continued subscription of Arab Iraqis to the concept of the Iraqi nation-state, Iraqi nationalism can potentially act as the mediator between competing sects who should be allowed to peacefully, even if competitively, assert their sectarian myths and symbols. However, as will be illustrated in this study, for Iraqi nationalism to fulfill that transcendental potential it has to be seen as sect-neutral. The situation today, however, is that whilst the state often proclaims an anti-sectarian stance, its claims to ecumenical inclusiveness are rendered hollow by the assertion of a distinctly Shi'a Iraqi identity in public spaces and through organs of state, thereby, intentionally or not, ascribing a sectarian identity to Iraq and alienating those who do not subscribe to the sectarian identity that is proclaimed.

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4. *The State and Sectarian Identities in the Persian Gulf Monarchies: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait in Comparative Perspective*
   Laurence Louër

The Shia who live on the Arabian side of the Persian Gulf are not part of the higher strata of the social fabric. This is dominated by those who can claim an old and so-called "pure" (*asli*) Arab descent by being descended from one of the big tribal confederations originating from Central Arabia, and also belonging to the socially dominant status group of the *hadhar*, the old settled and/or urbanized population. In all the six GCC states, the Shia are a demographic and/or political minority, the Bahraini Shia demographic majority being kept out of the most powerful institutional positions as well as sensitive sectors of the administration, which are held either by members of the Sunni ruling dynasty or Sunnis of various social and ethno-national backgrounds.

Mainly resulting from the history of state formation in the region, this basic fact must not lead us to think that Shia everywhere in the Gulf are subjected to various forms of sectarian-based discrimination. The mere fact that they belong to a different current of Islam than the rulers is not always the primary reason that they have less access to important institutional positions than their Sunni fellow-citizens. Saudi Arabia is the exception rather than the rule in this respect. It is the only Gulf monarchy where the identity of the state, based on a specific reading of Sunni religious orthodoxy, has led to a widespread state-sponsored policy of sectarian discrimination. When such policies exist elsewhere, they are based on motives other than religious hatred or refusal of the Other.

This chapter, based on the cases of Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, the three Gulf monarchies where the Sunni/Shia divide has a social and a political relevance, aims at identifying the various rationales behind state-sponsored anti-Shi'ism. The comparative analysis of the Bahraini, Saudi, and Kuwaiti cases shows that the relation of the Shia to the state in the Persian Gulf is very heterogeneous. A key factor explaining the different situations in the three countries under scrutiny is the conditions of state formation from the seventeenth and eighteenth century onward. Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, the two states which have sponsored blatant, widespread anti-Shia policies, were founded following processes of conquest during which the Shia were on the side of the vanquished and were inserted into political systems that were initially largely organized in order to reward the conquerors at the expense of the conquered. The Sunni/Shia divide was reinforced by its overlapping with other polarized social identities.

The Kuwaiti case, by contrast, shows how a state formation process based on the progressive assemblage of segments of populations of various ethno-religious backgrounds has had the effect of avoiding any type of polarization between the rulers and the various Shia communities. The contingent history of the formation of the opposition to dynastic authoritarianism, where the Sunni founding families of Kuwait who embraced Arab nationalist tenets played a central role, is also key in understanding the old alliance between the Al Sabah ruling dynasty and the Shia. This was meant to protect the rulers from the encroachment of the opposition and the Shia from the anti-Iranian stance of the Sunni merchant oligarchy, in a situation where anti-Shi'ism came primarily from the society and where hence the state was seen by Shi'a as a shelter.

Despite their differences, the three cases have also shown that Sunni rulers, even when they have sponsored discriminatory practices towards the Shia, can show extreme flexibility when confronted with the necessities of government. What I have called the "pragmatic sectarianism" of the Saudi regime when dealing with its Shia citizens is particularly telling in this respect. In Bahrain, the strategic use of Shia sectarian identity

to counter the influence of Marxist and Arab nationalist movements is another example that, for a long time, the Bahraini regime did not see the public expression of Shia difference as a problem. The same is obvious in Kuwait. The relations that King Abdallah of Saudi Arabia developed with the Shia in the 2000s, in the context of the contest for succession with his rivals within the ruling dynasty, is also a telling example of how Shia identity entrepreneurs can be seen as allies by rulers in the context of enhanced intra-dynastic factionalism.

In all three cases, the shifts in the regional geopolitical context played a key role in altering the rulers' pragmatic and sometimes benevolent attitudes. From the 1980s onward, the advent of the Iranian revolution, after which Iran formulated a foreign policy in which Shia sectarian identity was used as a tool of influence, and the radicalization of some of the Shia Islamic movements, have pushed towards the securitization of the Shia question. The 2003 regime change in Iraq, which permitted Shia Islamic movements to take power in Baghdad and reinforced the Iranian networks of influence in the Arab Middle East, further aggravated this phenomenon in which Shia are seen by their Sunni fellow-citizens not so much as adepts of somehow bizarre religious practices but as a fifth column of Iran.

Laurence Louër joined the Center for International Studies and Research CERI/Sciences Po in 2003. She also serves as a permanent consultant for the Policy Planning Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (CAP), and has been co-editor-in-chief of *Critique Internationale* since 2006. Louër currently teaches courses on nationalism and ethnicity in the Middle East. Her area of research focus is on the politics of identity and ethnicity in the Middle East, and in particular on Shia Islam and politics, social and political changes in the Gulf monarchies, and communitarianism and ethnicity. Her most recent publication was *Transnational Shia Politics: Political and Religious Networks in the Gulf* (London: Hurst & Co., 2008).

5. *Royal Factions, Ruling Strategies, and Sectarianism in Bahrain*
   Kristin Smith Diwan

The demonstrations that erupted in Bahrain following the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings revealed widespread political discontent in the small island kingdom and stark political divisions within the al-Khalifa ruling family. The push for a political compromise with Bahrain's opposition political societies initiated by Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa was countered by Bahrain's long standing Prime Minister, Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa, and another faction—known locally as the *Khawaled*—positioned in the Defense forces and the Royal Court. The failure of political negotiations, cut short by the intervention of Saudi-led Peninsula Shield Forces, presaged the rise of these "hardliners" over the "moderates" headed by the Crown Prince. It also marked the emergence of a distinctive new ideological and exclusionary sectarianism taking hold in the country.

This study seeks to deepen the analysis of "moderates" vs. "hardliners" through a reflection on the impact of ruling factions—their internal competition and their external allies—on sectarian relations within the country. I argue that sectarian strife is not simply the outcome of entrenched communal divisions, but rather is a corollary of ruling strategies. These political choices—linked to economic interests and shaped by distinctive worldviews—have a profound effect on the salience of sectarian cleavages. Moreover, these ruling strategies extend to external alliances with the power to profoundly re-shape the domestic political field. Understanding these royal factions and their strategic positioning within a Bahrain that is declining in oil wealth and subject to regional rivalries is critical to assessing the potential for sociopolitical reconciliation and the best channels to achieve it.

From the earliest days of the al-Khalifa's conquest of the island, relations between ruler and subject was differentiated by tribe and ethno-sectarian community and their differing roles in Bahrain's date palm and pearl diving economies. Although Bahrain's governing and market institutions were utterly transformed by the British-initiated process of state formation and by the introduction of the oil economy, these early patterns of tribal authority and social organization showed surprising resilience, preserving the salience of identity politics within the evolving rentier state.

The power and prerogative of the al-Khalifa in this system was unrivaled. Their control over oil and land allowed them to cultivate elite clients from each community, while their privileged relations with other Gulf ruling monarchies provided vital external support. Bahrain's long-standing Prime Minister Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman epitomized this strategy of rule, extending his influence through patronage relationships with Bahrain's business leaders and through personal relationships with the Saudi ruling elite.

While this method of rule was tribal not religious, the indigenous Shia Arabs, known as the *Baharna*, found themselves at a disadvantage. Public investment lagged in their rural villages, and the *Baharna* lacked both the privileged access of the tribes and the professional networks of the urban communities. Suspicions about Shia loyalty in the wake of the Iranian revolution left the *Baharna* further excluded from state employment in security-related ministries. Their relative impoverishment and strong clerical leadership found expression in the largely village-based protests which beset Bahrain in the mid-1990's.

The succession of Emir Hamad in 1999 brought new challengers to leadership and a new ruling strategy. The self-declared King sought to co-opt the opposition through a political reform project cemented in the National Action Charter. His son and appointed successor, Crown Prince Salman, extended this reform effort

into the economy through new initiatives to train and employ more Bahraini workers and to promote greater diversification through international investment. This economic project had additional political motives: to build an institutional base to challenge the authority of the Prime Minister and to strengthen Bahrain's autonomy from Saudi Arabia. It attracted the support of the Shia working and professional classes due to their greater dependence on private sector employment, as well as development-minded Sunnis, particularly modernizing youth who were attracted by the Crown Prince's global vision and international scholarships.

Yet, while the Crown Prince worked to integrate the Shia into his national project, another faction of the ruling family worked to exclude them. The commander of the Bahrain Defense Forces (BDF) Field Marshal Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Khalifa and his brother Royal Court Minister Khalid bin Ahmad bin Salman al-Khalifa watched the democratic rise of Shia power in Iraq with alarm. The Bandargate scandal disclosed measures taken by *Khawaled* allies, aided by Sunni Islamists, to counter the demographic threat of a Shia majority in Bahrain through strategic naturalizations of Sunnis, conversions, and a concerted media program to discredit the Shia opposition.

During the uprising, the Crown Prince's new coalition failed to coalesce into an objective reform alliance. Meanwhile the *Khawaled* and the Prime Minister formed a more cohesive coalition, and received a decisive boost from the intervention of the Saudi state which shared their fears of Shia empowerment. A punitive campaign to purge Shia from state employment, universities, professional associations, and municipalities ensued. While loyalty campaigns silenced dissent, a new more ideological rhetoric permeated the public discourse. State actions were accompanied by Sunni mobilization within society, including boycotts of Shia businesses, and campaigns against foreign mediation or domestic compromise.

The ascendancy of the new sectarianism associated with the *Khawaled* marks a rejection of the internationalist project of the Crown Prince and a repudiation of the political pragmatism of the old guard associated with the Prime Minister. The business-supported weakening of the economic institutions and policies of the Crown Prince and the diminished appeal of Bahrain as an international business hub strengthens his royal adversaries. The rise of the security state and the push for unity with Saudi Arabia reflects this new power balance. It is commonly implied that sectarian strife is inevitable in a small island Kingdom with a Shia majority ruled by a Sunni minority. Yet even under conditions of monarchical authoritarianism strikingly different modes of sectarian relations can emerge. The competition among royal factions breeds distinctive ruling strategies linking international alliances to domestic coalitions through cohesive worldviews cemented in domestic institutions. The "before" and "after" of Bahrain's Pearl Uprising demonstrates the dramatic changes these shifts can engender.

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6.   *Identity Politics and Nation-Building under Sultan Qaboos*
     Marc Valeri

Sultan Qaboos has ruled Oman since overthrowing his father, with British support, in July 1970. The new ruler's room for manoeuvre with regard to the British was reduced to a minimum, as was his legitimacy vis-à-vis the Omani population. In this context, the building of a nation lay at the heart of the political project established by Sultan Qaboos as a means of asserting his authority over the whole territory. This nation-building policy was based on one major objective: for Qaboos to set himself up as the "natural" sovereign, the only individual able to draw together all the religious and ethno-linguistic groups located within Omani territory. However, sectarian politics, understood as the process of socio-political instrumentalization of sub-national (ethno-linguistic, religious, etc.) identities, either by the regime or by non-state political actors, has always been a key dimension of Omani politics. If sectarian identifications have rarely been openly politicized under Qaboos, debates over each group's loyalty to the Omani nation have never stopped.

        In this chapter, after a brief presentation of the ethnic and religious diversity of the Omani population, I analyze how, far from erasing sub-national allegiances, the advent in Oman of a nation-state centered on the personality of the new ruler engaged with sub-national identities in order to maintain the old social order while depriving these identities of any potential for political harm to the new regime. This regime's policy of manipulation of sectarian affiliations has long blocked the possibilities of socio-political mobilization on criteria other than that of these identities: by channeling claims and demands according to these identifications, the ruler prevented the emergence of "transversal" mobilizations, such as social class or ideology. As a result, it allowed Qaboos to be the only one able to claim to embody the whole political community. This paper then argues that this "sectarian game," which supported the regime's stability, has now shown its limits. First, it has proven unsuccessful in releasing social tensions for the last several years and more particularly has not prevented the emergence of dissonant voices, as became apparent in 2011. More broadly, if the public expression of these sectarian identities represents a threat, it is now a threat to the political system itself, to the rules imposed by the regime—a monarchy in the hands of a single man, without counterbalance and without any possibility of alternative expression—and not to the firmly-established framework in which it is held: the nation.

        Sultan Qaboos's personal legitimacy has relied since the mid-1970s on the building of both an Omani state and an Omani nation. With the remarkable achievements in technical, economic, and social development, there has been a rewriting of identity frames of reference around the person of Qaboos, identified in the new historiography with the contemporary welfare state and consequently with Oman itself. This political reworking of history has aimed at "naturalizing" his rule and at preventing the emergence of any alternative to the established order, in the name of the requirement of national unity behind the ruler and the threat of fitna (division). However, far from destroying sub-national identities, the ruler has hastened to turn them to his own profit by integrating them into the new political order and using them to consolidate his authority. In Oman, this sectarian politics has sought to "de-autonomize" sub-national allegiances from the state, rendering them fully dependent on a political game that the regime controls and whose rules the regime establishes. In that way, the ruler has been freed from the constraints imposed by community leaders and alone can claim to be an arbiter above all lesser allegiances.

There can be no doubt that one of Sultan Qaboos's major achievements has been the imposition of the idea of an Omani nation as the horizon of all social and political actors' strategies, as well as a collective framework of belonging. Even re-polarization based on sectarian identities (ethno-linguistic groups, regionalism, religious sects, etc.), observed in the past fifteen years, is not opposed to that of the nation, but complementary to it. It represents a new means of positioning at the core of the Omani political system. While the opportunities for wealth that the state can offer are dwindling, everyone seeks to consolidate his anchoring into the Omani nation, to show that he is more Omani than the other. Such strategies have been carried out in the name of the Omani nation and within the framework defined by it. They are the proof that both national feeling and the Omani state are fully applicable as references of thought.

However, the "Omani Spring" has shown how this long-term encapsulation policy, intended to prevent any social claim or the emergence of alternative discourses, has reached its limits. If this sectarian policy can explain why the Interior province was immune to protests in 2011, there is no doubt that growing sectors of society, particularly among the younger generations, are reluctant to guarantee the perpetuation of a system in which they feel excluded from political and economic decisions that engage the country for a new era. It definitely proved unable to prevent the emergence of politicized transversal identifications, based on social class (unskilled and unemployed workers) or religious ideology (Muslim Brotherhood, Salafism, Ibadi Islamism), that are directly calling into question the old "divide and rule" order.

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7. *The Baluch Presence in the Persian Gulf*
   J. E. Peterson

It can be conjectured that migration of Baluch to the Arab countries of the Gulf was prompted by three motivations. The first, and perhaps the most primal, factor seems to have been the general tendency for ethnic or sectarian communities to spread into neighboring lands. This has been particularly true up and down the Gulf with Arab groups settled on the Iranian coast and inland from it for many centuries, and Persian groups, first as merchants and then as laborers, settling in Arab littoral towns from Kuwait to Dubai. This type of migration over the longer term exhibits a pattern of migration from areas along the Iranian littoral to the nearest points on the Arab littoral. Thus, Behbehanis are predominant in Kuwait, Bushihris in Bahrain, and Bastakis in Dubai. Under this reasoning, it is not surprising that a sizeable proportion of the population of Oman's Batinah Coast on the Gulf of Oman should be Baluch.

The second factor in the settlement of Baluch in the Gulf is related to the Baluchi martial reputation. Baluch mercenaries have served as soldiers and armed retainers in the service of more than one Gulf ruler, but especially the rulers of Oman, where their presence has been recorded with the Ya'rubi imams in the 16th and 17th centuries. Recruitment directly from Baluchistan continued well into the 20th century in Oman and Bahrain. A factor in this process unique to Oman was the sultanate's ownership for more than a century and a half of the enclave of Gwadar on the coast of Baluchistan.

The third factor is part of a general migration of labor to the Gulf during the oil era. While the Baluch have not been as numerous in this respect as other Pakistanis, not to mention Indians, Bangladeshis, Sri Lankans, and other Asian nationalities, Baluchi workers can be found in all the Gulf states. There they work as unskilled laborers, policemen, fishermen, and are employed in oil fields and on farms.

Oman is the one country in the Gulf where Baluch live in profusion and have done so for a long but indeterminate period of time. While concentrated in the capital region and along the Batinah coast of the Gulf of Oman, there are pockets of Baluch scattered throughout the northern half of the country. Some were recruited in recent times as soldiers from Gwadur, the Omani enclave on Pakistan's Makran coast of Baluchistan until 1958. Most, however, seem to have resided in Oman for centuries and form a natural part of the Omani social mosaic.

Elsewhere, Baluch residents seem to be of more recent origin. Many of those in Bahrain arrived as soldiers or police, and the small community is centered around a mosque and a club. In the United Arab Emirates, another notable Baluch community of Iranian origin resides in the Gulf of Oman town of Kalbah, although others are scattered throughout the UAE. In all the Gulf states except Oman, and similar to other expatriate communities, Baluch workers play no role in local politics and, because of their extreme vulnerability to arrest and deportation, eschew political activities related to their homelands.

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8. *Iran's Ethnic, Religious, and Tribal Minorities*
    Lois Beck

In this study, I investigate identity and politics in contemporary Iran as they relate to the languages, religions, ethnicities, national minorities, and tribes there. Writers on Iran often blend or confuse these terms or intermix them with others. Other factors relevant to a discussion of Iran's people and relating to the five entities include the geographical region, level of economic development there, placement (center, periphery, urban, rural), livelihood, socioeconomic standing, and integration and assimilation in the nation-state. If authors consider societal complexity, they sometimes include people such as the Kurds or Armenians but without discussing what these labels mean or how such groups have changed over time.

The identity of a Kurdish man living in Iran in the early-twenty-first century, for example, involves a language (one or more regional variants of Kurdish), a religion (Sunni or Shiʻi and perhaps Sufi Islam), ethnic and other cultural features, national-minority awareness, and possibly tribal affiliation. He calls a specific underdeveloped region of Iran home, he is an urban or a rural dweller, and his socioeconomic status relates to his family and its livelihood. He is more or less integrated and assimilated in the nation-state of Iran, depending on his background, place of residence, level of formal education, occupation, inclination, and degree of orientation toward the Kurdish people. He emphasizes his Kurdish linguistic, religious, ethnic, and tribal identities according to the intensity of these affiliations. Likewise, he relates to an Iranian national identity based on his experiences. Each of these traits is fluid and reflects his stage in life and his particular context at the time. His politicization as a Kurd (and any of its associated identities, such as membership in a Sufi order) also pertains to his background. If he is a Sunni Muslim, he may feel alienated from the Shiʻi-dominant Islamic Republic of Iran. Even if he is a Shiʻi, the Sufi orientation of his sect may antagonize the government. Iranian state agents might have attacked or harassed him or his family members, leaving him further estranged. After a kinsman, conscripted by force by the Iranian army, was killed in the Iraq-Iran war, he might have intensified his negative sentiments against the two nation-states. Perhaps he supports a Kurdish political party, participates in other civil-society nongovernmental organizations, and is attracted to regional Islamist movements. His access to the internet and his growing reliance on the related technologies and media may further link him with other Kurds in the region and the world. The growing autonomy of Iraqi Kurdistan intrigues him; the Turkish military's continuing oppression of Kurds in Turkey appalls him.

This example illustrates the complexities of identity formation, its multiple bases, the interrelationship of its components, and the ways identity can be politicized. Labels of different sorts—such as "Sufi," tribal names, and even "Kurd"—are political constructions to be employed for specific purposes. A person's identity is unlike that of any other person because of its multiple, interlinking features. Identity is also fluid and malleable for the individual and changes over a lifetime and according to context. Certain aspects of identity rise in importance and expression over time while others recede.

Most writers on Iran focus, often implicitly, on the Persian elements of society and culture and ignore the other half. They may comment on recent political unrest in Baluchistan or Khuzistan but without examining the circumstances or the participants, and they may regard the disturbances as threatening to Iran's integrity regardless of any legitimate reasons for protest. Any discussion needs to acknowledge and take into consideration the diversity of Iranian society, which includes Persians and many other peoples.

In this study, I focus on the political dimensions of identity in contemporary Iran, after the revolution in 1978-79 against Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi and the declaration of the Islamic Republic of Iran. I choose five categories, in this order—languages, religions, ethnicities, national minorities, and tribes. Iranians use them to identify themselves and others, and outsiders find them useful. Other issues also pertain to identity, such as regional, socioeconomic, and educational factors, which I address. Geography especially corresponds with and affects each category.

As a foundation of Iranian society, language is fundamental to constructions of identity. It forms part of a social and cultural matrix, each feature influencing the others. Language can become politicized within this larger context. The major language groups in Iran are Indo-Iranian, Altaic, and Semitic, with variations in each family, and other languages are represented as well. Language is a major identifying characteristic of each of the four other categories.

Religion, the second category, has saliency for every Iranian. As another foundation of society, it has social, cultural, and political dimensions for its adherents. The Islamic Republic proclaimed in 1979 a particular version of Twelver Shi'i Islam as the heart of the state and society. Iranians who are Muslims but not Shi'i, who are part of Shi'i sects that the state does not condone, or who are not Muslims have experienced this development in profound, often negative, ways. Also, Iranians advocating the implementation of secular ideals, regardless of their religious backgrounds, oppose the official, legitimized, and sometimes mandated intersection of religion, government, politics, and society in Iran.

Third, ethnicity also affects every Iranian. Ethnic identity for Iran's Persians—the dominating half of society—is more amorphous and less explicit than the ethnic identities of other Iranians, for reasons this chapter explains. Also, most Iranians in Iran are influenced to different degrees by Persians, the Persian language, and the Persian attributes of Iran's national identity, while Persians are not necessarily affected by the other ethnicities and ethnic identities. I examine the impact of these asymmetries.

The fourth category is national-minority status. Unlike language, religion, and ethnicity, this factor is explicitly relevant for only certain segments of Iranian society. Only some Iranians have a politicized sense of "nation" that differs from that of the Iranian nation. Over time, national-minority identities emerge, develop, and perhaps recede, similar to and yet different from the ongoing changes in the identities formed by language, religion, and ethnicity. The Iranian state, neighboring nation-states, and outside powers view Iran's national minorities as threats to the territorial and political integrity of Iran, security of its neighbors, and stability of the region. Language, religion, and ethnicity impact the lives of all Iranians, but these traits are politicized to a higher degree among the national minorities. Focus on the minorities requires a parallel discussion of Iranian nationalism and its relation to the history, languages, religions, societies, and cultures of Iran. Many people, particularly the Persian-speaking majority in Iran, equate Iranian and Persian nationalism. Those who are not Persians find this notion objectionable, if not offensive, and are motivated to reassess their place in Iran and to highlight their own minority nationalisms.

Fifth, tribal affiliations are also relevant for only certain sectors of Iranian society, and they are politicized in ways similar to those of the national minorities. They also have linguistic, religious, and ethnic characteristics,

which strengthen these cultural systems and the polities of which they are a part. Tribal people are organized politically by means of certain structures and ideologies, which differentiates them from Iran's nontribal peoples. They defend their interests and repel incursions by activating these structures, organizations, and ideologies. Tribal structures are alternative systems to state structures, and states often regard these polities as threats and try to subjugate, relocate, or eliminate them. States also exploit tribal systems for their own benefit, such as sending tribesmen to fight enemies or invaders, and tribal people participate in some state institutions without distancing themselves from their own polities.

These linguistic, religious, ethnic, national-minority, and tribal factors in Iran interrelate in people's constructions of their identities. Sometimes individuals and groups stress one factor over others; sometimes another factor takes precedence. People invoke these identities according to specific times, situations, and contexts.

Baluch nationalists in Iran, for example, stress their religion (Sunni Islam) to differentiate themselves from the Shi'is who control state power, while Baluch nationalists in neighboring Pakistan emphasize their language (Baluchi). The Baluch in Pakistan share Sunni Islam with most citizens there, while their language contrasts with the state's official ones (Urdu and English) and provides a distinctive, unifying symbolic system for them.

Iran's sectarian, infra-national, competing sub-national mass-group identities are this chapter's focus. Non-sectarian, transversal, cross-societal mobilizations in society—based on socioeconomic class, religious ideology, and other ideologies (such as democracy and secular nationalism)—underlie and overlap with sectarian identities. Studies of the urban poor, Islamic reformists, and leftists, for example, demonstrate the ways that non-sectarian and sectarian factors intersect. In the conclusion, I outline overarching and underlying topics relating to sectarianism (as broadly defined) in Iran.

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