



Identity and Power: Rethinking Sectarianism in the International Relations of the Middle East

May Darwich, Durham University
Friday 29th June, 9.30-12.30

ABSTRACT:

Following the 2011 Arab uprisings, sectarianism has paradoxically evolved as an overarching narrative and a primary factor shaping events at the fore of regional politics. Sectarianism has acquired a security dimension not only in divided societies with large sectarian minorities, such as Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain, it has also emerged as a determining factor in homogenous societies, such as Egypt and Jordan. Actors are increasingly framing the sectarian other as an existential threat, and sectarianism, especially the Sunni-Shiite divide, became a dominant meta-narrative in Middle East politics. This diffusion of sectarianism following the 2011 Arab uprisings has been the issue of wide disagreement and debate among scholars of Middle Eastern International Relations. These debates revolve around the role of identity and material power in shaping actors' behaviour in the region. Whereas some scholars adopt a rationalist view and argue that sectarianism is an instrument to pursue material interests in the region, others argue that identities play an independent role in this process. Several theoretical approaches have evolved to explain the diffusion of sectarianism in the Middle East. This session has three aims. First, it will problematize the phenomenon of sectarianism in IR of the Middle East, i.e. what is sectarianism? Second, it will present a critical review of the different theoretical approaches and traditions to explain the rise of sectarianism in the post-2011 regional order. Third, it will shed light on some particular empirical cases, such as the Syria crisis, the Gulf, among others to illustrate the validity of the various theoretical explanations of sectarianism.

Readings:

Abdo, Geneive. 2017. *The New Sectarianism : The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Al-Rasheed, Madawi. 2011. 'Sectarianism as Counter-Revolution: Saudi Responses to the Arab Spring'. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 11 (3): 513–26.

Darwich, May, and Tamirace Fakhoury. 2017. 'Casting the Other as an Existential Threat: The Securitisation of Sectarianism in the International Relations of the Syria Crisis'. *Global Discourse* 6 (January): 712–32.

Gause, F. Gregory. 2014. 'Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War'. Analysis Paper 11. Doha: Brookings Doha Institute. <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Research/Files/Papers/2014/07/22%20beyond%20sectarianism%20cold%20war%20gause/English%20PDF.pdf>

Haddad, Fanar. 2014. *Sectarianism in Iraq Antagonistic Visions of Unity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Malmvig, Helle. 2014. 'Power, Identity and Securitization in Middle East: Regional Order after the Arab Uprisings'. *Mediterranean Politics* 19 (1): 145–48.

Wehrey, Frederic M. 2013. *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf: From the Iraq War to the Arab Uprisings*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Zubaida, Sami. 2014. 'Sectarian Dimensions'. *The Middle East Journal* 68 (2): 318–22.