



To be fair to the author, a critical re-evaluation of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP; as the CPM is also known) is needed. Since 1989, the year when the MCP, the Thai government and the Malaysian government signed a peace agreement to end armed conflict, MCP members have been actively publishing memoirs and even propagandistic books to offer their side of the historical account. Meanwhile, some young Malaysians, Singaporeans, and revisionist historians share this common yet problematic sentiment, which tends to romanticize and nostalgize an unrealized revolution as an expression of dissatisfaction with the present. Hence, the lack of sophisticated revisionist historiography calls for more re-evaluation. Nevertheless, Yao's over-reliance on external sources, such as those by the British, or accounts of cruelty and violence practised by communists in other parts of the world, compromises the strength and quality of his critique. The rectification campaign (or *sookching*), an internal conflict within the MCP between 1969 and 1970 which killed more than 200 people, could have served as a better entry point to raise a critique of the party, yet it is missing from this book.

Overall, these 'essays on a small, distant war' do not offer anything new. As a matter of fact, the author's argument echoes the official developmentalist narrative of Malaysia's and Singapore's histories, which use the 'economic miracle' to justify their anti-communist war. It's a rather old narrative coated with self-proclaimed 'innovative' methods.

Reference

Khoo, Agnes. 2004. *Life as the River Flows: Women in the Malayan Anti-Colonial Struggle*. Petaling Jaya: SIRD.

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Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel (eds.)
Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East
London: C. Hurst & Co., 2017, 320 pp. £18.99 pbk

With the eruption of social movements in the Maghreb and later the Mashreq region in northern Africa, sectarian conflict has come back into focus for both policy-makers and the general public. However, the reasons for sectarian conflict in the region still remain unclear and are highly debated. This is important not only in terms of official policy, but also public perception, because it seems that attitudes to sectarianism are biased by pre-conceptions and specific agendas. The first reading of sectarianism frequently encountered among the Western media and policy-makers perceives sectarian conflict as emanating from an ancient

religious blood feud between Sunni and Shia Muslims that has been rekindled by the Arab Spring. As a consequence, conflict in the region is explained as a Muslim mirror image of the Christian conflicts experienced in Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, either driven by ideology and group solidarity or simplified to contention between authoritarian regimes and Islamic extremists. Such a limited understanding has and has had direct political consequences, leading to a *laissez-faire* mentality symptomatically illustrated by Sarah Palin's 2013 slogan, 'Let Allah sort it out'. In other words, these countries are best left alone.

The second reading, on the other hand, comprehends sectarian conflict as an artificial and external construct created by state actors and elites to foster their own economic and political interests. This understanding of sectarianism is frequently peppered with catchwords such as European colonialism, or identity and geopolitics, perceiving sectarian conflict as a proxy war in which the afflicted countries are pawns in a game between hegemonic regional and supra-regional powers. Ironically, in its extreme version, this latter reading leads to the same response as the former one. That is, the belief that in the absence of any external interference, sectarian conflict in the afflicted countries would soon subside.

Against this background, *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East* (hereafter *Sectarianization*) provides a timely and thorough response to the questions of why sectarianism in this region, and why at this point in time. While *Sectarianization* recognises viable elements in the former, more perfunctory, lines of argument – mainly, the perpetuity of characteristics of and differences in religious identity as well as the opportunistic actions of weak and authoritarian states struggling for legitimacy and power consolidation – the book comes to a different conclusion. By studying the historical factors that created fertile ground for sectarianism at the national level, including the active nourishment of religious differences and the politicization of identities by state actors and regional powers, it exposes the self-reinforcing nature of sectarian conflict. The editors declare in their introductory chapter that '[d]espite its constructed character, sectarianization has the ominous potential to become a self-fulfilling prophecy' (p.21), and make a powerful diagnosis that only active, long-term anti-sectarian policies and cultural work can put an end to sectarianism in the region.

The book is divided into two sections. The first section offers a general historical and theoretical overview, while the second section provides a subtle analysis of the principal countries involved in the sectarian conflict. The latter presents a comprehensive historical elaboration of the manifold reasons for sectarianism and sectarian conflict in each country studied. The countries included are Pakistan, Iraq, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Yemen, Lebanon, and Kuwait. Part I provides an astute geopolitical, historical, and theoretical synthesis for readers who are interested in a general understanding of the causes of sectarianism. And although the first part offers little that is new to social scientists familiar with the constructivist school or the authors' previous writings, the case studies in the second part offer valuable insights into the historical causes in each country.

Coming from different disciplines, each author scrutinizes the causes for sectarianism from slightly different angles, especially with respect to the interplay between political interests, national identity, and the abuse of sectarian plurality at

the national level and the role of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. It becomes evident that although vital for our understanding, a complete reduction of sectarian conflict to a proxy war does not fully grasp the dynamics of the conflict. On the one hand, both Saudi Arabia and Iran take a strong interest in the Middle East, firstly as an offensive strategy to increase and consolidate their power and influence in the region, and secondly, as a defensive strategy to protect their internal stability and reinforce external stability among their allies, thereby minimizing external security threats while de-stabilizing the allies of their enemy.

On the other hand, the Arab Spring revolution shattered the power structure in the region and questioned the legitimacy of governments, causing fear amongst the elites. Sectarian politics proved to be an effective means to redirect contention away from state actors and to re-consolidate power; it is a counter-revolutionary strategy which re-cloaks political divides into sectarian conflict. A religious interpretation of sectarianism therefore confuses means with causes. At the same time, this also shows that the creation of fictitious sectarian enemies is actively fostered by state agencies. These enemies can be national entities or external players like Iran and Saudi Arabia. As a consequence, the proxy war perspective is in part a narrative conceived by national elites, creating a mix of real and fictitious external involvement.

While the case study structure in *Sectarianization* leaves too little room for controversial engagement with different theories and is strongly shaped by each author's approach and opinion, it is a constructive and instructive attempt to disentangle the true underlying actors and causes of sectarianization in each country. At the same time, it shows that the underlying fundamentals are strikingly similar across the region. Sectarianism is far from being motivated by religious ideology. It is the progeny of political and economic power relations, both at the national level and across the region, as well as being the result of a crisis of legitimacy in these states and the struggle by their persistent dictatorships to maintain power.

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Anders Hellström
Trust Us: Reproducing the Nation and the Scandinavian Nationalist Populist Parties
Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2016, 232 pp. \$95.00/£67.00 hbk

The Scandinavian welfare states emerged from the unique contours of regional history. Large-scale projects of state redistribution were built on social homogeneity: because everyone was similarly placed with respect to the state, everyone was seen as equally entitled to the benefits of social welfare policies. In recent years, growing diversity in these societies has tended to polarize political