

The Hobbesian Nightmare in the Arab League: A Collision of Identity Politics and National Interests in Middle East Conflicts

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Abstract

The Middle East has plunged into a wide-scale Hobbesian war of all against all since the proliferation of the Arab Spring in 2011 that chronicled the message the people want the downfall of the regime that disrupted the status quo in their regional politics. This paper argues that this state of nature intriguing all ethnic groups in the Arab World against all is anchored on and explained through the phenomenon of identity politics. The author scrutinizes the applicability of this extrapolation by surveying the conflict seized countries of the Middle East (Egypt, Syria, Bahrain, Iraq, Israel, Palestine, and Lebanon) and posits that external self-interested influences impact on the crises according to regional identity politics as well. The Syrian conflict is herein viewed as the centre of gravity that disperses its spill-over effects across the region. It is further argued that collective system mechanisms (UN, Arab League) as a solution to internal conflicts have been jeopardised by the decisive role of identity politics in the Arab League. The clash of civilization hypothesis is herein taken as a product of identity politics which explains the outcome of identity politics. The study proposes that conflicts caused and defined by identity politics can only be solved through the auspices of identity politics itself. Group cohesion and unity of purpose which are key facets of identity politics might be harmonized through opening the public space for civil society organisations, churches, and minority movements to air their concerns to get a strong national identity. National constitutions, institutions and elections must reflect sectarian cleavages in those societies in order to enable proportional representation, majority rule and respect of minority rights to curb conflict recurrence.

Keywords: Identity politics; Clash of civilizations; Hobbesian nightmare; Collective security

Introduction

The Middle East has been ravaged by successive conflicts since the dawn of the 21st century which became explicitly manifest in 2011 with the mushrooming of the Arab Spring. In cognizance of such crises, this paper examines the interplay of identity politics in explaining the causes, nature and possible solutions to the Middle East crises. Identity politics is used in conjunction with the Clash of Civilizations thesis by Samuel Huntington since they seem synoptic in their approach. The paper traces the crises mentioned herein going back to the 20th century so as to assume a better appreciation of the on-going Syrian crisis, Israeli-Palestine conflict, Egypt conflict and the Lebanon crisis among others. The stance taken in this paper is that identity politics is a central fulcrum in explaining Middle East conflicts and a determinant of a possible resolution. This is said in cognizance of the tribal, ethnic, religious, nationalist and ideological nature of all the Middle East conflict spitting all groups against all tantamount to the Hobbesian nightmare as it will be illustrated in the succeeding passages.

Conceptualization

The looming question in this case is what can identity politics be taken to entail? It is popularly associated to a political movement or activity based on or concerned with cultural, ethnic, gender, religious or social interests that characterises a group identity. It is interwoven with liberal notions of self-determination, minority rights and majority rule as it shall be elucidated hereinafter. Zweiri states "Identity politics is the political activity of various ethnic, religious and cultural groupings in demanding greater economic, social and political rights of self-determination... [It] claims to represent and seek to advance the interests of particular groups in a society..." These definitions entail that identity politics is a political movement formed by the members that share and unite around common historical, religious, ethnic backgrounds and experiences of actual or perceived social and economic injustices in their societies. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy posits that:

Identity politics starts from analyses of oppression to recommending, variously, the reclaiming, description, or transformation of group membership. It rejects the negative descriptions offered by a dominant culture about one's inferiority; one reforms one's own sense of self and community, often through consciousness-raising (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/identity-politics/>).

Thus identity politics signify a loose collection of political projects, each undertaken by representatives of a collective from a distinctively different social location that has been neglected, erased, or suppressed. In this way, the identity of the oppressed group gives rise to a political basis around which the group concerned then unites and begins to assert itself in a society using whatever means practicable. To put the discussion into perspective, a conflict is herein taken to mean friction, disagreements or discord within a group or between members of different groups.

The Middle East sometimes called Near East is the area around the eastern Mediterranean stretching from Turkey to northern Africa and eastward to Iran. This is the site of ancient Civilisations from Phoenicia, Babylon and Egypt and also a birth place for Judaism, Christianity and Islam religions (<http://worldnetweb.princeton.edu>). Thus the countries of the Middle East are; Egypt, Yemen, Oman, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Israel, and Palestine territory of Gaza and parts of the West Bank

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(<http://www.cotf.edu>). However, some maps include African countries such as Libya, Sudan and Somalia as part of the Middle East but for the purpose of this discourse, the latter will be mentioned in passing whilst great light will be cast on the former.

The Hobbesian Nightmare is herein used to mean a chaotic, conflict-torn society where social strata are engrossed in a self-centered perpetual antagonism that escalates to wide scale violence in which the state apparatus fails to enforce law and order across its territories. Thomas Hobbes extrapolated that in such a society is short, nasty, and brutish.

Demystifying the essence of identity politics

It is widely held that “The reason that communal identities remain so strong, reinforced rather than obliterated by the communication explosion, is the result of historic doctrinal differences and memories of oppression, both antique and recent...” [1]. This extrapolates that sectarian clashes exist because the ruling powers continue to exploit such cleavages for political reasons and instead of reconciling heterogeneous societies, divide and rule stratagems are used to instigate animosity between ethnic groups which further intensify identity (sectarian) political revolts. Parker [2] posits that identity politics and democratic political freedom are mutually supportive; each enables the vitality of the other because the former necessitates self-identification followed by articulation of the right to self-determination and equal treatment.

The main objective of identity politics is “Demand for recognition on the basis of the very grounds on which recognition has previously been denied; and formation of a political framework based on that identity...” (Kruks 2001: 85) [3]. This means experiences of oppression and the possibility of a shared and more authentic or self-determined alternative is the undercurrent of identity politics. Hence it can be stated that identity politics starts from the realisation by a group of individuals that they are marginalised and this sentiment unifies the oppressed underdogs to stand up for their dignities; this is closely tied to demands for self-determination, equality and liberty.

It is further premised on respect for one as different and encouraging univocality about the meaning of politically laden experiences of diverse individuals [4]. For political identity to root, group leaders undertake group based consciousness-raising mobilised around a single axis identified as a group’s defining feature. Thus these hallmarks of identity politics are examined in line with the conflicts in the Middle East in order to prove the relevance of identity politics in shedding light about the causes and course of the conflicts.

Another popular inclination of identity politics is according to Parker “...the idea that individuals sharing a particular trait (such as race, gender, class, history) are essentially the same, share the same identity in myriad other respects.” In this opinion, Parker entails that commonality of either experiences, dispositions of circumstances serves as a unifying force driving identity politics and sectarianism. It follows therefore that such practices can be streamlined as a necessary girding for conflict in the wider political arena. This paper examines the conflicts in the Middle East aiming at highlighting how such conflicts can be understood in the auspices of identity politics; this in turn aims at pointing research and policy intervention towards this key variable in a bid to save lives and liquidate the crises.

The conflict in Syria

The conflict exploded in March 15, 2011 when many Syrians protested against the brutality unleashed by Bashar Al-Assad police

force that detained and tortured fifteen teenagers in the south western town of Daraa. These teenagers were accused of inscribing the famous Arab spring war cry “The people want the down fall of the regime” [5,6]. With large numbers of protesters hitting the streets, the government offered a ‘military solution,’ to the crisis and citizens predominantly Sunni were bombarded and violently quashed using a chiefly Alawite military. This intensified a feeling of sectarianism amongst the protesters who perceived the oppression experienced along ethnic axes. This therefore accelerated the conflict as protesters transfigured into militarised justice seeking revolutionary movements.

The conflict is rooted in Syria’s historical metamorphosis into the state of Syria known today from the ancient Greater Syria that encompassed nowadays Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, the Palestinian territories, western Iraq, and southern Turkey. The fracture of the great Syria occurred in July 1922 when the League of Nations approved plans for a French mandate in modern Syria and Lebanon, whilst Britain assumed responsibility for the areas that are now Israel, the Palestinian Territories, Jordan, and Iraq. This historical epoch explains the existence of heterogeneous ethnic groups in the countries of the Middle East since boundaries were curved enclosing historically and culturally different societies in a single territory. The conflict in Syria is thus historically embedded; the European powers who administered the state before its independence “bequeathed to Syria a heterogeneous composition including Arab Sunnis, Alawites, Christians, Druze, Shia, and Sunni Kurds, Circassians, and Turkmen”. This social fragmentation has been a battle line for decades and it underpins the proliferation of conflicts today.

The crisis is better understood from identity politics point of view; there is a sharp, volatile ethnic-religious cleavage and friction between Sunni and Assad’s own Alawite sect a side-shoot of the Shia Islam. The Alawites once suffered the tyranny of the Sunni majority in the aftermath of Syria’s independence. Sunnis in the late 1970s committed assassinations of Alawites especially the infamous June 1979 Aleppo artillery school massacre. Thus Sunnis saw the Arab uprisings as an opportunity to undercut the Iran-Hezbollah- Syria axis [7]. This ‘shared group suffering’ exacerbates hatred and animosity amongst these core Arab ethnic groups.

The Alawite minority still the poorest community in the country, manage to acquire political power and social integration through Hafiz al-Assad’s coup and his subsequent rule from 1970 to 2000. As Huntington [8] postulates that conflicts today will emanate from the clash of civilisations; the Sunni-Alawite sectarian divide along religious doctrinal proclivities can be viewed as sub civilisations within the wider Muslim civilisation. A point of perplexity is that these two factions are tribally Arabs, but their religious perceptions demarcate their ethnicities. A more noticeable example of identity politics is evidenced by the Assad regime’s creation of shabiha-armed loyalist militia comprising Alawites drawn from active duty military and intelligence personnel and unemployed Alawites which has been used to exterminate Sunnis. Thus one notes that the Alawites organised themselves according to their shared historical oppression by the Sunni majority; and when their candidate Assad got to power; they then consolidated sectarianism in the military, public offices and key government arms and used this to oppress the Sunni majority through police brutality, segregation and exclusionary politics.

Abdo reasons that “Salafists generally seek a return to their vision of the seventh century, when they believe Islam was practiced in direct keeping with the teachings of Mohammad.” Thus it is noticeable that Alawites are seen by Sunnis and Salafists as secularists who violate

the strict teachings of their Prophet Mohammed. This perception is triangulated with experienced sectarian oppression and perceived attainability of liberty, equality and self-determination to formulate the object of the anti-Assad rebellion in Syria. The year 2012 witnessed a massive radicalisation of the rebels due to their infiltration by hundreds of Arab Islamists seeking to wage their own jihad against the regime, which they consider to be apostate because of the predominance in it of the Alawite minority [9,10]. These Sunni and Salafist militant groups have used anti-Shi'a rhetoric and anti-Iranian sentiment to justify their own actions as a sect.

It is pertinent to highlight here that Alawites transmuted from the Shia Muslim sect that seceded from the dominant Sunni sect in the early 18th to 19th century and Iran's supreme leader Khomeini is one of the figures who sponsored this movement. This Shia-Sunni divide explains the involvement of the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Iraqi groups Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Kata'ib which are fighting alongside Assad's forces claiming their role as protecting Muslim Shias' holy sites like the mosque of Sayyeda Zeinab in Syria. This reveals the core principle of identity politics which is to perpetuate the survival of the group and its core religious values through consciousness-raising as witnessed in this case. Huntington's clash of civilisations thesis extrapolates the notion that when such clashes occur, spillover effects spread across geographic frontiers to the neighbouring states. In this case, it explains the web tying Hezbollah a front for the cause of Shia Muslims created by Iran, and other Shia groups from Iraq with the Alawite Assad government against Sunni rebels.

The sectarian nature of the conflict cripples the Arab League's ability to offer collective security solutions since the League has succumbed to identity politics that perpetuates a stagnancy and rivalry amongst league members. The Arab League suspended Syria's membership and imposed economic sanctions on Damascus in November 2011 and subsequently called for Assad to step down calling for a strict UN Security Council resolution which was vetoed three times by Russia and China. Turkey has been hosting rebel groups and allegedly sponsoring regime change in Syria like Qatar and Saudi Arabia funneling arms to the Supreme Military Council. United States of America called for Assad to resign in 2011 and embarked on bombings of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Jabhad al-Nusra although it publicly denies sponsoring rebels in Syria pointing their lack of unity and terrorist contagion. Iran headed by predominantly Shiite government and Iraq are reportedly supporting the Assad regime with financial and military support to deter the effects of US, EU and Arab League sanctions. This clearly spells out the sectarian identity politics in the Syrian crisis.

It can be argued that the involvement of China and Russia in this crisis takes a sectarian axis and a pro-government stance widely seen as a pro-Alawite ploy enhancing the perpetual disenfranchisement of the Sunni majority. The EU and USA stances are aligned to the opposition; this brings to light the use of identity politics as well. These powers are seen by the ruling Alawites as collaborating with the Sunni to uproot the government. Syria, Iran and Iraq are fighting for the survival of Shia ethnicity and the blockage of western civilisation whilst Saudi Arabia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates and Turkey on the other hand fight against Shia dominance and seek to entrench their Sunni Muslim variant.

Another threat to Syrian territorial integrity is related to Kurdish nationalist claims from Syrian Kurdish minority. Kurds have a history of persecution and political, social and economic marginalization, due to the fact that it is the most cohesive non-Arab community threatening

the Baathist nationalist project. Thus one notices that the Syrian crisis is multifaceted. Due to identity political nature of this Kurdish endeavor, this has stirred Iraq Kurdistan to partake in fighting the Assad regime to protect Kurds therein.

Lebanon Conflict

Syria's on-going crisis mentioned afore has intensified the Sunni-Shia conflict in Lebanon on two levels, "...symbolic and identity-based on the one hand, and geopolitical or interest based, on the other hand...". The Lebanese Sunni and their allies hope the fall of Assad will free them and their Lebanon from Iranian-backed Shia hegemony, and permit justice to prevail after years of living under Shia violence. In Lebanon and the Persian Gulf, sectarianism according to Abdo "...has become so pronounced that Sunni clerics now warn of the "Shiitisation" of the Middle East and exploit the brutality committed by Assad's regime to spur calls for outright Sunni ascendancy." This enunciates that identity politics in the region surfaces from historical, ethnic, religious and political cleavages. The interests of the players are highly sectarian in nature.

The sectarian challenge to the Lebanese Sunni government is a Shia militant group Hezbollah, created in 1982 by Iran to spread Khomeini's Shiitisation of the Persian Gulf. Thus in Lebanon, where the Shi'ite comprise approximately 40 percent of the population, the prospects of democratic governance is unpalatable to the Sunni and democracy is viewed as part of a subversive Shi'a agenda. Although the main goal of the Arab uprisings was to move towards democratic governance, Lebanon experienced the rise in power of the Shi'a, led by Hezbollah after the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, allegedly by Hezbollah and Syria. Hence the Sunni-Shia cleavage has largely supplanted the historical divide between Muslims and Christians.

Also identity politics and renewed sectarianism in Lebanon was triggered by the 33-day Israel-Hezbollah war in 2006 which was seen by Lebanese as a triumph by a Shia militia. After this glory the government severed the communications of Hezbollah leading to its riot in Beirut in 2008 where it massacred many Sunnis creating a wall between the Shi'a and Sunni. The "Alawites of the region accuse the Sunni for providing passage for Syrian rebels fighting against Assad's government, whilst the Sunni suspect the Shi'a of smuggling arms into Damascus to help Assad's army." This identity politics is seen more clearly where Alawites of Jabal Mohsen support Syria's Alawite government and are allies of Hezbollah whilst the Sunnis of Bab al-Tabbaneh support the Syrian opposition. In this regard, it is beyond reasonable doubt that identity politics is at the core of explaining the interface of ethnic wars and clash of interests in the Middle East.

Iraq conflict

Since the US-Iraq war in 2003 Iraq has been in continuous conflicts between the Sunni majority and the Shia minority that got to power as the result of the overthrow of Saddam government. Telhami [11] states that most of the Arabs believe that the United States waged the Iraq in order to control oil, help Israel gain strength vis-à-vis its Arab foes and spreading democracy. It is argued the de-baathification of the Maliki's government, an attempt to purge Iraqi politics of those who had been active in Hussein's regime, largely targeting Sunnis. Maliki's political and military targeting of Iraqi Sunnis, however, fed Sunni perceptions that they are threatened and disenfranchised by the central government and this brewed identity politics.

Currently, the Sunni Arabs fear that they would be left out of government, in the same way that the government of Saddam Hussein had left out most Shi'a Arabs if the ruling order is changed. In the 2010

parliamentary elections, many Sunni candidates were disqualified from contesting in principle because of their links with former Baathist regime but in reality because they were Sunni [12]. This established a naked sectarianism in the Iraqi government which reveal that the former regimes' sectarianism cause the present identity politics. Reese states that the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) constantly conduct raids on Sunni Arabs which has prompted an increase in anti-government sentiment and attacks on the ISF, while attacks by Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and ISIS on Shi'a civilians rises day after night. Thus it can be stated that the conflict in Iraq is a result of identity politics; foreign powers join the conflict from an identity political framework

Egyptian conflict

The 2011 revolution that dethroned Hosni Mubarak was from a call by protesting civilians for the end of exclusionary politics and clamp down of the opposition parties by the Mubarak regime. After the invasion of Iraq and overthrow of its Sunni-dominated Baathist regime, many Shia are now convinced that the United States is behind the Sunni bid for regional power. This view has been strengthened in their eyes by Washington's engagement with the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt which is Sunni ethnic movement and its support for the Syrian uprising. The identity politics course has been the case in Egypt, where al Azhar, the seat of learning for Sunni Muslims, began asserting its independence from official religious interpretations under former President Hosni Mubarak and expectations that the Islamist government led by President Mohammad Morsi will aid its desire for greater independence. However, this has been barred together with the downfall of the Morsi government after the 2013 coup d'état. Reese argues that the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood was a Shiite ploy against the US and Sunni's support of the Syrian revolution. Thus it can be said that identity politics have a lion's share in these successive coups in Egypt.

Bahrain conflict

The uprising which began in 24 February 2011 under the Arab spring wave raised sentiments of democracy and liberty amongst the oppressed Shia majority. In Bahrain, the Shia ethnic group which constitutes about 70 percent of the population has been excluded from power for centuries, under a sectarian monarchy of the minority Sunni Al Khalifas, who first took control in the 1700s. The main Shia movement in Bahrain is the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB) which has been brutalized by the monarchy. Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa the king's uncle and has been in the post of the presidency for more than 40 years. This has united the Shia majority guided by the quest for majority rule as seen in Tunisia to fight the government. Reese locates the cause of the conflict in the "...lack of reconciliation between the Shia dominated opposition and the U.S.-backed Sunni government is radicalizing both sides." It is argued that the Shia in Bahrain at first tried to convince the world that they were not aligned with Iran but this seems ludicrous in the current conflict.

More radical Bahraini Shia depends on Iran or its proxies for military help. Reese 2013: 2 contends that "the Shi'a in Bahrain believe their uprising is for the benefit of all Shi'a in the region, particularly their long-oppressed brethren across the border in Saudi Arabia." This sectarianism merges with historical marginalization to typify the crisis as the interplay of identity politics. The fact that US sides with the government again reflects the clash of civilizations; the government is used to fight a US war against its historical adversary Iran that serves as an ally of China and Russia in the Middle East.

Israel-philistine conflict

The crisis is rooted in the May 14, 1948 following the declaration of independence of the state of Israel from British mandate of Palestine; five Arab states Lebanon, Egypt, Syria and Saudi Arabia waged a war against Israel. The feud was created by United Nations General Assembly's resolution 181 known as the partition Resolution that divided Great Britain's former Palestinian mandate into two Jewish and Arab states in May 1948. The Arabs refused such a resolution purporting to create a Jewish state in a Philistine territory which was unfair in their eyes whilst the Jews viewed the land concerned as their territory given to them by God as recorded in the bible (<http://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/arab-israeli-war>). Thus identity clash was mainly Arab-Jewish conflict which claimed religious and historical foundations. Main causes of clashes are the hallowed land by both sides, Jews especially religious Zionists value their Jerusalem temple and the land as their eternal inheritance whilst Arabs value the same temple for its religious significance as a place on which their prophet Mohammed ascended to heaven.

The 1967 Six-Day-War between the Arab states and Israel over West Bank did not solve the matrix (Telhami 2008: 8). Palestine Liberation Authority and Israel continue fighting. It is argued that the Zionist squatters in West Bank and Gaza plunder Palestinian property and possessions which has ignited the animosity. However, the clash of civilisations cannot be left without mention in this case; the Arab Muslim states unite against Jews, Judaism and Christianity as a religion. Israel is viewed by the Arab world as a Euro-American front for displaying the latter's superiority over Muslim religion which can be understood as the clash of western civilisation and Islam civilization.

Conclusion

The conflicts in the Middle East can only be better understood through the auspices of identity politics. The Sunni-Shia division is the main demarcation of the perpetual clashes although there are evidences of anti-west sentiments, quest for enfranchisement and quest for self-determination and majority rule. The Shia-Sunni Muslim division cuts across geographical boundaries; thus this plunges the whole region into a tug-off-war stalemate where all Sunnis in the region fight all Shias and vice-versa. These are the main factors that unite groups across the Middle East to formulate distinct socio-political identities that result in sectarian conflicts. Thus this paper suggest that if the Middle East quagmire is to be resolved, there is a dire need for reconciliation of conflicting ethnic groups through negotiated settlements arrived at by the population or parties to the conflicts not an imposed solution. Collective security initiatives must tackle these crises from this identity politics point of view to enable a lasting regional peace.

Recommendations

United nations and Arab league

This paper argues that since the UN and the Arab League as world and regional collective security mechanisms respectively seems locked down by the primacy of national interests of the veto wielding members of the Security Council (UNSC) at the expense of humans suffering in Syria; it is preferable that action must be taken by the UN General Assembly (UNGA) through the uniting for peace procedure. This will neutralize the dictates attempts to stall the decisive action through majority voting procedures. Further, peace building mechanism should be based on identity politics to come up with a popular peace agreement. This can be done through international military intervention in conflict torn states followed by multi-sector and all inclusive

negotiations to come up with national constitutions reflecting the demands of all identity groups. Then UN administered elections based on proportional representation will help in harmonizing internal and external sectarian interests. Lastly, government institutional reforms to reflect sectarian realities, multiculturalism and multipartyism might assist in converting intergroup conflicts into intergroup cooperation and cohesion. International convention must be put into place which defines genocide to avoid double standards and mass human slaughter. The need for a standing army for these organizations is manifest and now necessary to enhance effective conflict resolution.

Lessons for African union

Lessons for that can be drawn by the AU and other regional organizations include the need for stipulating a minimum number of human killings to warrant a genocide description that might enable humanitarian intervention. Sectarian conflicts need a solution that is based on identity politics in order to harmonise different interests and come up with the general will. Peace talks and negotiations must be inclusive of all interested actors from within the conflict zone and external actors to come up with a holistic compromise.

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