CALL FOR PAPERS

Conceptualizing Sectarianization
Perspectives on the Dynamics of Ethno-Religious Difference in Studying the Middle East and North Africa

A workshop in September 6-8, 2018 at University of Bern (Switzerland)

Demarcating a given community on the basis of its confessional identity or religious denomination has served as a key instrument in current international Middle Eastern politics. Furthermore, such demarcation of communities has informed the public debate about the Middle East and North Africa, the perception of Islam, its internal diversity as well as its dealing with non-Muslim minorities. Sectarianism, with the emphasis on (ethno-)religious identity has become the key concept to account for conflict, turmoil and war, and applied to so manifold a context as the political system of Lebanon, the war in Syria, and the growing international Sunna-Shi'a divide. In contrast to the political discourse, recent academic contributions have identified the origins of sectarianism with the modern and colonial period and underlined its various trajectories. Thus, critical scholarship has shifted attention from a general political and essentialist characterization of the Middle East toward studying specific processes of conflicts, formations of ethno-religious identities, and societal fragmentation, and more recently adopted the process-oriented notion of “sectarianization.”

While building upon this path, our workshop invites scholars to revisit the analytical validity of sectarianism which has remained to be taken as either a self-evident category to discuss the region of the Middle East and North Africa or an explanatory framework. Rather, we would like to address specifically what “sectarianization” actually means and discuss possible definitions to the term. To be more specific, our aim is to broadly discuss the interpretive value and analytical validity of “sectarianization” and related concepts such as confessionalization, religious difference, and religious conflict.
This is a call for scholars from the fields of Middle East history and politics, social anthropology as well as Oriental philologies that are critically engaged with concepts of religious difference in contemporary, modern, and also early modern terms to answer the question of how to define sectarianization according to the following set of questions:

1. **as a process**
   When and how did confessionality/sectarian difference emerge as a category of remarkable social relevance and how did the significance of confessional belonging change over time? When does mere confessional belonging translate into sectarianism? And how do sects or confessions change, how are they shaped by societal developments?

2. **as an analytical category**
   Apart from understanding sectarianism as politicized religion – how can we make sense of sectarianization on a level of analyzing social facts? How does sectarian difference relate to aspects of ethnic identity? How shall we differentiate between the language on the ground (e.g. discourses of ḥuṣn al-ṭāʾifiyya) and the researcher’s analytical categories? What are more adequate terms to describe the vast topic of religious difference and its political implications?

3. **from the perspective of historical hermeneutics**
   If considering confessionality / sectarianism as phenomena of modern historical developments, how shall we understand earlier multiconfessional societies in which sectarianism is absent? How do we then make sense of confessional communities and notions of confessional belonging / confessionalization in a pre-sectarian age or any other context not commonly associated with sectarian identities?

Researchers interested in applying are kindly invited to send a short abstract (200 words) before May 30, 2018 along with a short bio to Christian Wyler christian.wyler@islam.unibe.ch. There is some budget available for travel expenses, so please indicate in your submission if you need financial support.