Workshop

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

September 6-8, 2018 at the University of Bern
The workshop will be held in Unitobler, room F007, the keynote in room F022
Organizers: Christian Wyler and Johannes Stephan

Thu 9/6

17:45   Arrival

18:15   **Keynote**
         Fanar Haddad, National University of Singapore
         Demystifying 'Sectarian Identity.' A New Approach to the Study of Sectarian Relations

19:45   Dinner: *Restaurant Beaulieu*

Fri 9/7

09:15   Welcome Address

09:30   **Nader Hashemi**, University of Denver
         The Sectarianization Thesis: Toward a Critical Theory of Sectarian Conflict

         Danny Postel, Northwestern University, Chicago
         The Temporal Problem: Historicizing the Sectarianization Process

10:30   Break

11:00   **Marina Calculli**, Universiteit Leiden
         Violence in the 'Sectarian Political Camp': Explaining Hizbullah's Strength within the Lebanese State

         Gabriel Ojakovo, University of Alberta, Edmonton
         Understanding the Jihadiyya Self: A Study of Islamic Sectarian Nashīd *in the Discourse of Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria*

12:00   Wrap-up

12:30   Lunch: *Restaurant Warteck*

14:00   **Toby Matthiesen,** University of Oxford
         Ottomans and Safavids in the Age of Confessionalisation

         Brittney Giardina, Loyola University New Orleans
         Sectarianism's Ambiguity: Lebanon as a Case Study, 1860-1943

15:00	Break

15:30   **Mohammad Magout**, Universität Leipzig
The Articulation of Confessional Relations in the Early Arabic Press in Beirut

Christian Thuselt, Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg
"The Country as made out of Millets and Sects" – Sectarianists as Modernists in Lebanon

16:30   Break

17:00   **Mark Farha**, Doha Institute for Graduate Studies
The Sectarian Surge After the Arab Spring Internal and External Reasons

Harith Hasan, Central European University, Budapest
Sectarianization: Reflections with Reference to the Iraqi Case

18:00   Wrap-up

19:00   Dinner: Restaurant *tulsi*

Sat 9/8

09:00   **Christian Wyler**, Universität Bern
Sectarianization in Iraq after 2003 – Contextualizing Societal Transformation

Riham Khafagy, Zayed University, Dubai
Crystallization of Differences: A Stepping Stone for Sectarianization

10:00   Break

10:30   **Bassel Salloukh**, Lebanese American University, Beirut
The Limits of Sectarianism as an Explanatory Variable. A Methodological Exploration

Sarah Muwahidah, Emory University, Atlanta
Sectarianism in Indonesia: Orthodoxization, New Authorities and Geopolitics

11:30   Wrap-up

12:00   Closing discussion and lunch snack

13:30   Departure

Abstracts

Nader Hashemi

The Sectarianization Thesis: Toward a Critical Theory of Sectarian Conflict

In recent years, a narrative has taken root in Western policy and media circles that attributes the turmoil and violence engulfing the Middle East to supposedly ancient sectarian hatreds. "Sectarianism" has become a catch-all explanation for virtually all of the region's problems. This narrative can be found across the political spectrum — from right-wing voices with openly anti-Muslim agendas, to softer liberal-centrist articulations, and even certain commentators on the Left. In one form or another, this new sectarian essentialism, which is lazy, Orientalist, and ideologically convenient, has become a new conventional wisdom in the West.

In our book *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*, my co-editor Danny Postel and I (along with our fellow contributors) forcefully challenge this narrative and advance an alternative set of explanations for the rise in sectarian conflict in the Middle East in recent years. In this presentation I will outline what we call the sectarianization thesis, arguing that political sectarianism in the Arab-Islamic world is an active process shaped by political actors pursuing political goals via mobilization of popular sentiments around particular identity markers. To understand the drivers of sectarian conflict today, we must examine not theological doctrines or religious forces but rather authoritarian regimes, class dynamics, fragile states, and geopolitical rivalries.

Danny Postel

The Temporal Problem: Historicizing the Sectarianization Process

Among the myriad flaws in the "ancient hatreds" thesis is what Shadi Hamid has called the "temporal problem". "If," he notes, "there is something constant about a culture and its predisposition to violence, then how can we explain stark variations in civil conflict over short periods of time?" In this presentation, I will show that the sectarianization of Middle East politics is, contrary to the new Orientalist narrative, a recent phenomenon. I will demonstrate that the three turning points in the sectarian turn are 1979 (the regional aftershocks of the Iranian Revolution, led principally by Saudi Arabia), 2003 (the domestic and regional aftershocks of the US invasion and occupation of Iraq), and 2011 (the Arab uprisings and the attempts to roll them back — what Jean-Pierre Filiu calls the Arab counter-revolution).

Shifting gears, I will then raise a series of critical questions about the "sectarianization" thesis as Nader Hashemi and I have formulated it, including: Is our argument constructivist or instrumentalist (or both)? In emphasizing the primacy of the political and the centrality the state, do we relegate religion to the margins and risk denying religious agency? Are we arguing that sectarian thinking is a form of "false consciousness" whose adherents are merely brainwashed and manipulated into thinking in sectarian terms? If so, what is the "true" consciousness implied in this argument? Fanar Haddad has argued that for minority sects and oppressed/politically excluded majority sects, sectarian affiliation and solidarity can be liberating. Are we overlooking these positive aspects of sectarianism?

Marina Calculli
Violence in the 'Sectarian Political Camp': Explaining Hizbullah's Strength within the Lebanese State.

Since its inception, Hizbullah has faced increasing pressure from within and without Lebanon. Internal rivals, often backed by external powers, not least the US, have deployed various means to delegimise and dismantle Hizbullah. Yet, all these efforts have been in vain. Why has Hizbullah grown stronger despite this increasing pressure? Whereas traditional scholarship focuses mainly on the sophistication of Hizbullah as a military organization, this paper argues that it was instead a political strategy that explains its success. By drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's work on 'the State', this paper theorizes the State of Lebanon as a 'sectarian political camp', characterized by informal, yet well codified, rules. By abiding by these rules – the paper argues – Hizbullah has managed to reshape the behavior of key State institutions, thus turning the Lebanese State from its archenemy into its accomplice.

Oghenvwarho Gabriel Ojakovo
Understanding the Jihadiyya Self: A Study of Islamic Sectarian Nashīd in the Discourse of Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria

This study examines the use of Islamic *Nashīd* ("I pledge to Islam my Religion", "The Burning Hellfire, "My Ummah", and "Nashīd of the Defiant") songs in the propagation of Boko Haram sect ideology in Northern Nigeria and how it contributes to the discourse of Islamic *Jihadiyya* in Sub-Sahara Africa and the Middle East. In my research, I will investigate the context, history, and meaning of such songs and analyse the lyrics in the propagation of Boko Haram's sectarian ideology, and to deconstruct it. In so doing, why and how have these songs been used? Are these songs composed by Boko Haram to promote their sectarian ideology and to recruit young adult's fighters? This study is built on Pettan's (2010) music theory of "war-peace continuum" in his study to understand how these *Nashīd* are used in promoting war and to justify their radicalization in Nigeria. For this study, I will be adopting the Virtual and textual analysis methods. The virtual method will be used to source for Boko Haram videos that employs the use of *Nashīd* songs in promoting their ideology, and the textual analysis of lyrics will be employed to understand how these contribute to the promotion of Islamic sectarianism in northern Nigeria. This study will deepen the debate around religious sectarianism, violence and justice, as well as contribute to the field of ethnomusicology in African critical scholarship.

Toby Matthiesen
Ottomans and Safavids in the Age of Confessionalisation

With the consolidation of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of the Safavids in Iran, two neighbouring Muslim empires espoused competing interpretations of Islam, the Ottomans Sunnism and the Savafids Shiism, to secure their rule at home and abroad. From the 16th century until the 18th century, the region was thus characterised by the Ottoman-Safavid rivalry (and some aspects of the rivalry continued under the Safavids' successors the Qajars). Both ruling dynasties legitimised their rule with reference to religion, and tried to subvert the other in part by promoting their interpretation of Islam. It is at this point that Sunni-Shii debates reach a new dimension, associated with state power on both sides. The consolidation of these two empires rekindled the importance of sectarian identity in Islam and infused them with the key ingredient that would make later episodes of Sunni-Shii rivalry so explosive: Great power rivalry. This rivalry would profoundly shape Sunni-Shii relations ever after.

The competition of two empires and their self-understanding as Sunni and Shia powers made the lives of adherents of the other sect in the respective other's territory harder, as they were suspected of harboring sympathies for a "foreign power". This was particularly the case in the border regions between the two empires, such as in Kurdistan and Iraq. The two empires fought several devastating wars against each other, so that especially the border regions were characterised by a near constant state of war for much of the 16th century. The case of Ottoman-Safavid relations is thus an early case of confessionalisation with important lessons for the modern period.

Brittney Giardina
Sectarianism's Ambiguity: Lebanon as a Case Study, 1860-1943

There is a great deal of scholarly intrigue and ambiguity around the notion of "sect" and its derivative "sectarianism," particularly in Middle Eastern studies (Haddad, 2017). Can this notion be used in academic and political discourse despite ambiguity? If so, how? If not, what other conceptual frameworks are viable? Is analytical ambiguity a virtue or hindrance?

Ambiguity is a virtue because it can produce discourse; it becomes a hindrance when it affects perceptions of actual events. A conceptualization of sectarianism adherent to both the flexibility of ambiguity and actualities of history remains necessary.

By using the case of Lebanon and historicizing its formation as a political entity, I argue, similar to Makdisi (2010), that sectarianism is a byproduct of modernism, having its roots in the Ottoman Empire's interaction with the West. Yet, I further note that a combination of instrumental and primordial understandings could lead to an effective use of "sectarianism." Instrumentalism discusses sectarianism as a modern discourse; meanwhile,the essence of primordialism can allow for the recognition of historical contingency since it denotes existing peculiarities within groups defined as sects. This nuanced understanding not only adheres to ambiguity by drawing from a developed discourse, but also reduces its negative effects by being sensitive to historical events and complexities.

Lebanon's political history, stretching back to the formation of Mount Lebanon Mutasarrifate in 1861 and its later evolution under the mandate system to the 1943 National Pact's solidification of religious proportional representation that continued through civil wars to the more recent electoral transformations creates the perfect opportunity. This inherently interdisciplinary research requires the use of available French primary sources and existing literature to rethink the notion of sectarianism. The analytical consequences here are wide-ranging, paralleling the implications of sectarianism in the Middle East.

Mohammad Magout
The Articulation of Confessional Relations in the Early Arabic Press in Beirut

The private periodic press first became a significant medium of communication in the Arab world in the 1870's, which witnessed the launching of numerous periodicals by local intellectuals, literary societies, and foreign missions—most notably in the city of Beirut. In these periodicals, which reported local and foreign news, published literary and scientific articles, and provided commentaries on current issues, relations between different confessional groups as well as their relationship with the State were some of the most discussed topics. This was a time when the massacres of 1860 were still fresh in collective and personal memory, but also a time of relative optimism and positivist faith that reform, education, and revival of Arab literature would produce new forms of social solidarity that are more compatible with the "Spirit of the Age" and less prone to communal violence. My proposed contribution to the workshop would be an analysis of reports, editorials, and discussions in the Arabic press in Beirut that deal with confessional relations and their social and political relevance. It would cover periodicals such as *al-Jinān* and *al-Janna* (issued by Butrus and Salim al-Bustani)*, Lisān al-Ḥāl* (Khalil Sarkis)*, Thamarāt al-Funūn* (the Islamic *Jamʿiyyat al-Funūn*)*, al-Bashīr* (the Jesuits)*, and *al-Nashra al-ʾUsbūʿiyya* (American missionaries)*,* starting from 1870 through the early 1880's. The analysis would provide an overview of the main positions articulated on the pages of these periodicals and the events shaping them. Focus would not only be on *inter*-confessional, but also on *intra*-confessional relations, which, as I would argue, were no less important in the undergoing process of sectarianization.

Christian Thuselt
No "Country as made up of Millets and Sects" – Sectarianists as Modernists in Lebanon

On fieldwork in Lebanon, I had to learn that no one is sectarian. Someone else is, but never oneself. That truly is a strange kind of presence in a country filled to the brim with sectarianism, since everyone eventually reverts to a sectarian filter in one form or another, which shape their perspectives. In a stunning contrast to "sectarianism" as the obviously illegitimate if not pathologized version of one oneself, stood the idea of bringing about the "real state", the "real party", and the "individual" being a "real activist". This "realness" indicates a norm, a reference to a framework provided by modernity as "the great disembedding" (C. Taylor) and its hegemonic idea of the "articulated" demos (E. Voegelin). This modernity, I argue, is the one dominating element in Lebanese political discourse.

My proposal tries to bring together two strings: organizational meta-narratives and individual micro-narratives. First, I will try to show how three Christian parties narrated their coming-into-existence as a revolt for this "great disembedding". I will further indicate how much their members have reflected that as a normativity not only within the context of being non-sectarian but as being an individual at all: One was not only never "sectarian", but also never "subservient". Thus, I argue, sectarianism touches less the "sect" as such but the conflict between the normativity of modernity and the necessity to be embedded into "relational identities" (S. Joseph).

Mark Farha
The Sectarian Surge After the Arab Spring. Internal and External Reasons

In no small part, the blight of sectarianism and the crisis of the civil state in the Arab world can be attributed to two crises, one ideological, and another geopolitical. This paper seeks to identify the key domestic and extraneous factors which have spurred political sectarianism in Arab political discourse in the aftermath of the Arab Spring of 2011. On the one hand, ideologues have tended to (inaccurately if successfully) stigmatize secularism as a nefarious foreign concoction, while, on the other hand, Arab leftists have (conveniently) pinned the blame for the rise of sectarianism and the failure of secularism on colonialism and Western intervention in the region. A third group of prominent secular Arab intellectuals have eschewed such apologetics and instead engaged in an introspective self-critique without necessarily denying the deliberate exploitation or dissemblance of sectarian movements by Western powers. They argue that the continued paramount dominance of tribe and religion in defining Arab identity has rendered the region vulnerable to both self-immolation and external exploitation of competing communalisms. This paper makes the case that both the ideologically charged, defamatory distortion of secularism, and the Machiavellian strategy of foreign and Middle Eastern actor seeking to leverage communalism to further their own ends continue to stymie Arab secularism and "assist in its suicide".

Harith Hasan
Sectarianization: Reflections with Reference to the Iraqi Case

Post-2003 Iraq is a place where sectarian categories, e.g. "Sunnism" and "Shiism", have been intensely politicized and rather institutionalized. In the last decade, processes of boundary-demarcation and construction of collective subjectivities gave more salience to these categories, deploying them both as markers of political representation and of oppositional mobilization. However, the word "ṭāʾifiyya", widely translated as sectarianism, continues to be seen as derogatory. Political actors' behaviors were rarely framed as purely "sectarian", and were often accommodated by other seemingly more legitimate discourses, nationalist or Islamist. Not only the word 'sectarian' remained ambiguous, it often denoted different meanings when used in the Shi'a and Sunni settings. Distinct religious histories, changing relations of power and modalities of state-building have conditioned the term's applicability. Therefore, to develop a nuanced understanding of these meanings, we need to situate the discursive and political deployment of sectarianism in its particular historical context. As an analytical category, sectarianism is difficult to be de-coupled from the sociopolitical reality in which it is deployed or operated. Thus, in order to move beyond the context-bound definition and develop a vocabulary that addresses several Middle Eastern cases, it might be necessary to search for further abstraction by deploying alternative terminologies, such as ethno-religion.

Christian Wyler
Sectarianization in Iraq after 2003 – Contextualizing Societal Transformation

This paper examines the constitution of sectarianity in Iraq after 2003, focusing on Shia and Sunna. While Iraqi society is often described as primarily sectarian, I argue that there is indeed a renegotiation of the meaning and acceptance of sectarianism instead of its unconscious reproduction. "Sectarianization" here does not serve as an explanation, but as an approach for research. It needs to include the examination of both the increasing pervasion of Iraqi society with sectarian oriented concepts, and the transformation of Shia and Sunna themselves as social entities. Through a context-oriented approach based on the philosophy of Jacques Derrida, sectarian conflicts are not primarily integrated into a history of eternal Shia-Sunna divide, but understood as a product (and forming element) of their respective historical contexts. Sectarianization in Iraq after 2003 thus no longer appears as a classic characteristic of a Middle East separated from the rest of the world, but as part of our (global) present.

Riham Khafagy
Crystallization of Differences: A Stepping Stone for Sectarianization

Historically, the MENA communities were characterized by the religious and ethnic diversity. However, ethno-religious identities gradually emerged as a category of a remarkable social relevance and a catalyst of political conflicts.

I argue that this shift in classifying ethno-religious identities is mainly due to the "crystallization of differences". Suggested by Ahmed Beydoun, the concept of "crystalized sectarianism" refers to the establishment of social and political institutions to promote certain sects' interests and goals. Beydoun admits that the more crystallization is achieved the more sectarianism is shaped.

I expand this argument to investigate the process of developing perceptual and physical crystallization and examine its consequences on shaping the concept of sectarianization. Perceptual crystallization means that individuals' self-concepts are exclusively formed by ethno-religious belongings. In parallel, physical crystallization focuses on institutionalized mechanisms that helped these identities to present in their societies; mainly providing social and educational services, and political coalitions.

I use the "Social Origin" theory and historical school based on Neo-Institutionalism to study the bi-dimension process of crystallization. I believe that this process significantly enhances ethno-religious identity, and reflects/reproduces the current balance of power within these sects. It might even encourage a reinterpretation of religious doctrines from a sectarian approach.

Bassel Salloukh

The Limits of Sectarianism as an Explanatory Variable. A Methodological Exploration

Is *sectarianism* a useful independent variable to explain domestic and geopolitical contests in the post-popular uprisings Arab world? Can it explain the timing of this sectarian wave as well as diachronic variations in the intensity of sectarian mobilization? I take Lebanon as a case study to make a number of methodological arguments. 1) Sectarian identities are better considered as historical products of overlapping domestic and geopolitical material contests, and 2) their emergence as the main markers of political mobilization, and hence the shift from confessional to sectarian identities in postwar Lebanon, can only be explained through endogenous political economic and transnational variables rather than exogenous primordial ones. Moreover, once institutionalized into a political system, these sectarian identities are reproduced through an institutional, clientelist and discursive ensemble that makes them difficult but not impossible to undo. 3) Despite their institutionalization, however, a strictly sectarian argument fails to explain diachronic variations in the intensity of sectarian conflict and the receptivity of in-group members to elite sectarian discourses. I demonstrate these arguments using the examples of the shift from confessional to sectarian modes of political mobilization in postwar Lebanon, and the variability in the intensity of sectarian conflict and mobilization in post-Syria Lebanon.

Sarah Muwahidah

Sectarianism in Indonesia: Orthodoxization, New Authorities and Geopolitics

This study interrogates factors behind the rise of sectarian consciousness and tensions, as well as how the sectarian definition and identifications were articulated on the ground (vis-as-vis academic analytical categories) by using the recent development of anti-Shīʻi sectarianism in Indonesia as a case study. Based on fieldwork and library research (2014 - present) that examines religious practices of ordinary Muslims in Bandung, Jakarta and Yogyakarta, the study looks beyond the perceived doctrines, orthodoxies, and boundaries that are ordinarily understood to delineate Sunni and Shiʻi religiosity. The study shows that until recently, the dichotomy of Sunnism and Shiʻism was not popular in Indonesian parlance, nor did these identities divide Indonesian Muslim societies. The amplification of (Sunni) sectarian consciousness was closely related to the "orthodoxization" policy led by the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) and was aggravated by the populist Islamic movement, as well as by the geopolitical conflicts between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Propagandized news pertinent to Iraqi, Syrian, and Yemeni conflicts has shaped the Indonesian imagination of Shiʻis and Shiʻism more than their direct interaction (or lack thereof) with Indonesian Shīʻis. Nonetheless, the study also found cases of people who uphold permeable sectarian boundaries, by adhering to shared Sunni-Shi'i allegiances and belongings.