



# The Future of Sectarian Relations in the Middle East

Jeffrey Martini, Heather Williams, and William Young

Sectarianism—particularly the Sunni-Shi’a variant<sup>1</sup>—is a prominent feature of the Middle East landscape. From the civil wars raging in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, to regional competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia, to governing strategies in religiously mixed countries, sectarianism is shaping regional developments. Sectarianism, which is difficult to measure or separate from other factors with which it may be interacting, is also a focus area for the U.S. intelligence community, which is tasked with judging its salience and forecasting its evolution over time. This Perspective is designed to assist the intelligence community by presenting scenarios for the evolution of sectarianism in the Middle East over the coming decade.

We generated scenarios through structured analysis—including a facilitated discussion with subject-matter experts—that builds from assumptions and drivers that we deem important to how sectarianism develops. These assumptions and drivers informed our scenario generation, which is based on the criteria that each scenario is plausible and analytically distinct so that it can be

differentiated from alternative scenarios. For ease of consumption and to “show our work,” the outline of this publication follows the steps in our method, beginning with a review of the assumptions undergirding our study, proceeding to the drivers, and moving on to scenario generation. We conclude with identification of related topics fruitful for future research.

## Method

The scenarios presented in this Perspective are a product of several inputs. We, as the authors and study team, began with a structured brainstorm among ourselves, devoting separate sessions to the *assumptions* undergirding the scenarios, *drivers* of sectarianism, and how the assumptions and drivers could be expressed in *alternative futures*. After undertaking this internal exercise, we drafted those sections of the document to further clarify our initial thinking. Having done the exercise internally, we convened a workshop of eight external subject-matter experts in which we solicited feedback on our assumptions and drivers, and then moderated a discussion

on alternative futures without presenting our preliminary scenarios. The workshop generated additional assumptions and drivers that we incorporated into subsequent drafts and that led us to craft two new scenarios we had not envisioned prior to the workshop.

In moving from assumptions and drivers to scenario development, we chose not to employ the method of “quadrant crunching,” whereby the two most critical independent drivers are juxtaposed in a two-by-two. Although we are familiar with the approach and have employed it in previous analysis, quadrant crunching limits the scenario to only two drivers. We consider the future of sectarianism to be highly sensitive to multiple drivers, the presence of which introduces additional nuance into the drivers’ effects on sectarian relations. Rather than opt for quadrant crunching, we flag the operative drivers at the beginning of each scenario and describe in prose how they interact.

## Assumptions About the Future Evolution of Sectarianism in the Middle East

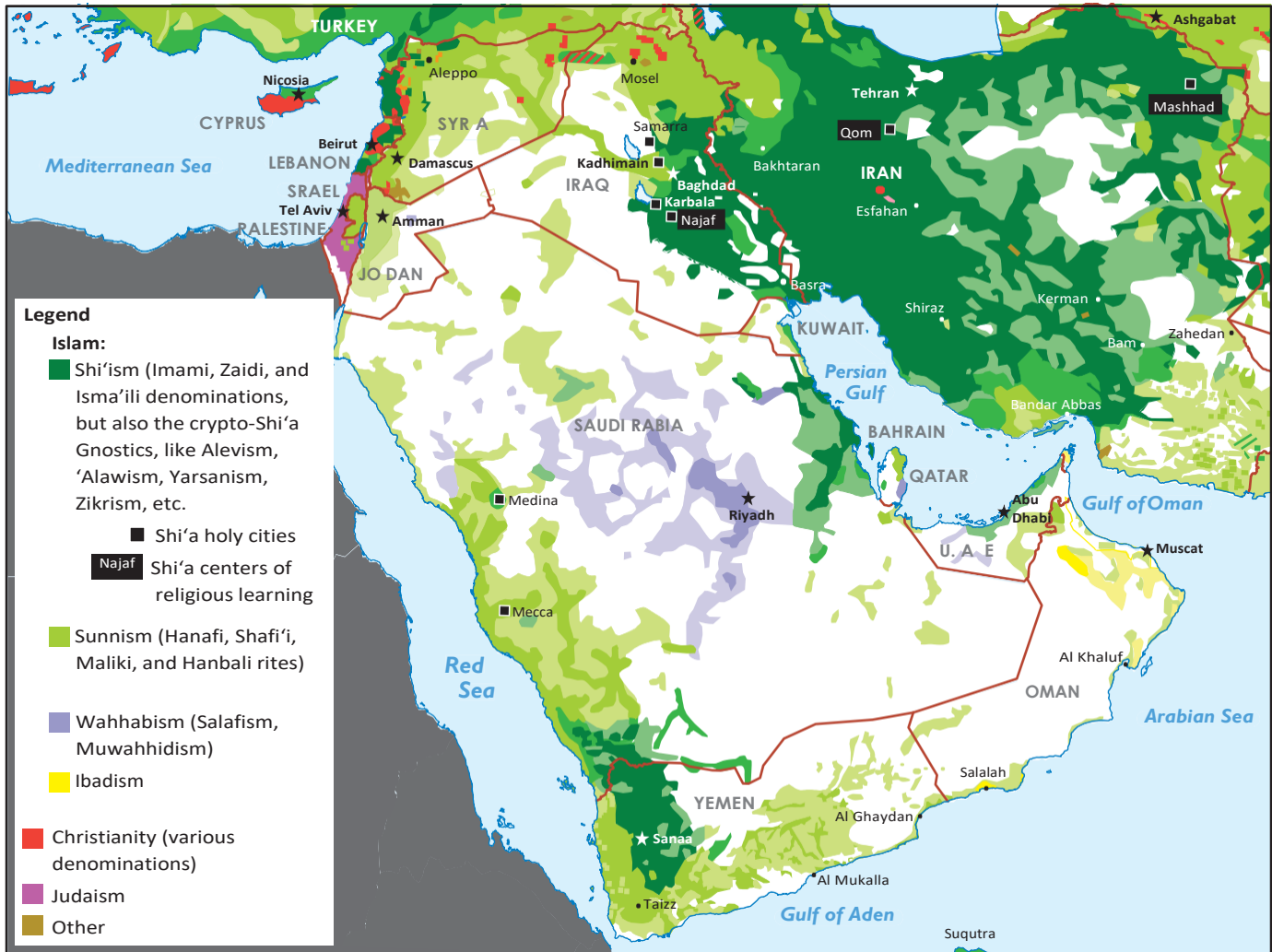
For the purpose of bounding our scenarios within realistic constraints, we begin by stating the assumptions that apply in all future scenarios we considered. Those assumptions are grouped into the categories of *demography*, *identity*, and the *political and economic context* of the Middle East and are summarized in Table 1.

Our assumption as it relates to demographics is that the global breakdown of Muslims will continue to reflect a predominance of Sunnis who will outnumber Shi’a on the order of 5:1. However, the split between Sunni and Shi’a along the sectarian fault line that encompasses the Arabian Peninsula, Iran, and the Levant, will be closer to 1:1.<sup>2</sup> We do not anticipate that the roughly even sectarian balance between Sunnis and Shi’a along this fault line will be altered or that the sectarian balance within specific countries on this fault line will “flip” during the ten-year timeframe of our scenarios. The figure shows the sectarian fault line that cuts through the heart of the Middle East.

**Table 1. Major Assumptions**

Demographics	Identity	Political and Economic Context
Globally, Sunnis will outnumber Shi’a on the order of 5:1	Middle Easterners will balance multiple identities whose salience changes over time and according to circumstance	The Middle East will be rife with conflict that sectarian entrepreneurs will seek to exploit
The Sunni-Shi’a balance along sectarian fault line, which encompasses the Arabian Peninsula, Iran, and the Levant, will be closer to 1:1	Sectarian entrepreneurs will try to mobilize communities around sect, competing with others who will seek to rally around different identities and interests	The Shi’a-Sunni fault line will be inhabited by weak states that lack broad legitimacy and the ability to control their territory
No country will see a shift in the majority sect	The quality of governance will be a major factor in the strength of nationalism as an identity	Saudi Arabia and Iran will remain the main state patrons of their respective sects
Refugee flows and internal displacement will affect the sectarian balance as much as differential birth rates among Sunni and Shi’a		

## Sunni-Shi'a Fault Line



SOURCE: Data drawn from Izady (2013).

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*Our basic assumption regarding identity in the Middle East is that the salience of different identities will continue to vary over time according to circumstance.*

There is some variation in birth rates among sects. In all countries except Lebanon, however, the majority sect has a numerical advantage that cannot be overturned under foreseeable conditions. In Lebanon, the Shi'a are believed to constitute a small plurality over Sunnis and Maronite Christians but no official census has been conducted in that country since 1932. Under normal conditions, we would project the presumed Shi'a plurality to consolidate over the coming decade because this community has historically had the highest birth rates among Lebanon's various confessions (Chamie, 1981; Lebanese Information Center, 2013). However, Lebanon's hosting of a large Syrian refugee population swamps any effect of differential birth rates; in the course of a few years, these migrants have come to make up an estimated quarter of the country's total population (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2016). There is no reliable breakdown of the refugees' sectarian identities but it is believed that the majority are Sunni, which would track with Syria's overall demographic balance and the disproportionate representation of this community in the opposition. It is possible this influx could lead to a plurality of Sunnis in Lebanon, although our analysis cannot determine the country's precise sectarian breakdown.

Our analysis is rooted in the empirical reality that Sunnis are predominant in the Muslim World writ large but enjoy only rough parity along a fault line that cuts through the heart of the Middle

East. That said, we acknowledge that in matters of identity, perception is often more important than reality. This means that while Sunni Arabs are a minority in Iraq, many belonging to that identity group genuinely believe they constitute the majority. Similarly, while Shi'a are roughly equal in number to Sunnis along the sectarian fault line, this sect is often mobilized via an underdog narrative in which they are the oppressed.

On demographics, it is also noteworthy that internal displacement — particularly in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen — is likely to have countervailing effects on sectarianism. On the one hand, the consolidation of communities in certain enclaves may lead to a decrease in sectarian tensions as communities become more physically separated. On the other hand, less cross-sectarian interaction may harden prejudices toward "out groups." And the transition period when families relocate can leave them particularly vulnerable to acts of sectarian violence.

Our basic assumption regarding identity in the Middle East is that the salience of different identities will continue to vary over time according to circumstance. It is not possible to say with any certainty that the Middle East in 2026 will be more or less sectarian — or alternately, more or less nationalist. Therefore, our scenarios encompass both these trajectories and others. What can be safely assumed is that Middle Easterners will continue to identify in multiple terms, including in relation to religion, ethnicity, nation-state, socioeconomic class, and gender. To be sure, "sectarian entrepreneurs" — i.e., those that rally communities around sect — will continue their efforts but will compete with others who will try to mobilize around different solidarities. The arena of Middle East identity politics will not just be the preserve of the Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawis of the region. Sectarian entrepreneurs will

compete with the likes of Egyptian President Abdelfattah al-Sisi, who rallies his constituency around a nationalist vision.<sup>3</sup> Still others will attempt to forge alliances that transcend sectarianism and nationalism, both of which are exclusive “isms” and potential drivers of conflict in different ways.

We also assume that the relative strength of sectarianism will be a function of underlying conditions and the choices of leaders and publics, not something predetermined by culture. For example, good governance and long national histories will predispose populations to prioritize national identities, whereas poor governance and artificial borders will make populations more vulnerable to competing identities, including sectarianism and tribalism. (These factors are discussed in the “drivers” section.) What this means for our assumptions is that the Middle East is not fated to suffer from sectarianism; rather, the level of sectarianism in the region will be a function of factors, some of which may be structural in nature, others of which will be determined by the choices of actors on the ground.

In terms of the region’s political and economic contexts, we assume several features will endure. The Middle East will continue to be rife with grievances and violent conflict that sectarian actors will attempt to exploit. There is the potential for conditions to improve – but given the scope of conflict in today’s Middle East, the typical duration of civil wars, and conditions that appear ripe for generating new conflicts, we assume that the Middle East will still have a high incidence of conflict in ten years’ time even if the absolute level is lower than it stands in 2016. We also assume that the states that inhabit the Sunni-Shi’a fault line will be weak states that lack legitimacy with significant portions of their population, just as they will lack the ability to control the entirety of their territory. It is possible that regional states could become more legitimate and more capable

in our time frame, but we do not see a plausible path for a transformation of regional governance or regional capability.

Finally, all of our scenarios assume that Saudi Arabia and Iran will remain the major state patrons of their respective sects. The behavior of these regional powers – which we treat in the “drivers” section – is subject to change; in our judgment, this will be a major determinant of the salience of sectarianism in the decade to come.

### Drivers

To examine the possible directions in which sectarian conflict in the region could evolve, we identified eight drivers of Sunni-Shi’a conflict in the Middle East. According to the Structured Analytic Techniques developed by the Sherman Kent School, drivers are a way to consider and prioritize among the multiple factors that determine plausible outcomes (U.S. Government, 2009). Our drivers are the factors we judge will have the greatest impact on the future trajectory of sectarian relations in the region. They encompass both societal conditions and the behavior of a variety of actors. The eight drivers can be grouped into three categories: those related to *publics and nonstate actors*, those related to *regional states and the regional environment*, and the strategies of *extraregional actors*. Each driver can increase or decrease the risk of sectarian conflict depending on the form it takes; the relationship between the driver and sectarian conflict is depicted in Table 2.

We identified three major drivers related to publics and non-state actors. The first of these drivers captures how publics self-identify, particularly the strength of sectarian identity in relation to alternative identities. At one end of the continuum, national identities are the main way that individuals self-identify in a given society. In such a situation, Iraqi Shi’a would feel a stronger

**Table 2. Drivers of Sectarian Conflict**

Reduced Risk of Sectarian Conflict	Driver	Increased Risk of Sectarian Conflict
Nonsectarian identities (e.g., nationalism, localism, class loyalties) are dominant	Self-identity	Sectarian identities are dominant
Religious leaders espouse tolerance of other sects and faiths	Character of religious discourse	Religious leaders promote an adversarial relationship between sects
Nonstate actors operate as bridge builders	Nonstate actors	Nonstate actors mobilize around sect
Regional states are working to reduce sectarianism	Regional states	Regional states push a sectarian agenda
States deliver good governance without discrimination among religious communities	Quality of governance	States fail to provide basic services or discriminate in their delivery of services based on sectarian affiliation
Economic growth relieves pressure and benefits are shared	Economic conditions	Economic pressure feeds division, and religious groups feel economically disenfranchised
Conflict resolution reduces violence in the region	Conflict trends	Conflict in one setting spills over and feeds conflict in other settings
Extraregional actors prioritize stability	Extraregional actors	Extraregional actors seek influence by playing on identity politics

connection to their fellow Iraqis – irrespective of sect, tribe, or class – than they would to Iranian or Lebanese Shi’a. At the other end of the continuum, sectarian identities are the dominant form of self-identity. Using the same example, Iraqi Shi’a would feel greater solidarity with their co-religionists from other countries than they would with Iraqi Sunnis. It is also possible that Iraqis identify in other terms, for example, based on connections to localities, tribal groups, or socioeconomic class.

The second major driver within the category is the character of religious discourse in a society. At one end of the continuum, *ulama* (religious leaders) espouse tolerance, and concepts of religious diversity are valued in society. Religious leaders may also actively mediate between sects or different faiths. At the other end of the continuum, religious leaders focus on what differentiates believers from nonbelievers, feeding a culture of intolerance. In this circumstance, religious leaders mobilize followers behind sectarian identities.

The third driver is nonstate actors (e.g., civil society groups, militias) that, like the previously mentioned *ulama*, can drive or mute sectarian conflict depending upon their behavior. Under the right circumstances, civil society groups can operate as bridge builders between sects. For example, civil society groups may organize demonstrations against the divisions sowed by sectarian acts, such as the bombing of a Shi’a mosque in a majority Sunni country. Conversely, nonstate actors can act as spoilers, disrupting governments and community initiatives to reduce sectarianism. For example, Shi’a militias – such as the Iraqi *al-hashdal-sha’bi* (popular mobilization) forces – may carry out reprisal killings against Sunni communities, perpetuating cycles of sectarian violence.

Another set of drivers is related to the behavior of regional states and the regional environment in which they operate. We identified four drivers within this category that we judge as most significant. The first, and most important, is the foreign policy orientation of regional powers. Saudi Arabia and Iran, the two

most consequential states along the Sunni-Shi'a fault line, can be drivers of sectarian conflict when they seek influence by mobilizing coreligionists in neighboring states. Conversely, these regional powers can be forces for stability when they respect the principle of noninterference in neighbors' affairs or when they pursue cooperation. The second driver in this category is quality of governance. At one end of the continuum are states effectively delivering services to their citizens, without discrimination based on sect or other identity markers. At the other end, states are unable or unwilling to provide security, justice, and basic services to all or parts of their citizenry. Poor governance can incentivize communities to retreat to other loyalties — including sect and tribe — to compensate for this condition, whereas good governance binds rulers to the ruled through a social contract.

The third driver in this set is the relationship between economic well-being and sectarian affiliation. When a sectarian minority, such as the Shi'a in Saudi Arabia, are also economically disadvantaged, disparities and competition over natural resources reinforce sectarian divides. High youth unemployment can also cause this cohort to be more vulnerable to sectarian recruitment. At the other end of the continuum, economic growth and improving economic circumstance reduce societal pressures that might otherwise promote sectarian violence.

Conflict trends, the fourth driver in this category, are the scope, intensity, and characteristics of regional conflict. At one extreme, regional conflict and violence harden sectarian identities and beget further violence. In this sense, conflict trends operate as a self-reinforcing phenomenon. On the other hand, conflict resolution in one country may create a precedent and positive momentum for conflict resolution elsewhere.

The last driver relates to extraregional actors — most notably, but not exclusively, the United States and Russia, which have influence and intervene in regional affairs. At one end of the continuum, extraregional actors are disengaged or actively working to reduce sectarian conflict. At the other end, they are engaged and either consciously pursuing or inadvertently contributing to sectarian conflict. An example of this driver operating in the direction of a reduced risk of sectarian conflict is the United States urging the Shi'a-led Iraqi government to pursue political reconciliation with the Sunni community. An example of the driver working in the opposite direction would be if Russia determined the only way to protect its interests in Syria would be to narrowly operate through the 'Alawi community as a vector of its influence.

Drivers can operate in several different ways. At times, drivers may work independently of one another or one driver may be strong enough to overwhelm the effects of the others. For example, the contagion of violence may be so strong that even when accompanied by drivers that reduce the risk of sectarian conflict, a country will still succumb to spillover from a neighboring state. At other times, drivers may interact with one another in ways that are mutually reinforcing. For instance, improved governance and strong economic performance could promote a greater sense of patriotism among a state's population, reinforcing national identity over sectarian identity. Finally, drivers may cancel each other out or create a muddle when one or more drivers point in the direction of less sectarian conflict while others point in the direction of more sectarian conflict. For example, the two most consequential extraregional powers, the United States and Russia, could prioritize regional stability at the same time that the two most consequential

regional powers, Iran and Saudi Arabia, are working to maximize their influence through destabilizing activities.

## Scenarios

The following are four alternative futures for sectarian relations in the Middle East over the next ten years. All scenarios reflect the assumptions and drivers discussed in the preceding sections. The scenarios are designed to be analytically distinct, in that the reader should be able to differentiate between the basic trajectories presented. Our structured discussion with subject-matter experts – including participation from intelligence community analysts – played a major role in crafting these scenarios. Several of these scenarios were outputs generated at a December 2016 workshop. Finally, the four scenarios presented are illustrative of different trajectories but not comprehensive, in that other scenarios beyond these four are possible. We have selected these scenarios because they represent a diverse mix of the drivers and present some original scenarios.

### Scenario 1: Rise of Localism

#### **Most Important Drivers: Self-Identity, Nonstate Actors, Quality of Governance**

In this scenario, the era of Islamism as one of the dominant identities within the Middle East wanes. Islamist governments throughout the region are underperforming and demonstrating increasing authoritarian tendencies. In its wake, a phenomenon we call localism emerges, in which communities demand an increased say in their affairs and delivery of key services.

Localism is a response to the failures of Islamist parties in particular. A new Turkish constitution has further strengthened the powers of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan despite his wan-

ing popularity and increasing opposition. Hamas, after months of failing to provide more than a few hours of power or water a day, loses control over the Gaza Strip to a technocratic group promising better service delivery. Public disillusionment with the transitions ushered in by the Arab Spring reaches an all-time high. Islamist parties are losing members and support throughout the region. These groups repeatedly fail to provide a framework for effective state governance, and more and more people blame them for empowering radical Islamic extremists.

To fill the void, “localism” emerges as a dominant driver of self-identity. It is broadly a reaction to the ascendance of religious orthodoxy and effacement of local variation witnessed in the Middle East in the previous decade. Tehran’s authority to build a coherent Shi’a camp erodes, with Shi’a minorities in other states seeing themselves as distinct and independent of Iranian leadership. In Sunni-majority areas, Sufism begins to make a modest comeback, evidencing an embrace of local variation in customs. A refocus on local issues degrades the importance of sectarianism in driving political agendas and mobilizing populations.

Regimes in Baghdad and Damascus push for centralized control and thus struggle with populations seeking greater local autonomy. In contrast, Tehran and Beirut delegate greater autonomy to local councils and provincial authorities, better balancing these domestic pressures. There is also renewed hope in the prospects for a productive dialogue between Israel and the Palestinians – with bottom-up peace initiatives emerging between adjacent communities of Israelis and Palestinians that seek practical agreement on water and other environmental issues.

In several notable instances, turnout in local elections eclipses that of national elections. And in favorability ratings, local bodies



enjoy greater popularity than national leaders. Beirut Madinati (“Beirut, My City”) spawns successor movements in other urban areas throughout the Arab world, challenging the influence of old-guard elites. Like their precursor, these movements are focused on practical public service delivery, further eroding the salience of ideology.

Localism does not always manifest itself in positive ways. At times, the previous “isms” (i.e., nationalism and Islamism) are replaced with equally exclusive identities – for example, leading to a renewed emphasis on tribe as a community’s organizing construct. However, localism clearly blunts the effect of sectarianism, diminishing the potential for sectarian entrepreneurs to mobilize along lines as broad as religious affiliation.

## **Scenario 2: A Consolidated Shi’a Camp amid Sunni Disarray**

### **Most Important Drivers: Self-Identity; Regional States;**

### **Extraregional Actors**

In this scenario, the Sunni and Shi’a camps move in opposite directions. On the one hand, a smaller and more united Shi’a camp rallies followers to continue what its leaders portray as a historic and overdue rebalancing of sectarian power in the Middle East. On the other hand, infighting and divergent interests within the Sunni camp limit its effectiveness, enabling Shi’a actors to chip away at its influence.

Despite long delays in realizing the economic benefits of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, a reelected Iranian President Hassan Rouhani begins to deliver on his economic promises and secures several large investment ventures by European companies. Increasing oil production and a growing technology sector start to grow government coffers, giving Tehran deeper pockets to support its allies and partners in the region. Hizballah, bolstered

by its performance in campaigns abroad, enjoys broad popularity at home, maintaining strong representation in Lebanon’s Parliament. Haider al-Abadi is backed by a strong majority owed to his successes in retaking northern Iraq from the Islamic State of Iraq and as-Sham (ISIS). His successes in combating political corruption, maintaining a power-sharing agreement with the Kurds, and rebuilding war-torn areas strengthen the central authority of Baghdad – albeit a government dominantly in the hands of Shi’a parties.

Several factors have also improved Iran-Iraq relations. The passing of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, without any equally revered spiritual leader taking his place, has diminished the religious challenge of Najaf to Qom. Grand Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, who was selected as Iranian Supreme Leader after the death of Ali Khamenei, has not altered Iranian national policies, but Shahroudi has leveraged his dual Iranian-Iraqi citizenship to build ties with Iraq, and he enjoys widespread popularity among Iraqi Shi’a.

The relative unity and good fortune of Shi’a actors stand in contrast to the disarray of the Sunni camp. Saudi Arabia ends its military operations in Yemen after disturbances inside the kingdom force a redeployment to quell the threat at home. Concern that Yemen is slipping into the orbit of Iranian influence weakens Gulf Cooperation Council cohesion, with subtle suggestions from the United Arab Emirates that Riyadh is to blame.

President Bashar al-Asad has retaken control over all of Syria’s major cities, small pockets of resistance notwithstanding. While Syria retains good relations with Russia and Iran, which it sees as instrumental to the regime’s defeat of ISIS and the rebels, shared victory in Syria has not brought a deepening of Russian and

Iranian ties. The removal of Syria as a continued sticking point in Saudi Arabia's relationship with Russia has enabled closer relations between Moscow and Riyadh. U.S. relations with Riyadh continue to be rocky, coming to a boil over Washington's attempts to monetize its alliance by demanding remuneration for its forward deployments. Meanwhile, the United States relationship with the United Arab Emirates and Qatar is growing, underpinned by deepening military ties.

The net effect is that Shi'a actors seek opportunities to expand their influence while Sunni actors are on defense. The dynamic is self-reinforcing, with Shi'a publics recognizing that their gains are made possible by their unity, increasing their commitment to this principle. Alternately, the retreat of the Sunni camp leads to further recriminations and leadership disputes, driving fissures further.

### **Scenario 3: Brinkmanship Brings Détente**

#### **Most Important Drivers: Character of Religious Discourse; Regional States; Extraregional Actors**

This scenario is characterized by an escalation of sectarian conflict that progresses right up to, before ultimately backing away from, a regional conflict that would pit Saudi Arabia and Iran in a direct military confrontation. The fear of ensuing consequences sets off an effort to contain flashpoints before they escalate to this level.

Saudi and Iranian investment in proxy conflict under the rubric of sectarianism has reached a new zenith. This competition is particularly evident in Syria and Yemen, as both sides continue to fuel conflict through their various partners. The United States has largely abandoned efforts to champion a resolution to the conflict, instead opting to allow the belligerents to exhaust each other. Having

secured its naval access in the Mediterranean via Tartous, Russia has pivoted to Europe, leaving the region's conflicts to the participants.

Tehran and Riyadh further raise the stakes by funding sectarian minorities in each country — Iran reestablishing Saudi Hizballah in the eastern province, and Saudi Arabia funding Sunni Baluch insurgents in Iran's southeastern region. These groups do not confine themselves to the border areas; instead, both groups successfully launch a series of terrorist attacks in their representative capitals. Saudi Arabia and Iran respond with aggressive force postures at air and sea in the Gulf. Amid this heightened tension, a Saudi Arabian fighter mistakenly sinks a large Iranian commercial ship and Iran responds by shooting down the aircraft. Rather than leading to escalation, this brief force-on-force encounter shocks both sides into an operational pause. This pause has extended into an uneasy détente, with Saudi Arabia and Iran looking to deescalate tensions rather than risk a direct extended conflict.

As each side looks for offramps to de-escalate, Riyadh and Tehran tighten the leash on those pushing sectarian agendas for fear they will set off events that the two regional powers cannot control. The royal court in Saudi Arabia begins quietly retiring *ulama* who inflame the street, while Iranian Basij forces are deployed to crack down on demonstrations against symbols of Saudi Arabia. The détente has yet to trickle down to the public, but both states are taking measures to enforce it.

This scenario suggests the possibility that an increase in state-directed sectarian conflict could actually lead regional actors to step back from the brink after being faced with the prospects of even greater instability. It is one of the more challenging for the design of policy interventions, since one interpretation is that things will get worse before they get better.

## Scenario 4: Ethnic Conflict and Displacement Drive Self-Segregation

### Most Important Drivers: Self-Identity; Nonstate Actors; Conflict Trends

In this scenario, active violence under the banner of sectarianism has abated only because ethnic conflict and displacement have driven a defacto segregation of the communities. Like Scenario 3, the net effect on sectarianism is to decrease tensions, but the process for getting there puts communities at physical risk and is based on separation, not acceptance.

Although an international campaign has eventually driven ISIS underground, the group waged a bloody, scorched-earth campaign on its way to defeat, with the aftermath revealing the effectiveness of the group's targeted purge against Shi'a minorities. These divisions are most evident in Iraq, where ethnic-driven killings and internal displacement have all but eliminated previously existing multisect communities. Mosul, for example, has become an almost entirely Sunni city. Shi'a militia groups responded with reprisals against Sunni populations, driving them out of central Iraq in what the United Nations has described as ethnic cleansing. The promise of a coalition government has all but died, with Kurds withdrawing into the autonomous region of Kurdistan that now includes Kirkuk, and Sunni leaders left to de facto govern the west.

Although the Saudi-led coalition eventually drove the Huthis from control of Sana'a, the newly established weak central government has not challenged Huthi control of the north, and Huthi forces continue to maintain control of the coastal city al-Hudaydah. With both sides finding it advantageous to maintain the fiction that the war is over, despite the lack of an official peace resolution, this de facto partition of Yemen seems unlikely to change in the near future.

In Syria, a peace process has resulted in recognized "zones of control" divided among the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the regime, and the opposition (Dobbins, Gordon, and Martini, 2017). After the zones are announced, a wave of internal displacement further consolidates Kurdish populations in the PYD zone of control; minorities including 'Alawis, Christians, and Druze in the regime zone of control; and Sunni Arabs in the opposition zone of control. Mixed towns and border areas where the zones abut are the sites of particular ethnosectarian bloodletting. Even in microstates too small to partition, Sunni and Shi'a self-segregate by neighborhood, with Manama and Kuwait City, particularly, divided between heavily Sunni and heavily Shi'a neighborhoods.

The impact on sectarian relations is cross-cutting. On the one hand, less interaction between sects decreases the daily incidence of conflict. On the other hand, the segregation of communities deepens prejudices, foreshadowing a brewing conflict that is slowly building toward release.

## Conclusion

The preceding review of assumptions, drivers, and scenarios can help inform analysts' assessments – including those of the U.S. intelligence community – of sectarian relations in the Middle East. The topline conclusions from this exercise are:

- Over a ten-year time horizon, there are multiple plausible futures for the trajectory of sectarianism in this region. It is not preordained that sectarianism will increase or decrease over the coming decade. This is because the intensity of sectarianism is dependent upon drivers that could point in either direction.

- Some of these drivers can be influenced by U.S. (and international partners') policy decisions. For example, the quality of governance, economic conditions, and addressing existing conflicts to prevent spillover are all ripe for policy interventions.
- On the other hand, such factors as the character of religious discourse in the Middle East and how local communities self-identify are much more difficult for state actors – particularly the U.S. government – to influence.
- Despite the dynamic nature of the region, there are several enduring factors the United States can count on in planning its strategy to mute the conflicts fueled by sectarianism in the region. We project that the roles of the regional heavyweights, Saudi Arabia and Iran, in influencing sectarian relations will endure over a ten-year time horizon.
- Sectarianism is only one factor in driving conflict throughout the region. We have isolated it as the topic of our research but that should not be taken to imply that it is the only – or even the most important – factor in generating regional conflict.

Finally, we would like to conclude by identifying some potential topics for future research that this project has identified as avenues for advancing our understanding of sectarianism in the Middle East. The first would be to design a composite variable capable of measuring the intensity of sectarianism in a place over time. At present, researchers default to an “I know it when I see it” approach to sectarianism, but there is no standard measure that can validate and provide greater granularity on the salience of sectari-

anism in a given society or that can demonstrate a trend of more or less sectarianism over time. But designing and tracking such a variable is eminently doable. A composite variable that combines (a) survey research on public sentiment, (b) tracking of sectarian discourse, and (c) tracking of sectarian actions would provide a much-needed basis for determining how much weight to afford sectarianism when designing policy interventions for a particular time and place.

The authors would also encourage rerunning the scenario-generation process using a different analytical technique – backcasting – to the alternative futures analysis presented here. We chose to rely on assumptions and drivers because we judged those as an objective way of forecasting futures. Backcasting, which starts with the end states in mind, has other advantages.<sup>4</sup> Namely, it helps illuminate policy interventions that need to be taken to reach a preferred outcome or avoid a worst-case outcome. And backcasting makes it easier to correlate those outcomes with indications and warnings since the indications and warnings naturally fall out from writing the story of how one gets to the end state.

The other research topic our study mentions but does not address head-on is the issue of the linkages between sectarianism and other drivers of conflict. In social science terms, we use sectarianism as our dependent variable, investigating what independent variables (i.e., drivers) feed or mute this phenomenon. However, one could begin with conflict as the dependent variable and investigate how sectarianism and a host of other independent variables interact to affect that phenomenon.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Sectarianism is a much broader concept than its Sunni-Shi'a manifestation. Other religious identities (e.g., Christian, Jewish) may also exhibit sectarianism and some academics use the term to apply to the politicization of any ascriptive group identity – meaning sectarianism can apply to nonreligious identities, such as ethnicity. This Perspective focuses on the politicization of Sunni and Shi'a identities only.

<sup>2</sup>Using data from the World Religion Database, we computed the ratio of Sunnis to Shi'a in the countries that sit on the sectarian fault line that encompasses the Arabian Peninsula, Iran, and the Levant. Combining the populations of those countries (i.e., Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, the United Arab Emirates, Yemen), Shi'a constitute 54 percent of the population; Sunnis constitute 46 percent. Considering the difficulty in obtaining reliable census information for these countries, we also computed this ratio

using an average of figures available from the Central Intelligence Agency's *World Factbook* (undated), the Congressional Research Service (Armanio, 2004), and the Pew Forum (2009, 2011), and came to the same result.

<sup>3</sup>In this case and throughout the Perspective, we use *nationalism* to describe loyalty to a particular country, not ethnic nationalism.

<sup>4</sup>Backcasting is a form of “what if” analysis and is presented in the Sherman Kent school primer under that heading (U.S. Government, 2009).

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## About the Authors

**Jeffrey Martini** is a senior Middle East researcher with the RAND Corporation and spent 2014 at the State Department's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations.

**Heather Williams** is a senior international/defense policy researcher with the RAND Corporation. She focuses on national security, Middle East regional issues, and intelligence policy and methodology.

**William Young** is an adjunct policy analyst with the RAND Corporation. He managed and led intelligence collection operations for the National Clandestine Service for over 30 years before he retired in December 2011.

## About This Perspective

This Perspective presents four potential scenarios for sectarian relations in the Middle East out to 2026. The work, which is brief and preliminary, is intended to be of benefit to trend watchers in the Middle East or those specifically interested in the topic of sectarianism. U.S. policymakers and the U.S. intelligence community are potential audiences for this analysis.

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