

The Third Annual Conference on Democratic Governance: Sectarianism and the Manufacturing of Minorities in the Greater Arab Mashreq

Dead Sea, Jordan, September 2014

The extreme sectarianization of the political realm currently underway in the region, particularly in the greater Levant and Egypt, demands that Arab social scientists reassess their conceptual and analytical tools to better investigate this phenomenon and provide a new methodological framework to bring an end to it. Over the course of the past several decades, the social sciences, especially in the Arab world, have lost much of their independent spirit, becoming mere addenda to the policies of so-called “decision makers”. Social science research has generally strengthened systems of monitoring and surveillance, thereby reinforcing Arab authoritarian systems of command and control. The process of social change underway in Arab societies today affords an opportunity to regain that lost independence and influence the process of social development.

In its founding ethos, the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies accords special importance to the critical dimension of the social sciences, stressing their need for independence from the plans of policy and decision-makers. In this connection it conceives of its Doha Institute for Graduate Studies in the Social Sciences as offering a foundational and scientific framework for such freedom, in which graduates may cross beyond the often self-imposed boundaries of specialization, underlining the importance of the social sciences and their independence. The social sciences must at times disassociate themselves from the “expert,” the market technician, and the planner, all of whom serve in the apparatus of an authoritarian state that calls for sociological expertise to be deployed in its service.

The ACRPS will be holding its third annual conference in September 2014. This year’s conference is entitled, “Democratic Governance: Sectarianism and the Manufacturing of Minorities in the Greater Arab Mashreq”. The Center’s previous conferences, in October 2012 and September 2013, focused on Islamic movements and issues of democratic rule, examining the concepts of nation, state, homeland, citizenship and integration. Arab academic and activist leaders of a variety of generations and persuasions participated in these events, especially the new and upcoming generation of Arab researchers that the Center holds in special regard. The Center has decided to dedicate this yearly conference to the issues of democracy and democratic transformation, in general, and the impediments thereto.

The continuing polarization and sectarianization in politics is extreme and unprecedented in modern Arab history, from the transformation from Ottoman rule to the state system, including the growth of independent nation states via the dismantling of old colonial rule throughout the period of independence until authoritarian regimes, and their convulsion in the most recent and on-going period of social changes, took over. These phases hint at the great Arab social transformations underway. The region’s sectarianization process is part and parcel of the confessionalization of the conflicts unfolding throughout the Arab world, which along with the employment of confessionalism and its traditional structures, has entailed the construction of new structures to further provide for it. The experiences of Iraq and Syria, for instance, represent a new complexity in that the process of confessionalization involves a conjunction of social and political violence with sectarian and identity-based violence. The

regimes' dependency upon, and their tacit alliances with, groups founded upon intense identity- or ideologically-based allegiances exacerbates this confessionalization, revives stereotypes, and reinforces the "us" versus "them" discourse.

Even more perilous is the observed ubiquitous use of affiliational sectarianization as ideological ammunition for mass mobilization and conscription. At the same time, there is evidence that a culture of sectarian hatred is spreading, replete with a litany of crimes and accompanying images that not only provide justification and legitimization for further sectarian hatred, but implicate those involved in a horrific process that replaces true social consciousness aspiring for democracy, development, justice, and citizenship with a fraudulent confessional identity engulfed in the conflict between "us" and "them".

The process of confessional and sectarian polarization recalls the construction of minorities seen in the practice and policies of previous Western colonial powers, and enables one to speak of an "industry" of confessionalism. It even allows for some sects to claim nationhood for themselves, and to describe the nature of their struggle with other groups as being essentially a struggle for national rights. Furthermore, discourse regarding the reconstruction of states, and the transitioning of some nation-states to composite federalist states with relevant regional affiliations theoretically, thrives in the light of the federal model. Though it does not outright deny the importance of the unity of the state, it remains a discourse that draws upon the concepts of sectarianism and the notion of the confessional or communal independence. It does not encourage complementarity and integration, but differentiation and dissonance, and, as a result, the creation of new systems of social, confessional, tribal, and regional allotments and quotas—so called consensual democracy. With regard to the greater Arab Levant, the impact of such developments, if they continue unabated without any social or political resistance, they will eventually lead to a reconstitution of the region in the foreseeable future, from Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon to the Eastern Arabian Peninsula.

The commonly-deployed instruments of societal analysis that are based upon mosaic-inspired conceptualizations of societies, along with very rudimentary and often over-simplified classifications of the ranges of personalized horizontal and vertical relationships of individuals, have become "traditionalized" and almost doctrinaire. These relationships and horizontal links have developed, and are discernable, most prominently in the very same societies in which armed and polarized confessionalism has emerged most significantly. This situation has ultimately led to the fragmentation and eventual disintegration of the alleged mosaic structure. These societal aspects are a testament to the rapid evolution that took place as a result of the great modernizing efforts undertaken by the concerned countries in a preceding epoch, or perhaps they are the results of the intensive intervention of their states into social and economic life. How have the traces of this process surfaced in the course of re-framing our understanding of the issue of sectarianism and the manufacture of minorities in the context of today's new circumstances? What are the main characteristics of developments in this new "industry," and what are its natural features? What are its key functions, concepts, and tools? What relationships exist between these all of elements and the lived situation in all its reality?

In order to focus research efforts upon the issue of sectarianism and the construction of minorities, the ACRPS has opted to limit the scope of the research to the greater Arab Levant, namely Egypt, Iraq, Greater Syria, and the Arabian peninsula—countries that have witnessed, to varying degrees, the fragmentation of their societies and societal rupture. The term *mashreq* (Greater Levant) in this conference is used as a general reference point; the ACRPS does not adopt or support either *mashreqi* or *maghrebi* trends or tendencies, and the recent turmoil in other areas within the wider Arab region will be discussed in forthcoming conferences.

The conference committee, therefore, invites all Arab research scholars to submit academic papers investigating the following themes:

1. The Levantine social structure between the mosaic and socio-variant perspectives
2. The origins of sectarianism in history and confessional structure
3. The Arab Renaissance's (Nahda) position on confessionalism: Boutros al-Bustani, Francis Marrash and other nationalist "schools"
4. Tyranny, oppression, and confessionalism in the Arab Levant
5. Colonialism and the production of sectarianism
6. Confessionalism and the concept of the confessional regime
7. Sect, sectarianism, and the production of sectarianism: development and current characteristics
8. Political confessionalism, consensual democracy, and the discourse of institutionalized sectarianism
9. Sectarianism and the politics of identity and confessional polarization: discourse, instruments, functions, relationships, actors, lobbyists, images and stereotypes, and the reproduction of its structures in new confessional and gang warrior imagery
10. Confessional, social, and political violence
11. Revolutions and sectarianism: Egypt and Syria
12. The Coptic question in Egypt: How does one study and confront the rejection of the Arab East of its historic Christian population?
13. The Lebanese discourse of coexistence and the sanctification of quotas on confessional lines versus citizenship
14. Social and political history of the sectarian question in the Arab Levant: Sunni-Shiite relations during the Islamic wars (Ottoman-Sufi) in comparison to Europe's religious wars; its re-emergence today in the guise of Sufism as a populist ethno-confessional descriptor, revived in a new context
15. Islamic political movements and the challenge in understanding them, as well as their association with confessions, sects, and cults
16. Nationalist and leftist movements and the issue of confessionalism and minority rights: positions and discourses
17. The expedient use of judicial tools to legitimate the discourse of confessionalism
18. The Millet system and confessionalism: was confessionalism an offshoot of the millet system or was the millet system being exploited in order to create confessionalism?
19. The confessionalization of regional conflicts: the "Shiite Crescent"

20. The confessional politics of some regional nation states to protect their “strategic depth” or “vital extension”
21. Studies devoted to regions or towns in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq
22. Studies devoted to contemporary confessional hate crimes
23. The Alawite and the Shiite in the Arab Levant
24. The complicity of the educated elite in sectarianism
25. From a discourse of confessionalism to one of citizenship

All submissions should adhere to the ACRPS’s submission guidelines. To review these, [click here](#).