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Sectarianism

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All doctrines justifying the disparaging of other sets of religious doctrines within a broader religious tradition, promoting division within one religion, sometimes to justify criminal violence or open political conflict. Sectarianism in the Middle East and North Africa most frequently refers to conflict between Sunnis and Shi'as but can include militant Salafis' killing of other Muslims belonging to any other form of doctrine. Throughout the centuries of Islamic history, Muslims following different doctrinal forms have lived together peacefully in many places for protracted periods. However, competing leaders sometimes appeal to differences in religious doctrine to justify their battles in pursuit of power. For example, Shah Ismail I, the first Safavid ruler, forced his Azerbaijani Turkish army to convert to Jafari (Twelver) Shi'a doctrine, to use the difference in his battles against the Sunni Ottoman Turks. He then promoted Shi'a doctrine throughout Iran.

The Iranian Revolution gave great power to sectarian competition. The Ayatollah Khomeini threatened his neighbors and sought to export his revolution in the name of Shi'a Islam. Khomeini sought credibility as an Islamic leader. Iran supports not only the Shi'a Hezbollah movement of Lebanon but also the Sunni group Hamas in Gaza, as well as the Christian Armenians against the Shi'a Azerbaijanis. This shows that sectarianism alone cannot explain Iranian policy. Although in purely religious terms, Shi'as despise the Alawites of Syria as following a corrupt religion, for political reasons—the value of the alliance with Syria—Iran disregards this antipathy.

On the Sunni side, Salafi doctrine justifies antagonism to Shi'as and Sufis. The extent to which individual preachers or states use this antagonism to motivate violence varies according to political conditions. While at some times in their history the Ba'athists in Syria and Iraq promoted official impartiality between Sunnis and Shi'as, when insecurity rose, both states deliberately exploited sectarian loyalties. On January 13, 1991, Iraq added "*Allahu Akbar*" (God is greatest) to the flag and in 1993 launched a "faith campaign" to get international Sunni support for lifting sanctions. At the beginning of the civil war in Syria, the government released Sunni Salafi militants, knowing they would stir up sectarian strife. Bashar al-Assad believed this would solidify his political base of support, because the alternative to his government would be extinction.

In contrast to these examples of instrumental exploitation of sectarian loyalties, the king of Jordan, Abdullah II bin Al-Hussein, organized a conference of leading scholars from 50 countries to defend the consensus Islamic position of the unity of Muslims in different schools of legal interpretation and practice. They created the Amman Message to signify their rejection of sectarianism as well as the extremism of militants.

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See also: Hezbollah; Iran, Islamic Republic of; Islamism; Khomeini, Ayatollah Sayyid Ruhollah Mūsavi; Salafism; Saudi Arabia, Kingdom of; Saudi Sahwa (Islamic Awakening); Shi'a; Syrian Arab Republic; Primary Document: *The Amman Message*

Further Reading

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