The Sectarian volcano in both Syria and Yemen conflicts

البركان الطائفي في كل من النزاع السوري والنزاع اليمني

(*)Hocine Laarid

Abstract::

     This study discusses sectarianism as a determinant factor contributing significantly to the escalation of violence in both the Syrian conflict and the Yemeni conflict through the regional polarization of states and actors who have a large presence in the Middle East. Which are also driven by sectarian and historical ideological motives towards regional issues such as Iran and Saudi-Arabia (So is Israel). That has negatively affected the region and the continuation of the Syrian conflict as part of a devastating proxy war. Through the external lens and regional interventions driven by sectarian policies, we will try to answer the main question, which is; why sectarianism still fuels both the Yemeni conflict and the Syrian conflict? We start with the assumption that the sectarian card has become the most effective tool in the hands of regional powers in the Middle East to justify their interventions in the Middle East issues.

key words: Sectarianism; Yemen; Syria; Saudi Arabia; Iran

ملخص:

    تناقش هذه الدراسة الطائفية كعامل حاسم يساهم بشكل كبير في تصعيد العنف في كل من الصراع السوري والصراع اليمني من خلال الاستقطاب الإقليمي للدول والجهات الفاعلة التي لها وجود كبير في الشرق الأوسط. وهي أيضًا مدفوعة بدوافع أيديولوجية طائفية وتاريخية تجاه قضايا إقليمية مثل إيران والسعودية. (وكذلك إسرائيل). وقد أثر ذلك سلبًا على المنطقة واستمرار الصراع السوري كجزء من حرب مدمرة بالوكالة.

    من خلال العدسة الخارجية والتدخلات الإقليمية التي تحركها السياسات الطائفية ، سنحاول الإجابة على السؤال الرئيسي وهو: لماذا لا تزال الطائفية تغذي الصراع اليمني والصراع السوري؟ نبدأ بافتراض أن الورقة الطائفية أصبحت الأداة الأكثر فاعلية في أيدي القوى الإقليمية في الشرق الأوسط لتبرير تدخلاتها في قضايا الشرق الأوسط.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الطائفية؛ اليمن؛ سوريا؛ المملكة العربية السعودية؛ ايران.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Middle East is the epicenter of tensions of the world, a chronically prone to wars and more protracted conflicts in the world. It appears to be the region where chaos and insecurity remain. The realist school of international politics considers them the main feature of most state systems, where the realist model retains the most importance.

Many observers believe that the state system in the Middle East since the Arab uprisings has stood at a dangerous juncture, and showing contradictory patterns of fragility and durability.

The uprisings that began in late 2010 were undoubtedly revolutionary in their initial impact, but outside Tunisia, it is the Counter-Revolutionary Movement that has proven most enduring. Despite the changes that have occurred in the environment of the East, which is primarily represented in the Arab uprisings, the most influential countries in the region and the problem of the balance of power are still Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, and Israel, with a slight decline in the Egyptian role due to the internal political problems they are suffering and as a hangover from the Egyptian uprising.

The demise of the Mubarak regime, and the military coup against President Mohamed Morsi. The geopolitical situation in the Middle East and the regional balance of power collapsed with the US occupation of Iraq in 2003. Likewise, the Arab uprisings not only destroyed real politics, the geopolitical situation, and the Middle Eastern balance of power, but also turned the region upside down in terms of social and cultural aspects, and economic ones. Therefore, the process of restructuring the Middle East began. And trying to map the region by regional and even international powers, to achieve their various interests and improve their positions. Among the most important regional changes that have occurred in the region since 2011:

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- Religious and sectarian differences, which are instigated and exploited by the countries of the region, and often have violent repercussions, will remain among the main characteristics of the scene.

- The danger of the political and religious dimensions of the competition between Saudi Arabia (Sunni) and Iran (Shiite), has moved into a full-fledged religious civil war, outside the control of states.

1.2. The significance of the study:

The importance of this study stems from the escalation of sectarianism in the Middle East in both Yemen and Syria, which led to large-scale civil wars that transcended the internal dimension to external and regional polarizations that were manifested in a new cold war involving Saudi Arabia and Iran, and what was reflected in the conflicts in Yemen and Syria.

1.3.The aims of the study:

In this study, we aim to shed light on the reality of the ongoing local and regional conflict in Yemen and Syria. Also, it reveals the real goals of the regional states participating in this conflict, whether directly or indirectly. Such as Saudi Arabia and Iran and their cold war against each other in these two countries (Syria and Yemen).

1.4. The problem of the study:

Through this introduction, the problem of our study starts by asking the following main question: To what extent does the sectarian dimension affect the policies of Iran and Saudi Arabia on the conflict in Yemen and the conflict in Syria?

1.5. The hypothesis of the study:

To answer this question, we have adopted the following hypothesis: Sectarianism is a theoretical framework for understanding the tensions and conflicts in the Middle East region, especially in Syria and Yemen.

2. Historical background of Syria:

Syria has become a center of regional conflicts and competition in the Middle East. The regional balance of power politics, ideologies,

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clashes, and unequal national aspirations have merged, leading to the transformation of what began as a peaceful uprising of dignity and democracy in an ethnic and sectarian conflict that is increasingly difficult to contain - within the borders of the Syrian State that were developing with only modest subsequent changes, in the Sykes-Picot Agreement of May 1916.

As Antonio Gutierrez, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, warned in late April 2013, "The conflict in Syria may for the first time put geopolitics (created by the Sykes-Picot Treaty) into question".[1]

At the end of the Cold War, Samuel Huntington eloquently proposed a treatise. He said: "The primary source of conflict in this world will not be primarily the ideological or economical side. Rather, the great division between people and the dominant source of conflict will be the cultural side".[2]

The ethnic model continues to grow either in conceptual focus on Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds in Iraq, Muslims and Christians in Lebanon, Muslims and Copts in Egypt, Berbers and Arabs in North Africa, Kurds, and Turks in Turkey, Sunnis, and Shiites in Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf, or Persians, Kurds, Azerbaijanis, Arab ethnicities, and a variety of other minorities in Iran.[3]

3. What is sectarianism?

The definition of sectarianism used in this study is wide, not only indicative of religious communities but also ethnic and tribal groups. In this sense," Sect" removes the description of any social groups whose members share a common identity and can create a strong solidarity bond.[4] The sect becomes a political player when its leaders decide to compete for power at the state level, using Sectarian Solidarity to seize power. Indeed, in the middle Ages, Ibn Khaldun defined that any such group as a fanatic group and it is a solidarity group created with the clear aim of seizing political power.[5]

Sectarianism has become a devastating feature of the modern Middle East. Whether it is driving by the ruling elites to maintain their

systems, or by regional powers to build their influence, or by religious leaders who are unwilling to accept the legitimacy of other religions, sectarianism is likely to remain a part of the scene in the Middle East for the coming years. The role played by Gulf actors in Syria also contributes to the rise of sectarianism in both Syria and the region.[6]

1-The geographical aspect: The borders were somewhat critical in determining whether certain societies had become more vulnerable to sectarian actors, which often arose from outside the state. In Syria, for example, the ability of sectarian elements to cross from Turkey was a major driver behind the levels of sectarian violence in Idlib. In Iraq, the ability to prevent sectarian militias from actually entering some neighborhoods helps explain the different levels of sectarian violence in societies.[7]

2- The ruling elites can impede or reinforce sectarianism:

Political elites with patronage systems, especially from external sources, are considered to promote or hinder inter-communal cooperation. However, when this elite loses legitimacy and cannot reach its constituencies, as was the case in Lebanon, opportunities can emerge for alternative leaders and movements with non-sectarian agendas.

3-Civil society development is crucial: non-sectarian movements need to open the political sphere, at least at the local level, so that movements can form around issues that go beyond sectarian identities, such as economic development, educational reform, women's empowerment, and environmental challenges. In the case of the "Beirut My City movement," the waste collection crisis has created a focal point for the popular organization and political mobilization across sectarian lines.[8]

4-Interaction between sects can be a sectarian buffer, with increased levels of trust and social contact between community members across sectarian lines, social capital also increases, which can better help societies resist the slide into sectarianism when conflict breaks out. Conversely, when societies are built to isolate citizens on sectarian

lines and create economic disparities, as happened in Hamed Town in Bahrain, the potential for sectarian division and conflict increases.[9]

5-Less obvious social and economic gaps improve the ability of society to resist sectarianism. The example of " Issa Town from Bahrain" shows that with the narrowing of social and economic gaps between the Shi'a and Sunni populations, there is less likelihood of grievances and sectarian violence.[10] But in neighborhoods where economic injustices and discrimination are greater, societies are vulnerable to sectarian violence.[11]

4. Saudi Arabia and Iran sectarian Rivalry in Syria:

Saudi Arabia intervened in the Syrian conflict under the radar, but it reinforced the sectarian nature of the Syrian conflict, and the Saudi and Arab goal is to interfere in the conflict and prevent Syria from moving more toward the Shiites, and more importantly, it is to prevent Syria from becoming a puppet in Iran's hands. The Sunni regime in Saudi Arabia and the Shiite Islamic regime in Iran were against each other, and it is now a struggle partly focused on Syrian opposition leaders and forces loyal to the regime. Anti-Shi'a is a great incentive for Saudi Arabia to intervene in this conflict.

The role of Saudi Arabia included seizing parts of the Sunni refugees and arming the Syrian opposition forces.[12]

In his article, Thomas Pierret says:" The pro-opposition government actors in the conflict have sometimes followed a sectarian pattern, but they have never been part of a comprehensive sectarian strategy".[13]

Pierret may be right by saying that the pro-opposition and opposition players are trying to influence sectarian relations. An example of influencing sectarian relations can be seen in the opposition forces that Saudi Arabia has chosen to support, especially those with a Sunni background, by providing them with various means to fight the regime. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia have a very deliberate strategy in the conflict, which is to build a counter-power toward each other's religious influence in Syria. And increase the Shiite Sunni

polarization, this polarization is not just a side-effect.[14] The polarization between these two religious groups is a deliberate goal and one of the reasons why Iran and Saudi Arabia intervened in the Syrian conflict.

The sectarian war in Syria was pivotal in providing a convincing narration for both Sunnis and Shiites to revisit the basic questions within the world of Islam: Who is a Muslim? Who will decide? Although these are ancient questions of faith, dating back to its early days, the violence that has arisen since the Arab uprisings on these particular issues threatens to redraw the map of the Middle East and create instability for the coming years.[15]

5. Yemen Historical Background:

Yemen was not immune to the uprisings that affected the Middle East and North Africa. It is a country of great importance due to its geographical location and its supervision of the Bab al-Mandab Strait.[16]

During the sixties of the twentieth century, Yemen became an open field for individuals, organizations, and countries that roam its agendas in this remote region in southern Arabia, paving the way and laying the foundation for subsequent decades of Arab and Yemeni history.

Yemen, which is located in the southern corner of the Arabian Peninsula, did not exist as a distinctive southern Arab country before the twentieth century. "The natural condition of Yemen throughout history has been chaos.[17] People and their country have been a regional entity in the Arab world, but it has never been a united nation," said Ingrams Harold, a British diplomat in the Yemeni coastal cities of Aden.

The country's geographical location at the crossroads of ancient spice and modern Red Sea routes ensures that Yemen has always descended amid distant regional and global conflicts. Since the Roman era, when Yemen was referred to as Arabia Felix[18] , the region has been invaded, occupied and, subjugated to at least a dozen foreign powers.[19]

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6. Yemen Uprisings:

On November 23, 2011, Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh signed an agreement that was settled by the Gulf Cooperation Council that put an end to his decades-old rule and the months of political deadlock in Yemen.

Saleh increased the fire of his tense relations with the opposition by trying to change the constitution so that he could run for a third unconstitutional term in the 2013 presidential elections. Although he had been in power for thirty-three years, this move confirmed the widespread suspicion that he intended to remain as president until his eldest son reached the constitutional age to succeed him.[20]

The apparent success of the Tunisian and Egyptian peoples in overthrowing its two presidents gave a powerful boost to the demonstrations it immediately increased and turned into a live broadcast on the road at the main entrance to the University of Sana'a, called Change Square to demand the departure of Abdullah Saleh and his removal from power.[21] Even the tragic events of the " Friday of Dignity " massacre of March 18, 2011, when dozens of men in civilian clothes armed with military assault rifles opened for three hours, gunmen killed at least 45 protesters and wounded 200 people, while State Security forces made no effort Serious to stop the massacre.

This massacre by Saleh's forces angered the population in general and had a major impact on the nature of the movement. The matter did not stop there but led to greater splits from Saleh's party (ministers, parliament members, ambassadors, etc.) which seriously weakened his regime, but also led to a split in the army.[22]

After rejecting several compromise proposals from the opposition and the Gulf Cooperation Council countries in previous months, Saleh finally agreed to transfer the presidential authority to his deputy, Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi, at a ceremony in Riyadh

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attended by Saudi King Abdullah. Saleh officially resigned in February 2012, and Yemen began the dreadful transition process.

In the twentieth century, Yemenis and close observers alike considered that President Saleh's regime was in its last stages, many wondering what it would bring in the end. The descent into civil war was expected. A series of wars in the far north against Houthis rebels, and increased military confrontations with separatists Southerners, many local military conflicts, increased tension between the official opposition and the regime, worsening poverty, the water crisis, the water crisis, low oil exports, incomparable youth unemployment rates, increased public anger and love I, and the high number of civilian casualties of war, have all paralyzed the official political system. The end of the previous regime and the disintegration of the existing system was a clear consequence of this situation, with the possibility of falling apart and multiple military conflicts.[23]

Yemen is a battlefield in which internal and external forces play a major role in the framework of a pro-Sunni sectarian Shiite war and as an extension of the Syrian war or the second face of the highly complex and infiltrated Syrian war from abroad.

7. The sectarian aspect in both Iran and Saudi Arabia Roles in Yemeni Conflict:

Iran and Saudi Arabia play a pivotal role in the development of the situation there. The search for global hegemony creates what is known today as the Ansar Allah movement (the Houthis).[24] Estimating the origins of this conflict in embezzling people's livelihoods along the borders is crucial to understanding Yemen today. The Saudi position is the most decisive and opposed to the Iranian role in Yemen. It is an influential and pivotal role in preventing Iran's infiltration into Yemen, as it strengthened its efforts by increasing its military and political presence in Yemen. Politically, Saudi Arabia has sought to implement the Gulf initiative to fill the political vacuum and stop the crisis in Yemen. Militarily, after Iranian-backed Houthis seized Sanaa by armed force, Saudi Arabia launched Operation Decisive Storm in 2015 to counter the Houthis coup and sent a very

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strong message to Iran that Saudi Arabia would never allow Iran to expand its influence in important Saudi regions.[25]

The Saudi-led escalation there, where Iran saw the conflict as an opportunity to drain the forces of the Gulf Cooperation Council and divert global opinion against the coalition for the humanitarian consequences of its military operations. Through this geopolitical connection, the conflict in Yemen is considered part of the conflict in Syria.[26] Iran sees - that Saudi Arabia's occupation in Yemen is a goal in itself, to weaken it, which means weakening the Gulf region in general, and an opportunity to prevent them from facing Iran's activity in Syria, preserving its ally Bashar al-Assad and working according to its ambitions in the region.[27] On the other hand, Saudi Arabia, which appears to have been victorious over Iran in Yemen, seeks through several factors, including the strong relationship that links Saudi Arabia historically with Yemenis, and the Saudi government has close ties with various components of Yemen in the north and south, its businessmen, tribal elders, and Yemeni society.[28] While we find that the majority of the Syrian people are against Bashar Al-Assad and its ally, Iran, and Saudi Arabia seeks everything it has to support the Syrian opposition formations, especially the opposition coalition until it undermines Iran's policy that suffers from the two issues in Syria, as well as international pressure and sanctions regarding its nuclear program.[29]

8. CONCLUSION

Although the processes of sectarian identities and homogeneity of local communities resulting from the use of violence within sectarian frameworks are facts created by the Syrian conflict that may have long-term social and political implications, this does not mean that the Syrian society will be forever trapped within the logic of sectarianism. There are non-sectarian forces in the conflict and even areas controlled by sectarian groups. There are many cases of resistance and denial of sectarianism.

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Therefore, if Syria escapes the conflict as a unified nation-state, then there are possibilities for a renewed coexistence between different religious groups within the social and political body. However, this will not be easy and will depend on the willingness and ability of Syrians to look beyond the boundaries drawn by sectarian violence and overcoming the tragic history of using religious differences to create political changes in times of crisis. It is easy to unleash sectarian identities and activate them, but once the famous genie comes out of the bottle, it will impose a life of its own, here it is finally realized that the difficulty of returning it to the bottle is greater than unleashing it.

Saudi Arabia should treat Yemen as a sovereign state, not as a back garden. Because the current approach that Saudi Arabia is adopting towards Yemen will not be successful, and it has to consider what happened and is happening today in the region.

The current Yemeni local forces are unreliable. Because they have turned into tools in the hands of regional States, and implement what is dictated to them. Therefore, the Yemeni people will not see the light unless there are live national forces that place the interest of Yemen above all else, rearrange the ranks to pull the country out of the cycle of violence and the ongoing civil war and build a strong federal system that preserves the country's security and sovereignty.

External sectarianism in the Yemeni and Syrian conflicts is based on sectarianism at the internal level of the two countries. Also involves encouraging one of the sectarian actors on sectarian divisions within foreign countries to achieve its political objectives.

Continued regionalization can involve causing conflict in one country to spread to other states by inciting sectarian groups internally through foreign sectarian conflicts or external sectarian support.

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