SECTARIANISM, FEAR AND POLITICAL INSTABILITY IN THE M.E.: PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH

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**Sectarianism, Fear And Political Instability in the M.E.: Psychological Approach**
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**Introduction**

The relationship between faith and politics is one of the major reccuring themes which Joseph Ratzinger[[1]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/sectarianism-fear-and-political-instability-me-psychological-approach%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn1%22%20%5Co%20%22) dissects in his writings. “His firsthand experience of Nazi totalitarianism led him to reflect on the limits of obedience to the state for the sake of the liberty of obeying God”[[2]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/sectarianism-fear-and-political-instability-me-psychological-approach%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn2%22%20%5Co%20%22).His famous quote states that: "The state is not the whole of human existence and does not encompass all human hope"[[3]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/sectarianism-fear-and-political-instability-me-psychological-approach%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn3%22%20%5Co%20%22).

The twentieth century may have seen the idea of binding faith and religious institutions to the state. However, today’s reality presents another picture. First, the secularization of society has never been a global phenomenon. Second, the number of religious institutions has increased in proportion to the number of believers especially in the Middle East. Third, religion remains an important factor in social, cultural, and political domains. Unfortunally, religion’s impact cannot be reduced to personal conviction and inner faith. It has been subjugated by the establishment of organizations and political movements which have falsly been holding religion as a banner to promote political and economic agendas.

Before proceeding with this article, I would like to assert and confirm that faith is a liberating experience felt from within. I therefore hope that this article is not misconceived as an attempt to undermine faith in God.

Man is constantly looking to coin terms and label phenomena in order to micro scale a macro-complex universe. Often, by micro scaling, the essence of the truth is lost.

**Social Psychoanalysis of Identity**

Renowned psychoanalyst and developmental theorist Erik Erikson, outlined eight stages of development in every human being’s life. The psychosocial theory of human development describes periods during which human beings create their identity and overcome challanges. Based on observations made popular in the midst of the twentieth century, this stage-based theory did not require that one successfully complete a stage of development in order to move on to the next. Most of the citique surrounding Erikson’s eight stages of personality development, question the interchangeable sequence by which personal growth takes place among stages and argue whether development is limited within the age ranges he suggested. There is debate as to whether people only search for identity during the adolescent years or if one stage needs to occur before other stages can be completed. However, Erikson states that each of these processes takes-place throughout a person’s lifetime in one form or another, and that he highlights the specified "phases" only because it is at these stages of time that the conflicts of identity become most prominent[[4]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/sectarianism-fear-and-political-instability-me-psychological-approach%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn4%22%20%5Co%20%22).

Recent empirical research has correlated Erikson’s work to views on the central relationship of religion and secterianism to the establishment of identity. His theoretical approach was studied and supported by James E. Marcia[[5]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/sectarianism-fear-and-political-instability-me-psychological-approach%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn5%22%20%5Co%20%22). Marcia's work distinguishes different forms of identity, and suggests that those who form the most coherent concept of the “self” in adolescence, are able to form deeper attachments to a core identity. Had Erikson still been alive to observe the complexity of the Middle-East, he would have certainly made major adaptations to his theory; namely the sections dealing with core identity and personality confusion.

The major question is whether Erikson’s theory is truly universal or whether it is, like many other theories, subject to the relativism of anthropology. The Middle-East is utilized in this article to be the monitor.

Recently, the Middle East has been heading most of the news in comparison to other developing countries. Social scientists started to consider it as an important region for research. Political and humanitarian issues were selected for their studies. In this regard Peter van der Veer generalized that both nationalist and religious institutions (not faith) are transformations of pre-modern traditions and identities. Religious institutions are nationalized in contemporary times. Affiliations to religious institutions are made part of national identity. Histories of religious conflict have to be tailored to fit a tale of national unity. Besides nationalized religion we find secular nationalism as well as explicitly religious nationalism in the modern period. There are crucial differences between states in terms of their relative secularity in the fields of law and governance, but also crucial differences between societies in terms of their relative secularity in fields of religious organization and religious rituals. These differences between states and societies are not evenly mapped onto each other. Nationalism and religion are intimately connected to processes of globalization. The emergence of the universal category of ‘religion’ and ‘world religion’ is a product of the imperial encounter. The modern forms of Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, and Taoism and their relations with national identity, were all produced in the second half of the nineteenth century, neglecting the importance of other elements like the relationship between fear and secterian solidarity where identity is a primary factor.

Most experts in Middle Eastern politics would conclude that there is no homogeneous identity in any of these countries. Instead, there are minorities, secterian groups, tribes, and different ethnic groups rallying around established institutions, and these supersede the camouflagic masks of nationalism.

There are no exceptions. On the contrary, Middle Easterns have very complex prototypes of identity confusion within a nation. In fact, very few intellectuals are different. All nation-states of the Middle East are composed of groups of non-formal federations based on confessionalism, secterianism, ethnicity, and relations to external powers among other issues. Some groups in the Arab world don’t even admit to being Arabs; they regard themselves as being different. This has to do with the hasty generalization that western concepts hold of Arabs being Muslim nations of the Gulf only.

 All above mentioned diverse groups of the Middle East are trying to defend their right to be treated as equals against the political abuse of dominant factions. But that’s not all. They are also searching for their identity. Contrary to erickson stages of human development and identity formation, Middle East people  are not adolescents trying roles in order to decide what fits them and what doesn’t as an identity in order to adopt or refute aspects that add-up to their personality. These are individuals who passed through the identity crisis phase and, supposedly, went out of it with a prescribed identity mostly religious. We are speaking about religions and confessions that have been present for hundreds of years in the Middle East.

Both nationalism and religion are transformations of pre-modern traditions and identities. In modern western states, religion and confessions are nationalized in the core of the political system. Religions are made a part of national identity and histories of religious conflict have to be tailored to fit a tale of national unity. Besides nationalized religion we find secular nationalism as well as explicitly religious nationalism in the modern West. There are crucial differences between states in terms of their relative secularity in the fields of law and governance, but also crucial differences between societies in terms of their relative secularity in fields of religious organization and religious practices. These differences between states and societies are not evenly mapped onto each other. Recently and again in the West, Nationalism and religion have become intimately connected to processes of globalization. The emergence of the universal category of religion and world religion is a product of the imperial encounter. In developing states, the modern forms of Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, and Taoism and their relations with national identity were all produced in the second half of the nineteenth century.The integration of nationalistic identity on subjects did not erode their hardcore religious identity[[6]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/sectarianism-fear-and-political-instability-me-psychological-approach%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn6%22%20%5Co%20%22). The purpose of this study is to explain from a psychological perspectve the “why” of this reality. However, the concentration is on the Middle East.

Individuals in the Arab World and in the Middle East in general, struggle throughout their lives with the tension inherent in a desire for security (domestic and regional security), a struggle most often culminating in submission to the existing authority. The submission to authority counterpoints, the drive for avowal of freedom, and sharing in decisions affecting their destiny. Based on this, one could understand the Taliban's and Saddam’s regimes continuity until ousted by The USA, and the unyielding Arab oppressive regimes recently confronted by the diminishing Arab Spring.

People of the Middle East and developing societies at large are helpless, they need help from International powers though they fear these powers. The reliance is on international organizations and international law. The stronger the international law is, the weaker the opressive state is in developing society. A strong International Humanitarian Law discharges some of the fears and anxieties of people in developing societies and provides them with hope. But to all developing societies’ subjects, still, hope comes down from God and not from laymen institutions. The foundations of this backdrop of hope are not hidden, but clearly encoded in the holy books of the different religions.

**The Lebanese reality and its regional reflections**

It has been clear all along that the electorate in Lebanon is scrupulously separated along ethno-religious divides. In what had been superficially masqueraded as a clash of political ideology was principally a religious strife between Muslims and Christians and lately a theological feud between the Middle East’s Sunni and Shia Islamic factions.

The engagement serves as a window into the animosities that have come to nearly pervade in every aspect of daily life. Today, polarizing sectarian identities contribute to the ongoing politicization of everything from holy matrimony to soccer matches. It is evident that Lebanon faces a festering national crisis, which threatens to reinvigorate communal tensions and further destabilize society[[7]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/sectarianism-fear-and-political-instability-me-psychological-approach%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn7%22%20%5Co%20%22).

Lebanon’s one-of-a-kind system, with its confessional and sectarian diversity, has been depicted as a Society that mirrors almost all of the Middle East. Unique in its weaknesses, yet proved to be less vulnerable to the waves of violence that swept progressive states in the region. However, the strife of the last decade in Iraq has produced another Middle Eastern state, which in its composition bears a striking resemblance to Lebanese Confessionalism. Subsequent to the ousting Saddam Hussein’s Baathist regime in 2003 by the United States’ led coalition, Iraq has shared increasingly convergent experiences with that of Lebanon’s idiosyncratic past. Similarities are perhaps most notable between their governmental frameworks, each deliberately designed to placate primordial grievances. The confessional system embodies the legally accepted incarnation of the “consociational” model advocated chiefly by political scientist Arend Lijphart[[8]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/sectarianism-fear-and-political-instability-me-psychological-approach%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn8%22%20%5Co%20%22) as a means for guaranteeing different demographic groups government representation in ethnically conflicted societies. According to the Confessional Model and Sectarian Politics, his prescription of consociationalism features four primary characteristics that define the models. Notwithstanding, all of his frameworks are anthropological and sociologically based analyses. The purpose of this paper is to dwell on the psychological dimensions of why sectarian and confessional institutions are still intensely strong and persistent in the Middle East?

**Psychology and Sectarianism**

When it comes to the study of sectarian institutions, psychology, though is a methodical field dealing with the human mind and nature, is completely approximated in ambiguity. If what we understand about the human mind and the power source of religion and sectarianism is limited, it would be impossible to supply information explaining the fundamentals necessary to achieve an understanding of sectarianism and its command on the individual, especially in Middle East societies and states which are very different from the West.

Being conscious of the demands of religious institutions is a complex proposition between our senses, our thoughts and our emotions. But the inner working of our sub-conscious is strictly vague in its output. It either supplies a specific emotion to a specific thought or it radiates the emotional hum of our basic instincts of fear and anxiety that are inherited at birth. If psychic fears exist, they lie within the sub-conscious and radiate as a basic instinct. One of these instincts is responsible for our ability to feel the emotions of another because we could relate to other people’s fears. In these instances, fear becomes a combined social and psychological phenomenon. It does not leave the confines of the mind, for it remains a part of the whole. In many instances, fear generates energy that expands from the confines of the mind. This energy is manifested in human relations at all levels in family, religious solidarity in institutions, and social and political interactions.

Literature on the psychology of sectarianism presents 16 hypotheses as potential theoretical explanations, subdivided into three categories: origin hypotheses (e.g., neural factors, cognitive need, fear of death, superego projection, sexual motivation), maintenance hypotheses (e.g., social learning, deprivation, personality factors), and consequence hypotheses (personal integration and social integration)[[9]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/sectarianism-fear-and-political-instability-me-psychological-approach%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn9%22%20%5Co%20%22).

By bridging these categories and particularly emphasizing the concept of fear in its imperative relevance to the understanding of the sectarian phenomenon, then, we begin to comprehend the connection between fear and sectarianism as form of ideology. Fear and commitment to a sectarian institution do not exist in isolation. This discerning is derived from Freud’s sociological essays. The essays in question are Totem and Taboo[[10]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/sectarianism-fear-and-political-instability-me-psychological-approach%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn10%22%20%5Co%20%22), Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse, misleadingly translated as Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego[[11]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/sectarianism-fear-and-political-instability-me-psychological-approach%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn11%22%20%5Co%20%22); The Future of an Illusion[[12]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/sectarianism-fear-and-political-instability-me-psychological-approach%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn12%22%20%5Co%20%22); and Civilization and Its Discontents[[13]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/sectarianism-fear-and-political-instability-me-psychological-approach%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn13%22%20%5Co%20%22). Freud is much concerned in these essays with matters of ideology for he attacked religious institutions but not faith. His claims if to be implicated in the Middle East, sectarian institutions distorted the picture of the real society in a distorted manner by forcibly fixing people in a state of psychical infantilism and by drawing them into a mass misapprehension[[14]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/sectarianism-fear-and-political-instability-me-psychological-approach%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn14%22%20%5Co%20%22).

Freud was at first reserved about the dynamics of fear, and during the middle phase of his creative years he was mainly interested in libido (biological urges), for libido, as a form of energy, seemed to provide a scientific paradigm for psychoanalysis. He was even more silent about fear, for like love, fear did not fit into any of his theoretical models. Fear, not sex, was Freud’s last hidden concern. He reversed his denial of the real and causal role of fear in human relations, especially when he speculated on aggression (aggression derived from fear), and fear as it manifests itself in the death instinct.

Fear as a pervasive reality in personal, social, legal, and political relations is self-evident. Then again, fear that is stemmed from pain is a necessary biological precondition for the preservation of the species. However, fear in the child allows him/her to recognize parental power. It is fear of pain that makes the child see his parents as not only powerful but omnipotent, and it also creates the images of the good and the bad parent, for that power can be used to heal and to hurt, to protect and to punish. Parental power can be compassionate and empowering but it can also be abusive and criminal: parents can overpower their children by enforced deprivation, indoctrination, physical torture and mutilation, and even murder. In the same token, we could depict of the government and sectarian institutions as being a replacement of parents and carrying the same above-mentioned characteristics.

The affiliation to sectarian institutions (the concern of this paper), just like bonding in the family where power and authority are derived from people’s fear and not from their faith. Sectarian institutions, in any form, mean the wielding of power derived from the fears of believers and their true beliefs. Absolutism, or autocracy, the ancient form of sectarian rule in which power was vested in a religious totalitarian, or a sectarian institution, could be either enlightened or tyrannical. In line with this and in the same practice, the abuse of power in the family, a ruling-class group or party, or the state, creates the soil for the social and psychological creation of omnipotence, claimed by the mighty on earth and attributed to the Almighty in heaven. In many religions, the central attribute of the deity is limitless power, called God Almighty, Allah-Akbar in Arabic, omnipotence in Latin. Tyrants can be powerful in many ways, but their power has limits; it is only God who is all-powerful, which brings us into the realm of religion and belief.

Middle Eastern people, regardless of their confessional and sectarian affiliation, believe that faith moves mountains, brings about victory against enemies, and the word of God is mightier than the sword (or advanced weapons). Somehow, next to the rude power of physical force, dictators utilize the power of ideology and faith, the power of persuasion and indoctrination, of political propaganda, of image and opinion making, the power of demagogues and spiritualists that become the vibrant of the masses whom they sway, in the media and the meetings, and through which the Middle Eastern masses can be manipulated.

It is also in the Middle Eastern family that religion emerges as the sustaining of parental power: the various ways in which parents rationalize their power by an appeal to nature-given or God-given authority, sacred by custom and religion. Such beliefs are based on complementarities: there is a reciprocal tendency to represent the parents as God-like and God as the heavenly all-loving father. Middle Eastern people have traditionally believed omnipresence, omnipotence, and omniscience to be God’s unquestionable attributes.

As expressed by Sartre, in his western way of thinking, individuals’ basic project is to be similar to God. Most people in the Middle East project their behavior to satisfy the commandments of God. This is acted out in collusion between the rulers and the ruled, to result in mutually shared dreams, or delusions, of omnipotence, contrary to reason and the limitations imposed by reality. Rulers in the Middle East act the part of self-styled gods, the ruled worship such man-made idols as portraits and fascinations, to participate in the reflected glory of their declared omnipotence; both the ruler and the ruled share a burden of responsibility for this collusion. But here is one social difference: the collusion between leaders and their subjects, allows the former what is not allowed to the latter.

Kings and powerful leaders in the Arab world have the power to act and speak like semi-gods and force to be obeyed as such; ordinary people depicting themselves as powerful are treated as grandiose madmen and locked up in asylums, even when they are harmless. Do such explanations help us to understand social and political upheavals in the Middle East, such as the increase of terrorist activities and the current trend of sectarian feuds and confrontations manifested in fundamentalism and atrocities?

In many psychoanalytic texts, power is a descriptive, dynamic, and developmental concept. Descriptively, it frequently appears together with such social and political labels as grandiosity, super-control, self-importance, and terror. Dynamically, it is a mechanism of defense. Developmentally, it is assumed to be the most ancient mode of relating to oneself and others. Dialectically, with the widening of the scope of psychoanalytic theories, there has been a trend to apply traditional psychopathological entities to ideas and feelings experienced in the course of ordinary life. Thus, power is now every individual and group’s defense at fear[[15]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/sectarianism-fear-and-political-instability-me-psychological-approach%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn15%22%20%5Co%20%22).

From this perspective, and similar to the middle ages with Europe and Christianity, the quest for Islamic power is collectively appealing to sectarian fundamentalists, who some social scientists dismiss as irrelevant and insist on highlighting all side-distinctions between “revivalist” and “fanatic” or “extremist” fundamentalists. Such fundamentalists share the common objective of reestablishing the power of Islam as the basis of recovery and strength to overcome fear and anxiety derived from perceiving the other as superior. Their central theme, which had developed into a core concept of power relations and authority thought over a century, has been given an explicit revolutionary logic by modern sectarian fundamentalist thinkers, in the Middle East and other Islamic societies at large. Nowadays, the same i.e. fundamental nationalistic trends are creeping onto the Christian west.

However, history demonstrates that the logic derived from certain types of fear, could produce other forms of fear. Therefore, fundamentalist revolutionary violence did win in a few locations, but did not sweep all of the Middle East, due to the balance of fear existing among feuding sectarians. Indeed, in some regions of the Middle East, the militaries and security forces, under the tight control of the regimes, manipulated the common fears of people and acted as instruments of consolidation and repression to preserve the institutions of the state.

In psychoanalysis, power and fear are a joint formation of the individual called the Rat-Man and his parents. According to Freud[[16]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/sectarianism-fear-and-political-instability-me-psychological-approach%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn16%22%20%5Co%20%22), whenever the individual is raged at his father, the Rat Man (individual) would succumb to the obsessional belief in the omnipotence of his/her wishes so that evils would be bound to come upon his father. This exemplifies the relationship between individuals and the state. Again, the individual comes to a shaky belief in the omnipotence of his thoughts and feelings, whether good or evil, and a doubt in the omnipotence of his love and his hatred that is independent of his parents and thus the latter is not to be blamed[[17]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/sectarianism-fear-and-political-instability-me-psychological-approach%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn17%22%20%5Co%20%22). The twofold ways Freud has with omnipotence as a concept is that it does not stand by itself, like a thing; it is an empty vessel that has to be filled with some content, such as the belief in the omnipotence of thought, or, as here, the omnipotence of love and hatred. On the other hand, Freud is inclined to assume that this idea of omnipotence is a delusion[[18]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/sectarianism-fear-and-political-instability-me-psychological-approach%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn18%22%20%5Co%20%22), and to explain it as a historical object of the old megalomania of infancy[[19]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/sectarianism-fear-and-political-instability-me-psychological-approach%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn19%22%20%5Co%20%22). Freud, as it seems, was not positively sure of the possibility that these attitudes of omnipotence could have been a product of a specific power interaction between the Rat Man and his parents.

The feeling of religious omnipotence is probably a throwback to the stage of child-development. It is characterized by a continuation of reluctance by the child to avoid a state of inhibiting, postponing, reflecting thought activity between wishing and acting. Then again, the individual is never quite satisfied with this feeling of omnipotence. The source of this is due to the apparent delusion of omnipotence in the mother-child relationship. Originally, as indicated in psychology, omnipotence is a feeling that one has because it is what he desires. It is created by life in the womb and as such it is not an empty delusion. The problem arises unconsciously, based on subsequent repeated demands for “the return of a state that once existed”[[20]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/sectarianism-fear-and-political-instability-me-psychological-approach%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn20%22%20%5Co%20%22). The newborn spends all his life longing and actively seeking to regain the sensation of being protected. For most, the substitute is found in institutions like religious societies, political parties, or the state.

In simple terms, the subjective feeling of the individual may be compared to that of a real magician in seeking of omnipotence by the help of magic gestures[[21]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/sectarianism-fear-and-political-instability-me-psychological-approach%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn21%22%20%5Co%20%22). The analogy of magic suggested here is related to the constant need for individuals to be loved. To be the center of the universe is the natural emotional state of all individuals, therefore it is not a mania but an actual fact. The disappointment in love that comes through punishments, through a harsh tone of voice, and threats, has in every case a traumatic effect. It may be assumed that splitting of personality, whether apparent or not, occurs as a result. The individual has to adapt him/herself and thus lingers for a shorter or longer period of time in the hallucination: “nothing has happened and I will always be loved the same way I was before regardless of what I say or do”. This is a manifestation of hallucinatory omnipotence. All subsequent disappointments, later on in one’s love life, may well regress to this wish-striving-fulfillment[[22]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/sectarianism-fear-and-political-instability-me-psychological-approach%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn22%22%20%5Co%20%22). Subsequently, one can never achieve the feeling of absolute omnipotence by relying on an imperfect group of beings to provide it to him. According to Melanie Klein, a child’s sense of omnipotence is directly tied to his relationship with his parents or guardians (figures of authority). If the child wishes to impair authority and is sanctioned heavily for doing so, then he will experience a decline in the feeling of omnipotence. At this point, the child is testing the limits of his parents’ power over him, as well as his own power over them. As such, the degree to which a child is stripped of power, upon challenging authority, will determine his readiness to challenge authority in the future[[23]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/sectarianism-fear-and-political-instability-me-psychological-approach%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn23%22%20%5Co%20%22). Klein is quoted as saying: "parents are inclined to suspend in the child's favour the operation of all the cultural acquisitions which their own narcissism has been forced to respect, and to renew on his behalf the claims to privileges which were long ago given up by themselves…[[24]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/sectarianism-fear-and-political-instability-me-psychological-approach%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn24%22%20%5Co%20%22)”. Subsequently, in regions like the Middle East, where children are mostly encouraged to submit to authority, they grow up carrying these cultural impositions and are very well aware of the puppet masters (parents, law and other forms of authority) responsible of the degree of omnipotence they feel.

Freud believes that the individual, aware of those dynamics, becomes fearful of the power of his thoughts, and wishes to destroy his family (group), feeling correspondingly guilty, and thus the individual is convinced, Freud said, of the omnipotence of his love and his hatred. His love and rather his hatred are in many instances overpowering for the individual. Being lost in his emotions of love and hatred, the individual falls victim to the creation of his/her own obsessional thoughts, of which he could not understand the origin of and against which he strove in vain to defend[[25]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/sectarianism-fear-and-political-instability-me-psychological-approach%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn25%22%20%5Co%20%22).

How does this work in societies like the Middle East? Omnipotence may be said to be defused in societies where fear exceeds the bounds of reality, when it is so overpowering or so self-oriented that it becomes irrational and delusional. But such an assessment of omnipotence, like any other thought or feeling, may be only in the eyes of the beholder, not the upholder of such feelings as fear and love. The upholder is convinced he is right, the beholder believes the other is wrong. It then becomes a question of who judges whom, and who has the power to impose his judgment on the other.

This analogy could be extended to sectarian behavior in the Middle East in the sense that people in this region are known for their momentous reverse. Not unlike the primitive man, against whose irrational beliefs Freud was inveighing, Middle Eastern individuals exchange the structural conditions of their mind into the external world[[26]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/sectarianism-fear-and-political-instability-me-psychological-approach%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn26%22%20%5Co%20%22), that is, to life in society, suggesting an evolutionary sequence. That is to say, at the animistic stage, individuals ascribe omnipotence to themselves, and at the religious stage they transfer it to the gods but do not seriously abandon it themselves. This explains the diversity in religious institutions with a breakdown in numerous confessions and sects.

People of the Middle East have the tendency to assimilate the power of the act to the power of the wish, especially the suitable wish. On the same theme, Freud roughly depicted of politics and sectarianism.  That is why Freud realized the importance of power in the life of groups, masses, and the body politic and the dynamics of groups and their leaders. Sectarian leaders combine the dynamics of the power of the wish and the will to power. In doing that, they are faced with the nexus power of love, love of power. The need to love and to be loved in return is as powerful as the need for the essentials of surviving. In this regard, Freud has asserted that frustrated love seeks compensation in omnipotent self-love and in acts of aggression, violence, and destruction aimed at individuals and societies. Sectarianism, at times, provides justifications for such emotions and the normal human emotions of love, pity, and sympathy are destroyed in the process of dehumanizing the God-hated external enemy, turning him into a scapegoat and a target for the chronic rage.

By looking at religion and the diversity of confessional and sectarian groups in the Middle East, much of the recent research has tried to deal with the subject as the prime integrator of society. These attempts have resulted in two sorts of dead ends. Either concrete religion provide unity for only a restricted segment of society, or the lack of a concrete integrating religion leads to functional conceptions of religion that make the argument circular. In simple terms, the implications here are that does religion integrates societies or integrated societies are thereby religious.

In this sense secularism in the Middle East is regarded, like identity, as individualistic and collective at the same time. A brief look at the Arab historical developments in this sphere can show how this result has come about. The idea here is that sectarian expressions are a series of delimited, systematic, and comparable units that existed side by side[[27]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/sectarianism-fear-and-political-instability-me-psychological-approach%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn27%22%20%5Co%20%22). Observers have regarded them as manifestations of some sort of basic or “natural” longing, an essence that might or might not be attainable. The latter notion was and is still critical because, like the concept of nation, it restyled secularism as a universal abstract that could only appear as a plurality of particular identities and religions.

Suffice it to say, that the distinction between formally equal religions gradually (but never completely) replaced other ways of understanding religious diversity, Indeed, then as now, in the Middle East, the idea of religion often ran parallel to or in competition with nationalism and other collective self-descriptive ideologies[[28]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/sectarianism-fear-and-political-instability-me-psychological-approach%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn28%22%20%5Co%20%22).

Moreover, and of equal importance, there exists difficulty separating the nation from the state in the Middle East, Middle Easterners move back and forth between seeing religions as descriptors of particular collectivities and regarding them as all the same instances of a type of systemic and instrumental communication.

The idea that sectarianism was and still is a functional domain that overrides other functional domains in the Middle East is a valid argument. For the people of this region, sectarianism manifests itself as a totality. The institutionalization of these ways of seeing depended in large measure on cultural realities. Somewhat in contrast to the fate of the idea of nation, however, a good number of minority groups have accepted this development only to a limited degree. The carriers of Islam have rather consistently fought against separating religious functions from other social and political functions. Nonetheless, as with nation, religion has very often become a collective identifier in Middle Eastern societies, a way of declaring collective actorship in contrast to other such actors. Among the ways of accomplishing this, perhaps the most visible has been through the “politicization” of religion, a strategy that brings us directly to the question of identity and character convergence under conditions presently prevailing in this region.

It goes almost without saying that one of the most striking aspects of the various politicizations of sectarian trends in the Middle East is that they are, precisely politicized: they were forced by the west into the modern state. They seek to harness the mechanisms of the state in order to enforce sectarian standards[[29]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/sectarianism-fear-and-political-instability-me-psychological-approach%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn29%22%20%5Co%20%22). Insofar as sectarianism is today a prime source for identity and character, the effective range of these attempts to bring about convergence in this regard has been, at best, only somewhat more successful than resort to the nation precisely because both identifiers rely on the territorially delimited state. In this respect, sectarianism provides a unique case. And if politicization of religion has limits because it depends on the pluralistic state structures, then ultimately convergence on the basis of sectarianism will have to depend, if it is to succeed, on other means. The question then becomes, are there any others that might be more effective? Certainly, mass media might be a prime candidate; and beside the function systems, among other structures available today organizations and social movements suggest themselves as alternative or supplemental possibilities. All these, however, are subject to even more diversifications than states. In effect, it seems, the means for generating and maintaining diversified identities and consistent models of proper character appear to be at least as prevalent, and I would venture to say, even more so, than the social forces that push people together into a single society.

On the other side of this coin are the tendencies and possibilities for individualization, and, hence, privatization of religion. Thus, in spite of the relatively recent resurgence of religious politicizations in the Middle East, and the continued development and expansion of fundamental religious movements, in most parts of this region, religious “de-convergence” or fragmentation continues to occur at the same time. Certain Islamic countries in the Middle East, for instance, have been moderately successful in enforcing religious convergence. Most Arab states, through semi-secular nationalism show little such tendency and in many cases as much and more internal religious pluralism than in the past. Here again, the source of this direction lies essentially in the availability in progressive Arab states of very effective means to realize and deal with the various differences in sectarian identity and character. With the uprising of the Arab Spring this is no more the case.

However, just because most Middle Eastern systems with their technical leverages are seeking dominance, the realm of personal and collective identity remains a primary outlet for variation that responds to inevitable differences in the situations people find themselves in. Sectarian tendencies, to the extent that they are resources for constructing those identities, and in spite of the fact that they generally provide holistic perspectives that emphasize human unity and community, seem more to fuel the perpetuation of diversity differentiation and conflict than to counter it.

Sectarianism in the Middle East, despite of the power reality of the semi-secular elite still stands as a vibrant cultural force. Sectarianism in this sense is a vital part of the social life of people and it is reflected in their beliefs, rituals, and institutions that provide an ethos to guide everyday life. In using both metaphorical explanations, adopted from the humanities, as well as familiar theoretical frameworks, three key metaphors, which commonly appear in sociological literature, could be employed: the sacred canopy, the religious marketplace, and elective affinities[[30]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/sectarianism-fear-and-political-instability-me-psychological-approach%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn30%22%20%5Co%20%22). These metaphors assist in revealing how people interact with religion. For example, faith provides the individual in the Middle East with a sacred canopy of meaning (The word Allah is always in their conversation). Potential followers bid one another in the religious marketplace for who has a stronger faith. And, elective resemblances lead the faithful to match their particular interests with different doctrines of the same religions. We could also note that these metaphors have limitations in their ability to explain, and accordingly support them with more formal theory.

Subjectivism could be used to explain beliefs and attitudes, opinions and values of the faithful. Structuralism reveals behavioral patterns rooted in sectarian institutions. The dramaturgical perspective examines the expressive and communicative qualities embedded in religious experience. Moreover, the institutional approach focuses on the construction and maintenance of the sectarian institution. By looking at religion from a sociological standpoint, we also acknowledge, reflecting a post-modernist position, that sociology is only one means of understanding this complex phenomenon[[31]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/sectarianism-fear-and-political-instability-me-psychological-approach%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn31%22%20%5Co%20%22).

The Middle East of today is more interconnected due to increasing communication facilities, significantly so in the realm of religion. Similar sectarian and confessional groups communicate across their state borders. As a result conflict has increased with the new solidarity of the different sectarian groups across their own state borders. This could lead potentially for even greater conflict not only within a state but in the region at large. Every major religion offers a justification for the use of violence. Religion is presently used all over the Middle East as a cosmic justification for violent ethnic, economic, and political struggles.

Confessionalism and sectarianism could be very dangerous especially in a culture that developed along lines of drastic fears even during relaxed state of affairs. Religious fanaticism goes through multiple trends of rise and demise and thus religious conflicts fluctuate through time and unexpectedly. Defying all expectations of modernization theory, the last ten years witnessed a reawakening of religious ideas and social movements. This has been particularly true in the Middle East, which provided the setting for important early research on modernization but has demonstrated more recently that economic development and social change are not necessarily associated with an increase in secularism. In the Islamic countries of the Middle East, and in Israel as well, it is today more important than ever to devote attention to sectarian and confessional movements when examining social and political phenomena.

Religion and politics as twin realities in the Middle East can be seen at several levels. At the foundational level, constitutions declare one religion to be the official state religion in almost all Middle Eastern States and Israel is no exception. Accordingly, religious holidays are national holidays. At the educational and pedagogy level, religion is part of the curriculum in state-run schools, the government has responsibility for religious worship assemblies and other religious institutions, and, most important perhaps, substantial segments of national legal codes are based on the Holy God given script.

Within their inner circles, the different religious sect, assert that one of them has to assume leadership of the country. Most often the projection implies that only a religious leader can provide good government for the community and that the main function of any government is to ensure obedience to God’s law as explained in the Holy scripts[[32]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/sectarianism-fear-and-political-instability-me-psychological-approach%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn32%22%20%5Co%20%22). This strong and historically validated connection between religion and politics contrasts dramatically with the established patterns of secularism that, however imperfect, is still favored by most of the dismayed intellectuals.

By sticking to the basic objective of this article I have narrowed down the psychological ramification of power and used only prevalent perspective to provide the basis for understanding why sectarianism is the Middle Eastern oldest and most important institutional trend. On a parallel scheme psychological limitation has always been the concern of religion[[33]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/sectarianism-fear-and-political-instability-me-psychological-approach%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn33%22%20%5Co%20%22). Individuals have always suspected their ability in what they could do, have had fears in being alone, terrified by the short span of life that always end with death, and puzzled by the purpose of their existence. These limitations have been the domain of all organized intellectual endeavors, institution building in the form of religious lines or philosophical and ideological in the form of political entities and nation-states.

The assertion among Middle Eastern groups is that religion demands faith and unconditional submission of the mind and the spirit to a belief system. This spiritual commitment helps the individual form a steadfast line of defense against his fear of the political and social reality. Freud’s point in regard to this is that the individual’s emotional commitment to secular institutions lies in the need for protection from the fear of pain[[34]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/sectarianism-fear-and-political-instability-me-psychological-approach%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn34%22%20%5Co%20%22).

It is within this general assumption, one could say, that the more dependent the person’s unconscious attachment to childhood parental images, the clearer his fears and anxieties become. Fear and anxiety of the unknown are generally given ample room for disguise in the neurotic use of imagination[[35]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/sectarianism-fear-and-political-instability-me-psychological-approach%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn35%22%20%5Co%20%22).

An individual Middle Eastern who becomes overly depressed about the evil of the world and metaphysical irregularity may protest exceedingly against the other (non-self). In addition, individuals with more personal and neurotic sub-stratum of insecurity and despair may lead themselves into Sectarian institution for protection.

Gordon Allport in[[36]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/sectarianism-fear-and-political-instability-me-psychological-approach%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn36%22%20%5Co%20%22) his writings distinguishes between people who have “intrinsic religious” values, mainly, those that are integrated and have comprehensive ends in themselves and those with “extrinsic religions” values, those that are “escapist and ethnocentric”. Allport was first intrigued with the meaning of religious outlooks as a result of the finding that high religiosity is an existing phenomenon. If this is true then Middle Eastern religious prejudice and group-centrism are linked to the extrinsic religious outlook in which house of worship membership was based on allegiance to a powerful, socially approved “in-group.”

**CONCLUSION**

Religion and political ideologies in the Middle East exist like a parallel set of springboards. People radiate between the two, and it can be no accident that a decline in religion is accompanied by a rectification of political ideologies, if not the latter underplayed the former. The competition between the two has always been in addressing peoples’ fears and problems and each extending promises to a better world. As for myself, I’m a practicing believer and secular in political views. And I would like to indicate that the faith-free theoretical explications of the article reflect social scientists’ perceptions and understandings in the separation and reemerging of the instruments of sectarian institutions into state politics especially in the Middle East.

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• Stage 1 - Trust vs. Mistrust

• Stage 2 - Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt

• Stage 3 - Initiative vs. Guilt

• Stage 4 - Industry vs. Inferiority

• Stage 5 - Identity vs. Confusion

• Stage 6 - Intimacy vs. Isolation

• Stage 7 - Generativity vs. Stagnation

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**المذهبية، الخوف وعدم الاستقرار السياسي في الشرق الأوسط: مقاربة بسيكولوجية**

في الآونة الأخيرة، يتصدّر الشرق الأوسط عناوين الأخبار بالمقارنة مع البلدان النامية الأخرى. فقد بدأ علماء الاجتماع يعتبرونه منطقة مهمة للبحث. وقد اختيرت القضايا السياسية والإنسانية لتكون موضوع دراساتهم. في هذا الصدد، عمّم بيتر فان دير فير Peter van der Veer أنّ المؤسسات القومية والدينية (لا الإيمان), هي عبارة عن تحوّلات للتقاليد والهويات السابقة للعصر الحديث. ويتم تحويل المؤسسات الدينية إلى الفئة الوطنية في العصور الحديثة. وأصبحت الانتماءات إلى المؤسسات الدينية جزءًا من الهوية الوطنية. ومن الضروري أن تُصمّم تواريخ الصراع الديني لتتناسب وحكاية الوحدة الوطنية. فضلًا إلى الدين المؤمّم, نجد القومية العلمانية وكذلك القومية الدينية الصريحة في العصر الحديث. ولدى الناس في الشرق الأوسط نماذج أولية معقدة للغاية عن ارتباك الهوية داخل أمة ما. في الواقع، يختلف الأمر بالنسبة إلى عدد قليل جدًا من المفكرين. فالدول- الأمم جميعها في الشرق الأوسط تتألف من مجموعات من الاتحادات غير الرسمية القائمة على الطائفية والتعصب الطائفي والانتماء الإثني، والعلاقات مع قوى خارجية فضلًا عن مسائل أخرى. وإذا كان مفهومنا للعقل البشري ومصدر قوة الأديان والتعصب الطائفي محدودًا، فسيكون من المستحيل توفير معلومات تشرح الأساسيات اللازمة وصولاً إلى إدراك للطائفية وإمرتها للفرد، خاصة في مجتمعات ودول الشرق الأوسط التي تختلف كثيرًا عن الغرب.