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Self-fulfilling prophecies are a danger to Iraq and Syria

Media Mention of Hussein Ibish in The National - June 28, 2014 - 11:00pm
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Self-fulfilling prophecies are a danger to Iraq and Syria

[Hussein Ibish](#)[2]

June 29, 2014

With both Iraq and Syria in the throes of seemingly total meltdown, and much of the Middle East apparently on the brink of a potential broad regional conflagration, the temptation to think in sweeping but simplistic terms becomes greater than ever. This is because the situation is so difficult to read, and even the parties involved in each manifestation of chaos are often not completely clear or entirely settled. But this is an impulse that needs to be resisted if a proper evaluation is to be made and an appropriate policy response formulated.

It would be too easy under such dramatic and unreadable conditions to view the situation as a kind of binary of neat polar opposites that are contending for mastery. But such thinking is dangerous, because the power of narratives and self-fulfilling prophecies is such that embracing the idea of a binary division could contribute to producing one at the political level.

In politics, there is no clear distinction between perception and reality. The constant repetition of an idea can often imbue that perspective with undue power. Sometimes the ardently-stated belief in them is sufficient to give monsters of the imagination a foothold in reality.

Two binaries currently in vogue illustrate the point painfully clearly.

Hanin Ghaddar, the outstanding managing editor of the Beirut-based website NOW (to which I am also a regular contributor), has proffered one of the most compelling explanations yet for the horrifying phenomenon of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). From years of close observation of Hizbollah, Ghaddar draws a strong comparison between the two organisations.

“Today,” she writes, ISIL “has become empowered by a similar feeling of injustice [to that which gave rise to Hizbollah] within the Sunni community, and what we are seeing is the emergence of what can be described as a Sunni Hizbollah”. This clear and simple analysis cuts to the core of the appalling rise in Syria and Iraq of ISIL, and its close political affinity to the origin and modus operandi of Hizbollah.

What gets lost for many people, however, is that there is nothing inevitable about an open-ended sectarian confrontation throughout much of the Arab Middle East, pitting a “Sunni” Hizbollah against a “Shiite” Hizbollah.

Since the downfall of former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, few observers have been more quick to point to sectarian tensions and ring alarm bells than this writer. However, in recent weeks, the undeniable rise of sectarian forces is being mistaken for the total domination of all regional strategic relations by sectarianism. There is, of course, a clear and important distinction.

It’s possible that regional powers might be headed for a grand and protracted confrontation between sectarian forces, whether Sunni versus

Shiite, or Sunni versus everybody else, depending on your point of view. But this is by no means a fait accompli – and assuming that it is inevitable constitutes an unethical moral and intellectual surrender.

Since such a conflagration is not in the interests of any major party, it's also eminently avoidable. And it probably will be avoided, assuming that the key players remain open for other approaches.

Another binary that's enjoying unwelcome prominence originates with the Israeli analyst Orit Perlov and has been recently popularised by the New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman. It pits two Arab dynamics: ISIL versus SISI – the latter standing for the new Egyptian president, Abdel Fattah El Sisi – as opposing models.

ISIL is supposed to stand for those who elevate God to the centre of all political dynamics, and SISI is meant to represent the trend of relying entirely on (implicitly failed) nation-state governance. This polar model is even weaker than the first because, in this case, SISI doesn't represent what it's meant to. In other words, the new Egyptian government can't be characterised in such a reductive and simplistic manner.

Moreover, there is no basis for seeing the Arab world dividing along these lines. There is a threat of sectarian confrontation, to be sure, but non-state actors only threaten states that are imploding as a result of long-evident structural and identity crises that were probably irresolvable from the time of their foundation.

That doesn't apply to many, or maybe even most, of the Arab states, although nonstate forces are finding ample stamping grounds in the ruins of the apparently unworkable Sykes-Picot boundaries, which were outlined in 1916 and formalised in the 1920s.

Such binary positions are always appealing at a time of confusion, seeming to offer clarity and structure where there is only opacity and disintegration. But they should be avoided, because this is a false premise.

The Middle East is not divided between government and mosque, failed national states and implausible nonstate parties. Nor is it in the grip of a broader sectarian confrontation. And for everyone's sake, it had better stay that way. Let's not wish ourselves into cataclysm before it's too late.

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