This timely book offers a broad, insightful, and reasonably comprehensive overview of the contemporary process of politicizing religious differences in the Middle East by contextualizing some of the most important contributing factors to the ongoing sociopolitical turmoil. Editors Hashemi and Postel, together with fourteen other researchers, critically examine the widely held and principally unsubstantiated claim that “ancient sectarian conflicts” are at the root of the region’s intra- and inter-state conflicts (2). The book’s format suggests the political science perspective of the authors’ combined understanding of sectarianization. The overall macro-perspective is blended with a number of relevant case studies that offer a wide-ranging understanding of this process.

In a nutshell, sectarianization is presented as a purposeful exacerbation of existing sectarian/religious differences by political stakeholders, such as governments and other civil society agents, where commitment to their own personal and profane interests, rather than to sacred values and moral commitments, is typically at the center of attention. As Hashemi and Postel note in their Introduction, sectarianization is “a process shaped by political actors operating within specific contexts, pursuing political goals that involve popular mobilization
around particular (religious) identity markers” (4). In other words, it can be regarded as constructed, reconstructed, and expressed in various ways depending on the sociopolitical context and time period within which it takes place.

The first part, the four-chapter “Sectarianization in Historical, Geopolitical and Theoretical Perspective,” deals with this process’ theoretical framing and historical (including social) contextualization and background story. In chapter 1, Ussama Makdisi attempts to link contemporary sectarian politics to the fragmentation of the Ottoman Empire and its failed, or rather interrupted, attempt to implement an inclusive form of citizenship to unify Muslims and non-Muslims under its rule (27-29). He makes a noteworthy point here: Europe’s colonization of large parts of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) interfered with the development of “ecumenical subjectivity” within the Arab public sphere, which ultimately enabled religious identity brokers to dominate the public discourse.

In chapter 2, Bassel F. Salloukh presents a somewhat sweeping evaluation of sectarianization in the region’s increasingly volatile political order. He links this process to regional geopolitics, where intercommunal violence in Iraq, Lebanon, and other MENA states broke out after the American occupation of Iraq (2003) spiraled into what can be described as a sectarian frenzy following the 2011 popular uprisings dubbed “the Arab Spring.” Chapter 3 comprises Yezid Sayigh’s partial deconstruction of the sectarian “appearances” of regional turmoil and its “causes” (54) and lays out the contemporary history of autochthonic causes and dynamics of the ongoing violence. Several interesting causes are mentioned, among them the state’s failure to provide social welfare and an inclusive political environment, as well as the increasing gap between haves and have-nots. (59).

The first part closes with chapter 4, Adam Gaiser’s presentation of an engaging analytical tool for explaining the sectarianization as “a narrative identity approach” (61) by which social agents “articulate threats in terms of and in relation to the grand narratives of the sect actors who perceive their sect to be under threat” (74). Although this approach offers no explanation for sectarianization, it enables observers to identify several critical junctures in a religious group’s master narrative vis-à-vis its perceived opponent and create thereby a more comprehensive understanding of the sectarianization dynamics on a case-by-case basis.

The second part, “How Sectarianization Works: Case Studies,” contains nine case studies that expose the sociopolitical contexts within which sectarianization occurs and the ultimate result of that sectarianization. First out is Vali Nasr, who in the long fifth chapter examines the evolution of sectarian politics in Pakistan. Here, he presents a highly important dimension of sectarianism that he terms “‘ethnic’ posturing,” wherein the “mobilization of group identity for political ends [moves people] in lieu of class, ideology, or party affiliation” (79). The case of Pakistan shows how a relatively weak state, due to several internal and external reasons, institutionalizes sectarian divisions between Sunnis and Shi‘as, among other religious groups, as a shortsighted “strategy of survival” (82).

In the sixth chapter, Fanar Haddad deals with Iraq, the epicenter of the MENA region’s current sectarian confrontation. The main intent here is to understand sectarianization
as a complex product of the modern nation state’s inability to effectively deal with sectarian plurality. His suggestion to try viewing sectarian hatred through the lens of racialization is an interesting and potentially analytically fruitful one—and yet he does not follow it up. A truly missed opportunity! Fortunately, it is implied elsewhere, especially in chapter 1. Haddad presents the complexity of sectarian tensions as a product of interactions among local, regional, and national dynamics that give rise to violently contentious sectarian politics, ultimately resulting in what currently seems to be unresolvable social fragmentation (120).

Paulo Gabriel Hilu Pinto’s contribution (chapter 7) offers a multifaceted insight into the convolutions of the Syrian civil war. He clearly states that sectarianism, as a contentious process, “has no explanatory power to make sense of the Syrian conflict. It is, rather, a political tool that was shaped and fostered by many actors in the conflict” (124), a conclusion that is largely in tune with the overall explanations offered in the book. He supports this assertion with a number of claims suggesting that the Assad regime has instrumentalized religious discourses and symbols. Another important aspect of Pinto’s analysis is that the 2011 popular uprising was initially a non-sectarian display of the public’s will for freedom. However, the existing sectarian identities were ultimately activated, politicized, and armed through multifaceted internal and external sectarianization processes. In other words, sectarianization was not a mere result of an existing set of sectarian beliefs and/or ideologies but rather a consequence of political maneuverings and securitization of sectarian identities (134-140).

Madawi Al-Rasheed (chapter 8) offers an insight into the sectarian politics of post-Arab Spring Saudi Arabia, where the echoes of North Africa’s uprisings were felt primarily as mild public protests within the confines of “The Movement of Islamic Reform in Arabia” and the Umma Party, both of which hoped—but failed—to gather wider public support (147). None of their hopes materialized in any substantial way. Al-Rasheed points out that much of the failure of those (Sunni-mounted) protests depended on the similar Shi’a-organized protests held in the country’s northeast to demonstrate solidarity with the Bahraini Shi’a protests and their own long-held grievances against the Saudi monarchical regime. The state media framed the Shi’a protests as a part of foreign (i.e., Iranian) plot to destabilize the monarchy (150-151). According to al-Rasheed, the compounded effect of the weak Sunni opposition, the state media’s framing of political dissent, and a sectarian-based religious discourse deflated whatever protests there were.

The chapter’s most interesting part is Al-Rasheed’s explanation of the regime’s strategy: the suppression of political opposition (primarily Islamists and Shi’a activists) through the sectarian policies of fragmentation, repression, and discrimination. She summarizes her insights on how Saudi and other regional dictatorships use sectarianization as an instrument of power politics to maintain their rule, despite the high internal levels of political discontent and popular grievances: “The survival of the Al Saud clan, rather than the protection of an almighty Sunni world, remains [for the monarchy] the most sacred project” (157).

Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi adds to the list of regional examples with his analysis of Iran’s security strategy in the very long ninth chapter. To a great extent, this chapter is
analytically detached from the volume’s purpose and approach because it centers on a regional power- and security-analysis. Following the usual international relations order, Sadeghi-Boroujerdi presents Iran’s precarious geopolitical situation as a “regional middle power’ whose foreign policy has been shaped in the context of the systemic insecurity of a regional system penetrated by hegemonic Great Powers [the U.S. and others]” (160). As such its foreign policy, as one of two Shi’i-majority states in a Sunni-dominated region, utilizes sectarian identity selectively and as a tool to adapt to a different regional dynamic, as it were. For him, the “sectarianization of civil and inter-state conflicts is the outcome of highly contentious civil and militarized mobilizations and counter-mobilizations stemming from a combination of domestic and inter-state security dilemmas.” This is another constructivist explanation which is perhaps most effectively demonstrated by Iran’s involvement in the Syrian civil war, as well as in the clashes between Hizbullah and various Sunni groups in Lebanon and Syria.

In chapter 10, Stacey Philbrick Yadav examines the sectarianization of Yemen’s domestic politics after the 2011 popular uprisings. The most stimulating part is her investigation of the key international actors’ “misrecognition” of the conflict as being premised on sectarian divisions (185). Her reasonably convincing constructivist framing of the particular context of the country’s internal sociopolitical divisions and tensions, combined with her analysis of the foreign parties involved, reveals the complex mechanics of sectarianization. For instance, during the 2011-2013 anti-government protests, the urban youth’s efforts to maintain cohesion and show their anti-sectarian profile did not prevent the fragmentation of the state’s institutional framework along sectarian lines. Saudi (and other) observers misread and misinterpreted the subsequent Houthi-Islahi infighting as sectarian in nature. Yadav’s analysis suggests that the spectrum of nonsectarian options through which the youth’s political demands could be expressed shrunk drastically during the period leading up to foreign military involvement in 2015. Only the sectarian options survived the initial political conflict, which was amplified through and by Saudi Arabia’s anxiety over Iran’s political aspirations in the region.

Toby Matthiesen’s contribution (chapter 11) brings forth another important perspective: the securitization of religious identity politics in Bahrain. His description of what is going on there as “a deliberate and long-term strategy by the regime to undermine the possibility of a broad-based coalition demanding democratic change” (200) is perhaps the closest match to Hashemi and Postel’s proposed definition of sectarianism as “a process shaped by political actors operating within specific contexts, pursuing political goals that involve popular mobilization around particular (religious) identity markers” (4).

Matthiesen examines the various securitization strategies implemented in the Gulf in general and in Bahrain in particular through a nonlinear historical process of sectarianization. The development of political allegiances along sectarian divisions is not new; however, in combination with the existing contentions and fears, the majority-Shi’a population did express its grievances through a strong sense of sectarian pride, especially during the popular uprisings of 2011. This has, in turn, been interpreted as a national security threat by the ruling Sunni monarchy and other “identity entrepreneurs,” which, with Saudi assistance, have curbed any prospects of political change there. Matthiesen argues, correctly, that the regional divide
between the hostile images of Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shi’i Iran is the “sectarian master frame” through which many analysts now interpret ongoing conflicts and predict future ones (213-214).

In the twelfth chapter, Bassel F. Salloukh offers perhaps the prime example of what decades of sectarianization within a multi-religious state has produced. The institutionalization of sectarian divisions through sectarian power-sharing (or consociation) is presented as a historical process going back to the late Ottoman administration of the region. This process has resulted in the very notion of Lebanon’s statehood and social fabric, for “[t]he constitution consecrated confessional groups and sects as the main pillars of Lebanese society” (219). In the well-ordered overview of sectarianization’s mechanics both within the state and civil society, we discover that Lebanon’s entire power and economic distribution system, as well as the dynamics of its interpersonal clientelist relationships, mirrors sectarian divisions among the various Christian (Maronite, Greek Orthodox, and Catholic), Muslim (Sunni and Shi’i), and Druze groups.

Despite the country’s historical and far-reaching sectarian divides, namely, the longstanding sectarian framing of politics and institutional structures, Salloukh argues that its general sectarian divide is not inalienable. He supports this claim by noting primarily “the summer 2015 You Stink revolt” and other smaller episodes of non-sectarian collective mobilization efforts against the government’s inability to provide basic sanitary services, its perceived corruption, and the sectarian political system more broadly. However, this seems to have been possible only in the major urban center of Beirut. The question remains if other parts of the country would mobilize across sectarian divides.

Madeleine Wells’ thirteenth chapter analyzes the contemporary sectarian dynamics of Kuwaiti domestic politics, or rather those of the ruling Sunni Al Sabah family. She opens with a set of arguments demonstrating that the regime is a relative political outlier in the Gulf Cooperation Council region regarding its Shi’i population (ca. 30% of the population), who “have equal access to the large coterie of welfare benefits offered by their rentier state” (238). This does not mean that the existing Sunni-Shi’a sectarian division has not been a source of sociopolitical contention, for ever since the 1979 Iranian revolution various regional tensions have caused periodical tensions between the semi-authoritarian Al Sabah regime and parts of the Shi’i minority (240-241).

As stated elsewhere in this volume, regional tensions often spill over into the smaller Middle Eastern states. However, the regime’s realpolitik style of navigating domestic issues created what can be described as a nonsectarian political opposition. The 1999 development of Shi’i political opposition and its parliamentary merging with the Popular Action Bloc, the leading Sunni liberal oppositional alliance, is one such manifestation. During the early 2000s the regime increased the number of appointed Shi’i ministers in the government. Wells interprets this as “strategic appointments [that] say more about [the way by which the regime is] instrumentally balancing the numbers and identities in the opposition for the end of
maintaining power than they do about primordial proclivities toward the identities in politics themselves” (243-244).

Another interpretation could be that the regime’s pragmatism and political maneuverings effectively stifled a potentially serious national sectarian conflict. During the latter half of the 2000s, the political fragmentation among the political opposition, the growth of Islamist representation in Parliament, the Sunni-Shi’i civil conflict in Iraq, and growing regional sectarian tensions became more evident. The weakening of rather unified Shi’i opposition, continued throughout the late 2000s, enabling a Sunni nationalist-Islamist dominance of the Parliament. This dominance was strengthened after the 2011 popular protests. Wells’ chapter demonstrates the importance of a more case-dependent analysis of sectarianization, one that ought to involve an understanding of state specific “security concerns” as well as its ruling strategies (257).

In the fourteenth (and final) chapter, Timothy D. Sisk offers a lucid and insightful theoretical discussion of understanding sectarianism by refining the process of religious othering introduced by Hashemi and Postel: “there is no fixed or ‘primordial’ impetus to group formation and maintenance that informs ‘ancient hatreds’ [so readily inferred by many Western analysts and policy makers]. Just as group differentiation—such as sectarian framing of the other—is constructed, or invented, it can also be reconstructed and reinvented over time away from essentialist perspectives to more pragmatic ones” (259). In effect, sectarian differences, like any other group’s identity, can be weaponized, securitized, racialized and then used in violent and discriminatory ways, primarily by power holders in a variety of multi-religious contexts.

In the Middle East, as this volume demonstrates and as Sisk reiterates, sectarianization becomes part of cycles of violence through “a combination of religious mobilization and manipulation by political elites, social dislocation and discrimination, and external influence during troubled transitions from authoritarian rule” (260). He contends that the answer to his rhetorical, but highly significant, question as to “What is the way out of sectarian conflicts?” lies in the continued empowerment of the United Nations’ and other regional and local organizations’ peace-promoting efforts that go beyond conflict resolution initiatives (262-263). De-escalation efforts directed toward “identity-based conflicts,” Sisk argues, must involve not only the elites (e.g., religious, ethnic, and other leaders), but also a broader assortment of civil society actors in order to create as a broad consensus as possible on how to solve a particular conflict. The assortment of this volume’s chapters seems to supports this claim.

Sisk concludes by summarizing the volume’s main findings and highlighting five main results: a) “sectarianization is a ‘constructed’ social phenomenon” (266), b) “sectarian violence begets more sectarian violence” (267), c) sectarianism is an institutionalized reality in many parts of the region, d) international and regional involvement in particular national sectarian conflicts have only worsened such conflicts, and e) authoritarian regimes in several cases have benefited from sectarianization as to redirect internal regime-criticism towards “threats” from minorities (268-269). In his closing remark, Sisk states that “[p]eacebuilding in the region will require a new configuration of political centralization and decentralization,”
something that would purportedly require major disruptions of the present internal political order in most of the region’s states.

This volume fills a significant gap in the present scholarship on sectarianization and the (geo)political disruptions that this process has engendered within a range of MENA countries. Sectarianization here is similar to another process of othering, namely “ethnic political mobilization” that, much like a religious element of a group identity, is often politicized and securitized in a similar fashion. There are several cases where the intersection between religious and ethnic identities, most notably in Iraq, Iran and Syria (e.g., the Arab, Kurdish, Turkmen, Azeri, Baloch, and other minorities) but also in Libya and Mali (e.g., Arab and a range of Amazigh groups) and elsewhere, results in violence and disorder.

Without taking anything away from interesting insights of the collective effort and the results presented in the book, several weaknesses are worth bringing up. For example, Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East on the whole fails to present a sufficiently clear and coherent longitudinal explanation of the evolution of sectarianization in relation to modernity and the development of nation-states in the region. There are intimations of such a discussion, primarily in the introduction, but these are largely left unexplored in the subsequent chapters. Including an in-depth conversation on modernity (e.g., the development of state institutions, construction of “national” borders, growth of authoritarianism, the development of education, new forms of civil society mobilization, including neocolonial strategies and relations) would have allowed the development of a more informed set of deliberations on key concepts such as citizenship, identity politics, and consociationalism—all of which have in various ways been significant to the chapters by Makdisi, Haddad, Nasr, Salloukh, Wells, Sisk, and others. This, in turn, would have offered a more theoretically informed conclusion to the book presented by Sisk, which mainly focused on the conditions for conflict resolution within the current international relations framework and regional order.

Despite the somewhat uneven quality of chapters and not entirely cohesive set of explanatory approaches presented in the chapters, Hashemi and Postel have proposed an interesting constructivist research model through which they and chapter authors have challenged popularized ideas, narratives and uninformed assumptions about alleged sectarian primordialism. The book represents a substantial contribution that will be of great value to both social science scholars and students of the wider Middle East, but also informed members of the public.

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