
FUNDAMENTAL CAUSES OF MODERN SECTARIAN TENSION ILLUSTRATED BY THE CASE OF THE MIDDLE EAST COUNTRIES

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Abstract

The purpose of the article is to explore the modern nature of sectarian tension and to identify the fundamental reasons underlying it. The research involved a number of special methods, in particular, comprehensive systemic and holistic analysis, the method of expert assessment, as well as general scientific methods: analysis, synthesis and comparison. The paper concludes that there are three fundamental reasons among the broad range of reasons engendering sectarian tension that are of foremost importance for the origination of interreligious conflicts, relative to the countries of the Middle East region. The introduction of the fundamental correlation coefficient by the authors made it possible to construct a scale of assessment for individual countries of the Middle East according to the level of tension between the confessions therein and to set the principal measures to attenuate it. The comparison of the fundamental reasons for the emergence of sectarian tension and its manifestation in individual countries made it possible to evaluate the levels of its manifestation. The obtained results will significantly promote the constructive organisation of inter-confessional interaction in the 21st century.

Keywords: religion, inter-confessional, relations, reasons, Middle East

1. Introduction

Any person, throughout his/her life, has an inherent sense of belonging to a particular culture, to a particular social stratum. The determinative factor of this environment, according to Shaklein [1], is the socio-economic, political and historical state of the country (or territory), its linguistic and ethnic composition, official, that is, historical and cultural affiliation of the population to a particular religion or confessional group. The 21st century is a century of sectarian tension.

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According to the polls by the Pew Research Center (USA), the share of the non-religious population (atheists, agnostics, or confessionally indifferent people) will decrease by 2060 (from 16% to 13%). Islam will develop until it reaches parity with Christianity and 10% of Europeans become Muslims. By 2060, 40% of all Christians will live in sub-Saharan Africa. While changing religion through conversion may trigger religious violence, this is unlikely to happen since conversion will mainly take place as a result of Christians becoming non-religious [*The Changing Global Religious Landscape*, Pew Research Center, April 5, 2017].

A person's religion, according to Sorokin, is sort of a social costume that can be taken off and changed [2]. If this costume were purely ideological, then beliefs would change very often, since religious faiths are generally changeable. However, the core of religion is not beliefs or certain notional complexes, but one's sensual and emotional faith-related experience [2]. Erikson is reasoning in a similar vein, arguing that religion is closely related with an important part of the socio-historical matrix, which provides the necessary platform for identity formation [3]. In addition, he claims that religion has been and remains the oldest durable institution that creates a favourable environment for the development of fidelity. However, acts of fidelity represent one of the consequences of religious exclusivity. This view leads to a conclusion that it is religion that is the only path to truth and salvation, while any other views are faulty. If such eccentric position in respect of religion is accompanied by an exclusionary movement this can lead to totalitarianism and authoritarianism for the sake of religion [4].

As noted by Reyhler, a US CIA document confidently asserted back in August 1978 that "Iran is not in a revolutionary or even pre-revolutionary situation" [5]. Williamson deems this to be a most striking example of Western misapprehension of modern Islam and, in general, its misconception. The fundamental mistake of Western observers, he argues, is the assumption that Christianity does not exercise a direct role in the life of Western society. Therefore, the split of religion along with relevant governmental decision-making may be expected in the Middle East as well [6].

It may be noted that at the end of the 20th century, Huntington, an American political scientist, also warned about the pervasive revival of religion, represented by the upsurge of fundamentalist movements [7]. This was observed irrespective of the fact that almost all world and national religious confessions called for religious tolerance in respect of representatives of other religious views. However, the historical experience of the development of universal and national religious confessions shows a certain 'field of tension' or increased propensity towards conflict that has developed between some of them (Christians and Muslims against Jews, Muslims against Christians, Hindus against Muslims, Muslims against Buddhists, etc.).

The parallel development of dynamic religious movements gives rise to various contradictions between countries and nations, leading to inter-confessional confrontation.

As an example, one may refer to the problems of India (Hindus and Muslims), Israel (Muslims and Jews), Egypt (Muslims and Christians), Saudi Arabia (Muslims-Sunnites and Muslims-Shiites), etc. Religious faith, as asserted by the sociologist Abbruzzese, treated as adherence to a certain structured doctrine of salvation, prompts the believer to 'pander to it' and extract a number of dogmatic truths from it for own self [8]. The immersion into a coherently structured doctrine allows one to see the world in its integrity and to pick out a number of principles necessary for living in it, for structuring one's existence and a worthy eternal life after death.

The foregoing makes it possible to assert that the specific distinctiveness of sectarian tension can hardly be doubted. However, it should be noted that it does not represent an inevitable consequence of the interaction between the existing religious beliefs. The hypothesis of this research in the outlined situation is the assertion that sectarian tension is of a fundamental nature.

2. Methods

The methodological basis of the research is represented by the comprehensive systemic analysis of the works by the national and foreign scholars [4-11]. This analysis identifies the causes of the worldwide sectarian tension. Special attention was paid to the works of such scientists as Abbruzzese [8] and Zuo'an [9], since their findings correlate to a significant extent with the authors' hypothesis. To analyse and synthesise the epistemological potential of the available sociological research findings, the reports of the RAND Corporation (USA), Pew Research Center (USA), and Russian Public Opinion Research Center (Russia), as well as the database of the international research programme World Values Survey, were explored. The synthesis of findings of these studies made it possible to identify and substantiate the growing threat caused by the tense inter-confessional relations in the present-day world and to form a broad spectrum of its causes.

In addition, the authors used the methods of empirical research, in particular the method of expert assessment. The expert examination involved the participation of 25 experts: heads of research centres (5), doctors of science of philosophical, social, and humanitarian departments of universities having more than 30 years of professional experience (12), practical specialists in the field of inter-confessional relations (8). When applying the above methods, the authors mainly focused on identifying the fundamental reasons - distinguished within a broad range of causes of sectarian tension in the modern society - characteristic of the most countries of the Middle East region (which predicated the title of the article) and correlating these fundamental grounds with particular countries. The authors selected, as the fundamental reasons, those scored at 80% and more in the course of the expert assessment. For this purpose, the experts were asked to rank the causes of sectarian tension and correlate the identified fundamental grounds with specific countries in order to derive a fundamental correlation coefficient for each country. The fundamental correlation coefficient is a

quantitative measure deriving the linear dependence of sectarian tension in the society on the fundamental causes thereof. This coefficient was calculated through expert advice and has the following gradation: low level (-1 – -0.34), medium level (-0.33 – +0.33), high level (+0.34 – +1).

The fundamental correlation coefficient for a country was calculated as the arithmetic mean of expert assessments for all fundamental reasons of sectarian tension. The processing of survey results made it possible to construct an appropriate rating scale.

Table 1. Reasons for sectarian tension in the society (experts' conclusions).

Causes of sectarian tension	Experts' estimate (%)	Rank
The religious elite's urge for self-affirmation	93.1	1
Presence of historically established inter-confessional disputes between the adherents	89.3	2
Setting the borders between the newly formed states, that does not take into account the confessionality of the population living in these territories	82.1	3
External support of particular confessions in the country	78.5	4
Superficial knowledge of dogmas of the professed religion by the adherents	71.2	5
Presence of numerous confessions in the country	67.7	6
Globalisation processes typical of the 21 st century	53.1	7
Society development trends in the country	45.9	8
Specifics of inter-confessional communication in the country and, in general, in the world	32.6	9
Features of the state structure	23.9	10

3. Results

The study of publications devoted to sectarian tension [*The Changing Global Religious Landscape*, Pew Research Center, April 5, 2017; 3-10; 12] enabled the authors to identify a certain range of its causes (Table 1). At the same time, being guided by the purpose of the research and the expert survey results, the authors identified the fundamental reasons for the emergence of sectarian tension, that are most typical for the majority of the countries in the Middle East region:

- *the religious elite's urge for self-affirmation* - this results in purposeful squeezing out the representatives of other religious confessions from the sphere of governance, economics and culture (Israel, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Palestine);
- *the presence of historically established inter-confessional disputes between the adherents* - presently, there is not any specific centre capable of settling these disputes (Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Israel, Syria);

- *setting the borders between the newly formed states that does not take into account the confessionality of the population living in these territories, which provokes territorial disputes (Palestine, Israel, Lebanon, Jordan).*

Since the concordance coefficient of expert opinions was equal to 0.89, the authors believe that the results obtained in the course of the examination are relevant and reflect the contemporary practice and nature of sectarian tension.

The survey also made it possible to deduce the fundamental correlation coefficient in respect of the causes of sectarian tension for the countries of the Middle East region (Table 2), which makes it possible to formulate the principal measures to mitigate its level in concrete Middle East countries.

Table 2. Fundamental correlation coefficient in respect of the causes of sectarian tension for the countries of the Middle East region (experts' conclusions).

Countries	Fundamental causes			Fundamental correlation coefficient
	The religious elite's urge for self-affirmation	Presence of historically established inter-confessional disputes between the adherents	Setting the borders between the newly formed states that does not take into account the confessionality of the population living in these territories	
UAE	-0.95	-0.89	-0.85	-0.89
Qatar	-0.59	-0.78	-0.93	-0.77
Kuwait	-0.54	-0.84	-0.86	-0.74
Bahrain	-0.35	-0.64	-0.92	-0.64
Jordan	-0.83	-0.92	0.25	- 0.5
Syria	0.69	0.74	-0.41	0.34
Palestine	0.68	-0.17	1.0	0.50
Saudi Arabia	0.78	1	-0.2	0.53
Lebanon	0.71	1.0	0.53	0.75
Israel	0.93	0.98	1.0	0.97

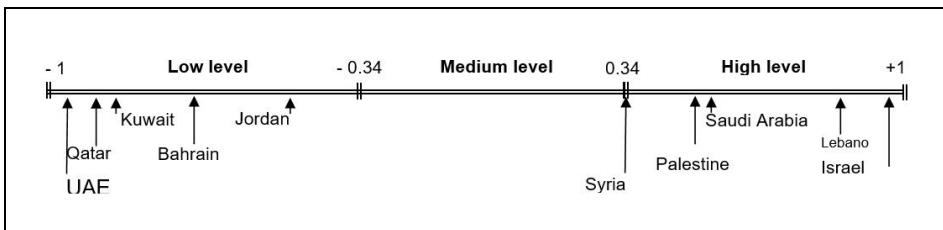


Figure 1. Scale of fundamental correlation coefficient values for the countries of the Middle East region.

A scale of values for the listed countries was applied as a practical approbation of using the fundamental correlation coefficient introduced by the authors (Figure 1). The use of this scale demonstrates the countries graded as requiring peacekeeping efforts to alleviate the level of sectarian tension.

The study of theoretical papers [3-5, 8, 9, 11-17] and empirical research works [*The Changing Global Religious Landscape*, Pew Research Center, April 5, 2017; *A Closer Look at How Religious Restrictions Have Risen Around the World*, Pew Research Center, 2019, <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/07/15/a-closer-look-at-how-religious-restrictions-have-risen-around-the-world/#government-restrictions-categories>, accessed 23.04.2021,] made it possible to distinguish three levels of tension in inter-confessional relations (Figure 2).

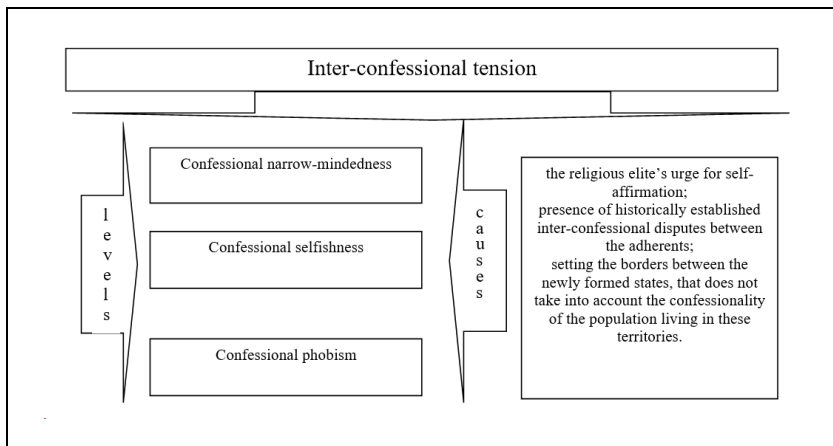


Figure 2. Sectarian tension levels and their fundamental causes.

1. *Confessional narrow-mindedness* is characterised by formation of communicative relations only within one ('own') religion. It is strongly pronounced in Israel where founding a family with a representative of another religion is not welcomed in order to exclude mixed ancestry.
2. *Confessional selfishness* is characterised by the actions to provide advantages to representatives of own religion to the detriment of adherents of other confessions), which are becoming increasingly widespread. It is most expressly manifested in Israel (Muslims) and Saudi Arabia (Shia Muslims).
3. *Confessional phobism*, is characterising open hostility and implacability towards other, 'alien' adherents. This, for instance, can be observed in the inter-confessional relations of Muslims and Christians in Egypt.

4. Discussion

The growing interaction between religious confessions and, at the same time, the growing trend towards religious diversity in today's globalised world create new opportunities and challenges for inter-confessional relations. On the one hand, since the interaction between different religious confessions becomes more frequent, the communions of believers have more opportunities for strengthening mutual cooperation. On the other hand, challenges like religious disputes or even conflicts are enhanced even although the trend towards

religious diversity stimulates cooperation [9]. The comprehension of these issues is of key importance, since the number of people professing a particular religion worldwide will increase in the next 40 years, while the share of the world population professing various religious beliefs will be affected by serious demographic changes [10].

The research has shown that in recent decades the number of civil wars fuelled by religious implication has increased significantly (Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Myanmar, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, etc.). Toft adheres to the same position: he substantiated in his work that religion-induced civil wars (44) accounted for a third of all civil wars (135) [10].

Analytical centres (Pew Research Center and others) also draw attention to the increased religious violence; however, they do not provide any general explanation of that. At the same time, the content analysis of the causes of modern armed inter-confessional conflicts (India, Pakistan, Myanmar, Syria, Egypt, China, Iraq, etc.) has shown that one of the reasons for this situation is that the governmental bodies, along with increasing tension in the religious dialogue, quite often do not assume the responsibility to uphold inter-confessional harmony, and forget that every religion professes the importance of serving the society and acting for the benefit of the individual. For instance, 'Jesus Christ's Sermon on the Mount', 'The Buddha's Four Noble Truths' and other manifestos.

Another reason for exacerbation of sectarian tension and its subsequent transition into an aggressive religious conflict is that the process of confessional phobia is surging only where there is a certain historical memory in the adepts of a particular religion (for instance, the ideology of 'Jihad' or 'Liberation Theology'), and this card is played by various forces towards solving their interests, specifically with the use of the mass media and the Internet (for example, Palestine - Israel).

At the same time, Nim [18] believes that five conflictological types of religiosity can be distinguished in accordance with the level of proneness to conflict (measured by factors of conflictogenity of religious consciousness and through conflicting on religious grounds):

1. High level of conflicting and conflictogenity (Russian Orthodox Church abroad, Old Believers);
2. High level of conflicting and low level of conflictogenity (Krishnaites);
3. Medium level of conflicting and conflictogenity (Evangelical Christians-Baptists, Seventh-Day Adventists);
4. Medium level of conflicting and low level of conflictogenity (Pentecostals);
5. Low level of conflicting and medium level of conflictogenity (Russian Orthodox Church).

The above is confirmed by the results of analysis of sociological research reports (PEW, 2007-2017) that show that the relationships between various confessions and the state in many countries of the world tend towards toughening of restrictions in the sphere of religion: significant restrictions on freedom of worship have been introduced in 52 countries; the number of

countries where people experience the utmost level of social hostility on religious grounds has increased from 39 to 56 within 10 (Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Myanmar, etc.). The highest level of restriction is observed in the Muslim regions of the Middle East and North Africa where 95% of countries practice persecution of certain religious communities by the authorities [<https://www.pewforum.org/2019/07/15/a-closer-look-at-how-religious-restrictions-have-risen-around-the-world/#government-restrictions-categories>]. These findings correlate highly with the results obtained in the course of the authors' expert survey.

At the same time, a research based on World Values Survey data obtained from 61 countries for the period of 1981-1997 showed that religiosity reduced revolutionary sentiments in the society, with the exception of Muslim communities [11]. This fact reflects the ability of militant Islamist groups to radicalise ordinary believers. This is exactly what happened during the 2011 Arab Spring, when the Muslims succumbed to American and Salafi propaganda and overthrew the governments in some North African countries, thereby plunging themselves into chaos and subsequent ravage (Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, etc.). In Egypt, they even brought the Muslim Brotherhood terrorist organisation to power. As one can see, the Augsburg Religious World principle (1555): 'Cujus regio ejus religio' ('One who has power sets faith') [12] is characteristic of the present-day earthly civilisation, as well and manifests itself specifically, as shown in this research, in the Middle East countries (Saudi Arabia, Israel, Palestine, Lebanon).

It can be asserted, within the framework of the above, that the results obtained in the course of the research are quite identical to the conflictological concepts of Luhmann's theory of religion, according to which all social systems are potentially prone to conflict. It is only the extent of actualisation of the conflict potential that varies, which, in turn, depends on the degree of differentiation of the systems and the public evolution [19].

This is well reflected in the results of the comparative analysis of the religious situation in Russia. Their synthesis makes it possible to draw a very interesting conclusion: the image of religion in the basic spheres of personal and public life in modern Russia has been enhanced in the conditions of decreased interest in the religious aspect of the life of the society, the absence of indiscernible and holistic religious consciousness in many believers, and even more, of fanatical creed. Most Russians consider themselves to be Orthodox in virtue of the cultural and historical tradition, rather than by faith. Proof of that is the fact that 72% of Russians consider themselves Orthodox, which figure is significantly larger than the number of all religious people in Russia [20].

The relationship between denominations and the state creates practical problems for the latter. Today they are of particular importance in many countries of the world, given the international, national and regional developments that shed light on the role of religion in terms of national identity and within minority communities. The problems vary: from the coordination of different systems for the purpose of employment, equity and quality assurance to

fundamental issues involving the values underlying the social life. This approach logically ensues from the scale of estimates of the fundamental correlation coefficient for the countries of the Middle East region, constructed by the authors, and also coincides with the provisions of regression analysis [13, 14] showing that religious fundamentalism and collective narcissism make people less prone to interreligious contacts (Israel, Palestine, Saudi Arabia). However, beneficent religious convictions, as well as the support of meta-religious confessions, promote inter-confessional contacts (Kuwait, Bahrain, Jordan, UAE, Qatar).

The numerous studies on the importance of egalitarian and voluntary inter-confessional contacts also clearly demonstrate that contacts based on a preconception of superiority (i.e. conviction that one religion is superior to others) have a counterproductive effect [3-5, 8, 9, 11-14]. Some studies demonstrate that the feeling of superiority over other groups, known as collective narcissism, is associated with negative attitudes towards outgroups that are perceived as distinct from the core inner group [15, 16]. It seems, the experts were reasoning precisely this way, highlighting the reasons - from the entire spectrum of considerations - deemed by them to be fundamental. It is not without reason that Sorokin distinguished the function of testing in religion (based on the principle 'a co-religionist is a kin, a gentile is a foe', with all ensuing consequences of the relationship) [17].

It should be recognised in these conditions that it is sectarian tension that prompts adherents to take the path of radicalisation. If an adept holds a strong belief that his God wants to see him as a martyr who blows people up, he will do it and will be convinced that he is doing it for righteous reasons, that he did the right thing.

5. Conclusions

The study has shown that the development of inter-confessional relations is conditioned by the extent of the development of religious pluralism in the society and the quality of interaction between the state and the religion in the society. Parallel development of dynamic religious confessions gives rise to various contradictions between them, leading to inter-confessional confrontation. At the same time, all religious confessions, recognising religious diversity and differences, should foster mutual understanding and compassion through dialogue, assume shared responsibility for maintaining peace and justice through collaboration, and contribute to intra- and inter-religious harmony. The obtained results allow the authors to assert that there are certain reasons, among the broad range of grounds engendering sectarian tension, that are of foremost importance. Therefore, the hypothesis put forward by the authors undoubtedly has the right to exist.

The authors realise that this research is just one of the vector approaches to such a topical problem as sectarian tension. Naturally, when analysing the causes and sources of existing and future inter-confessional contradictions, one

cannot unilaterally reduce everything to fundamental reasons only (it is indispensable to consider the economic, social, demographic situation, etc., in the first place). Moreover, the above represents only a certain aspect of the analysis of inter-confessional relations, a certain dimension in exploring the problems of the Middle East region, being, although, of fundamental nature and significance.

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