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The Language of anti-Shiism

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The recent wave of anti-Shiite rhetoric and sectarian polarization has caused profound concerns across the Middle East. Sectarian tensions are not new, of course, but the *vocabulary* of anti-Shiism in the Middle East has changed dramatically over the last 10 years. Shiites who used to be accused of ethnic otherness are now being cast as outside the Muslim community itself. Exclusion on doctrinal grounds was a mostly Saudi exception in the framing of Shiism. It is now increasingly becoming the regional rule.

Prior to 2003, anti-Shiism in Iraq was perhaps best encapsulated in the term *ajam*. *Ajam* (singular *ajmi*) is an Arabic phrase meaning non-Arab; however, in the modern Middle Eastern vernacular, particularly in Iraq, "the *ajam*" is usually understood as "the Iranians." Throughout the 20th century this term was used to discredit Shiite activists and political opponents by casting doubt on their national loyalty and Arab pedigree. Sectarian otherness was framed in distinctly national and ethnic terms with scant, if any, reference to sectarian dogma, doctrine, or beliefs. In other words, prior to 2003, Middle Eastern Sunni-Shiite dynamics were more often manifestations of nationalistic and ethnic rather than religious expression.

Ethnic markers mattered, of course, in an age dominated by anti-colonialism, "progressive revolutionary" ideologies and above all by pan-Arabism. Arab conceptions of "us and them" in most of the 20th century elevated Arab identity to the prime marker of belonging. As such, Shiite opposition in Iraq -- from Mahdi al Khalisi in the 1920s to exiled oppositionists in the early 21st century -- was discredited by successive governments on *ethnic* grounds of national inclusion rather than religious ones. Iraqi Shiite oppositionists -- even violent Shiite militants such as those of the 1970s -- were attacked for being allegedly pro-Iranian or even for being Iranian themselves -- *ajam*. Few bothered, for example, with their somewhat ambivalent views toward Aisha or the first three caliphs -- *rafidha*. Even the Iraqi regime's denunciation of the 1991 southern uprising largely stuck to the prism of ethnicity and only gingerly approached elements of faith, ritual, and doctrine.

The overthrow of Saddam Hussein changed all that. Since 2003, *ajam*, a term that was ubiquitous in what was regarded as anti-Shiite sentiment in Iraq and beyond, has all but disappeared from public usage. In its place has emerged a style of anti-Shiism that was largely the preserve of clerical circles of the Saudi Arabian variant. This is a discourse of exclusion primarily based on *religious* otherness that is embodied by the word *rafidha*. This new form of

sectarian animosity frames the Shiites as suspect not because of the allegedly ambiguous national loyalties of some nor because of the so-called "ethnic impurity" of others but because of the beliefs that define the sect as a whole.

There is a qualitative difference between stigmatizing the Shiites as *ajam* and stigmatizing them as *rafidha*. Its potential repercussions on stability and social cohesion explain why authoritarian regimes in Iraq and elsewhere employed the former and repressed the latter. Multi-sectarian states like Iraq need a convincing veneer of inclusivity to survive. Iraq can afford to treat its miniscule Baha'i community the way Saudi Arabia treats its religious minorities, but its internal stability is hardly served by the explicit, unabashed, and ideological exclusion of culturally or demographically competitive sections of the population such as the Sunnis or Shiites. In dealing with Shiite opposition, *ajam* was a far more useful tool than *rafidha* for successive Iraqi regimes, as it allowed for selective exclusion: the state line throughout the 20th century was that some Shiites may be *ajam* but that does not detract from "our brothers" the "noble Arab Shiite tribes." This starkly contrasts with exclusion on the basis of doctrine which would place *all* Shiites beyond redemption until they renounce their beliefs and their adherence to Shiism.

The shift in how sectarian discourse is framed and the effect that authoritarianism had in shaping public discourse can be easily gleaned by comparing pre and post-2003 Iraqi Salafi discourse. In pre-war Iraq, even the most ardently anti-Shiite Salafis had to navigate their message within the state's red lines that seemed to forbid any explicit wholesale condemnation of Shiites. Come 2003 and the removal of state restrictions and the accelerated politicization of sectarian identities, those same Salafis modified their message and adopted previously restricted frames of reference -- a shift that was immediately noticeable in the vocabulary used. The most notable change was the adoption of *rafidha* at the expense of *ajam* and the use of more wholesale doctrinal issues rather than just ethnic ones to condemn and exclude all Shiites. Needless to say it can scarcely be doubted that this discrepancy reflects the changing pressures of state rather than changes in beliefs or changes in a preacher's views regarding Shiites and Shiism.

A most illustrative example can be found in Iraq's most well known anti-Shiite Salafi polemicist, Taha al Dulaimi, a man whose vitriol is such that he recently advocated the formation of a Sunni region in Anbar on the upper Euphrates -- as it is, "free from Shiite filth," -- and contemplated this proposed region's ability to cut the Euphrates' water flow in order to, "kill the [Shiite] south." Dulaimi's endeavors almost exclusively revolve around anti-Shiism; however, prior to 2003, and in line with Iraqi and, to many extents, regional trends, his pre-war public preaching framed the issue in terms of ethnicity with anti-Iranianism thinly cloaking doctrinal hatred. In essence, his undoubtedly genuine anti-Iranianism provided a vehicle through which to express sectarian Salafi beliefs by wedding Arab-nationalist chauvinism to sectarian bigotry without crossing the censor's red lines.

For example, in a sermon from 1998, Dulaimi launched into a tirade against central tenets of Shiite practice, ritualm and belief; however, this otherwise standard Salafi sectarian discourse was peculiar in that it was done as part of an expose of Iranian enmity toward Arabs rather than Shiite enmity toward Muslims. In other words, the problem is the *ajam* not the *rafidha* who remain unmentioned throughout. As such, Dulaimi presented the *khums* as a form of *jizya* exacted from Arabs by Iranians; turbans as a Persian displacement of Arab identity (incidentally, so too for some reason is the ancient book of fables *Kalilah wa Dimnah*); temporary marriage (*mut'ah*) as nothing more than a Persian attack on Arab honor; even the word *sayyid* as not an Arab word but an Iranian word signifying the first Persian state; and so forth. The anti-Shiism was palpable but due to state restrictions, and perhaps due to pre-2003 boundaries of political

correctness, never once were the Shiites condemned for being Shiites; on the contrary, the sermon, and others from the 1990s, were filled with hollow obligatory disclaimers such as, "Iran bears no relation to original Shiism ... the original Arab Shiism is innocent of Iran."

This chimes with the ambivalent, even confused, view of many Arabs regarding Shiism prior to 2003: that there is essentially a bad Shiism and a good one with emotional and intellectual proximity to Iran being the arbiter differentiating between the two. This allowed the myth of a non-sectarian Arab world, in addition to myths of unity and uniformity, to be perpetuated and which allowed for a selective rather than wholesale exclusion of Shiites. In Dulaimi's pre-2003 words: "There is a difference between noble and true Shiites who have a noble and true Shiism and that alien Shiism. We are not talking about ... our dear brothers. These are our dear brothers ... beware the infiltrating *ajmi*." As is obvious in his voluminous writings since 2003, there is no doubt that the concluding sentiment would today be rephrased as the infiltrating Shiite or *rafidhi*.

These pre-2003 niceties, superfluous as they might seem to most Shiites, have long since been discarded. While Shiites' Arab pedigrees continue to be questioned, anti-Shiite discourse today is overwhelmingly concerned with *religious* otherness. It is the post-2003 sectarian landscape and the inflammation of a religiously inspired sectarian entrenchment that has shaped the sectarianization of Syria's civil war in stark contrast to how the Hama massacre of 1982 was framed. Likewise, it is this new sectarian landscape that is facilitating Hezbollah's unabashedly Shiite posture of late. Just as it is the post-2003 environment that has led to the spread of Sunni-Shiite tension beyond its usual geographic hotspots -- who could have predicted the public lynching of Shiites in Egypt of all places? Most strikingly perhaps the new sectarian landscape is illustrated by openly sectarian acts of violence and the genocidal rhetoric often accompanying them. Prior to 2003 seldom, if ever, was sectarian identity in and of itself the explicit rationale of discrimination or violence be it the deportation of tens if not hundreds of thousands of Iraqi Shiites in the 1970s and 1980s or the Hama massacre or even the violence of the Lebanese civil war.

Today it is no longer shocking to see violence framed and justified in terms of sectarian identity in and of itself as part of a wholesale condemnation and exclusion of the other. In such cases, *ajam* seems antiquated and hardly up to the task of vilifying the sectarian other. Sectarian extremists no longer pay lip service to the idea of unity and uniformity and state control has lost the ability -- and in some cases the interest -- to enforce the more selective and ambivalent sectarian discourse of the 20th century. Since 2003, a sectarian discourse marinated in religious dogma has emerged that leaves little room for compromise and even less room for "good Shiites" as was previously the case. The *ajam* were the "bad Shiites" whose *ethnic* impurities nevertheless potentially implicated the whole; however, the portrayal of Shiites as *rafidha* is a *religious* condemnation of all Shiite s for the fact that they are Shiites.

The newly invigorated emphasis on doctrinal as opposed to ethnic otherness has been internalized by some Shiite groups. In these circles, the term *rafidha* has been adopted and turned into a badge of honor. One group of activists proudly calls themselves *al shabab al rafidhi* (the *rafidha* youth) and publicly revel in those elements of Shiism that are most offensive to Sunnis. Similar Shiite groups compose poetry and anthems in which they refer to themselves as *rafidha* in an aggressive assertion of a very belligerent Shiite identity heavily infused with sectarian dogma. While this phenomenon remains relatively limited, it is reminiscent of the evolution of the "N"-word's usage over the 20th century. Also stricking is the contrast between such forms of Shiite expression and the more apologetic, low-profile Shiism that was more prevalent in the Arab world prior to 2003.

These changes speak volumes about Middle Eastern states and societies and how they have been transformed by the changes and pressures of the past 10 years. Far from being an issue of mere semantics, the disappearance of *ajam* and the ubiquity of *rafidha* in sectarian discourse reflects profoundly consequential transformations in how sectarian relations, the nation-state and the criteria for inclusion are viewed in the post-2003 Middle East. While the long-term ramifications and trajectories of these changes cannot be predicted with certainty, developments thus far raise serious concern for sectarian relations in the immediate future.

Throughout the 20th century sectarian relations in Iraq -- and to varying degrees in Lebanon, Syria, and Bahrain as well -- were framed through the prisms of the nation-state, ethnicity and national rather than religious inclusion or exclusion. A glaring exception, as already mentioned, was Saudi Arabia where sectarian identity and sectarian exclusion has always been, first and foremost, an issue of religion and religious doctrine.

Since 2003 however, the "Saudi exception" seems to be increasingly turning into the Middle Eastern rule. Today sectarian otherness in the Middle East is no longer framed in primarily ethnic or national terms but in starkly religious ones: where previously an Arab nationalist-influenced anti-Shiite discourse questioned the Shiites' ethnic and nationalist pedigree by referring to them as *ajam*, today a Salafi-influenced discourse questions Shiites' doctrines, religious beliefs, and ultimately their belonging to the Islamic world by referring to them as *rafidha*. This shift from ethnic or national exclusion to religious exclusion can potentially turn sectarian competition -- never pleasant even at the best of times -- into something far more divisive and intractable than anything witnessed in the history of the Arab nation-state.

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