# Middle East Insights

### Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore

# 'Shi'a Forces', 'Iraqi Army', and the Perils of Sect-Coding

## By Fanar Haddad

Last week Twitter was the site of a few rhetorical skirmishes between Professor Juan Cole and several Iraq-watchers—myself included, albeit very briefly. The exchanges were occasioned by Cole's use of the phrase "Shiʿa forces" to refer to the various non-Kurdish Iraqi formations (the Iraqi army included) that will lead the effort to recapture the city of Mosul from the Islamic State. Rare, if not downright mythical, is the sensible Twitter debate. Alas, this incident was no exception. Nevertheless, the to-and-fro between the Cole and his critics highlighted an important issue—one that disproportionally affects current commentary on the Middle East: the issue of sect-coding. When should something be sect-coded and when should the vocabulary of sects be avoided? How can we temper the prevalence of sect-coding in commentary on the Middle East without succumbing to a stifling and distortive political correctness? When is sect-coding a neutral linguistic device and when is it a damning value judgment?

Controversial semantics are of course not unique to sect-coding and the Middle East. Consider the role of religious identity in whether an event is labeled a "terrorist attack" or a "mass shooting." However, there has been a strange ubiquity and persistence about the sect-coding of all things Iraqi since 2003 (a pattern that has been replicated with Syria). Thirteen years after regime change, even some of the world's most esteemed academics can casually refer to the Iraqi army as "Shiʿa forces."

There is no need to debate the undeniable relevance of sectarian identity in post-2003 Iraq. Nor is there much uncertainty about the centricity of sect to many in Iraq's political classes (and not just the Shiʿas amongst them). However, this should not be grounds for the sect-coding of all things related to the Iraqi state—let alone all things related to Iraq. Yet all too often, that is precisely what we see. More to the point is the fact that what drives this sort of sect-coding is far more serious than just an objective assessment of the perceived balance of power between sect-centric forces. Rather, it is a value judgment on the legitimacy of the post-2003 Iraqi state. Rightly or wrongly, the national is generally viewed if not equated with legitimacy, legality, and modernity. As such, to sect-code a government or arm of the state is to de-nationalize and hence delegitimize it. Nowhere is this more the case than in Iraq where the legitimacy of the state has been violently contested since 2003. That contest means that one cannot use terms like "Shiʿa forces", "Shiʿa government," and the like without appearing to take sides in the contentious debate about the legitimacy of the Iraqi state. And in a way the reverse is similarly true: to insist on the use of "Iraqi forces" or "Iraqi state forces" is also to take sides in the struggle over the Iraqi state's legitimacy— this time defending the legitimacy of the Iraqi state.

This is symptomatic of the inherent difficulties surrounding discussions of post-2003 Iraq: how to maintain distance from an emotionally charged subject? One way to address this minefield

might be to question the relative accuracy of the terms. Love it or hate it, there exists an Iraqi state of sorts. It commands an army and other security forces, not least of which is the Counter Terrorism Service (CTS). Labeling these as "Iraqi forces" is accurate enough and only validates the Iraqi state's legitimacy in as far as it accepts its existence for want of a more functional alternative.

However, labeling the same forces "Shiʿa forces" not only validates a highly incendiary narrative of post-2003 Iraq, it is also inaccurate. A debate can be had as to whether or not the Popular Mobilization Units should be sect-coded as "Shiʿa forces," and even this is not as clear-cut as is often assumed. But to sect-code the Iraqi army or the CTS is highly problematic. These forces are far from being *exclusively* Shiʿa. That they are *majority*-Shiʿa should not be a source of controversy or sect-coding given Arab Iraq's demographic makeup. In any case, if demographic makeup alone warrants sect-coding then Iraq itself is forever doomed to the tyranny of sectarian labels.

Some may argue that the reason such forces must be sect-coded is that they are precisely the institutions that have upheld the sect-centric power structures that have sustained Shiʿa empowerment and allowed Shiʿa-centric forces to project Shiʿa hegemony in Iraq. But if this logic suffices for Iraq, should it not also suffice for other cases? Should we not use the same logic to, for example, label police forces across the United States as "white forces?" After all, they—like the Iraqi military, police, or CTS—have minorities among their ranks but have nevertheless upheld the power structures that have sustained white male privilege. Yet "Shiʿa forces" is a term of mainstream acceptance while "white forces" is one of those terms that are restricted to the darker corners of the internet.

Some are sure to protest: these forces ("Shiʿa forces"/"Iraqi forces") have committed crimes and abuses against Sunnis. In other words, they have engaged in sectarian violence and hence should at the very least be sect-coded. However, blanket terms such as "Shiʿa forces" paint far too broad an array of actors with a veneer of illegitimacy and conceal rather than reveal the actual perpetrators. Was it the army that committed a particular crime, was it the CTS, was it the police? In any case, and this is at the heart of the issue with sect-coding, are wartime abuses necessarily instances of *sectarian* violence? After all, abuses, excesses, and war crimes are hardly the preserve of sectarian conflict. The same Shiʿa-majority Iraqi forces were capable of committing awful excesses against Shiʿa militants in the Charge of the Knights operations of 2008 just as US soldiers were capable of shocking the world at Abu Ghraib without there being a sectarian dimension. In other words, one need not be part of a sectarian militia to commit a war crime.

**The Problem with Sect-Coding**

There are two inter-related issues with sect-coding: one concerns negative framing, the other is its divisiveness. Sect-coding what are meant to be state organs immediately de-nationalizes what are supposed to be national institutions thereby delegitimizing them. Such sect-coded negative framing cannot but be a force for division. How can a Shiʿa trust the state that governs him if he is convinced that it is a "Sunni state?" How can a Sunni trust an army if she is convinced that it is a "Shiʿa force?" This is precisely why we, as academics, commentators, and writers need to exercise particular caution when it comes to sect-coding—especially in these times of unprecedented sectarian entrenchment.

A good example of the potential impact of sect-coding is how this summer's effort to recapture the city of Fallujah from Islamic State militants was perceived in the regional. While a scientific opinion survey eludes me for now, casually observing Arabic-language social media at the time and the comments of some of the Arab world's most influential pundits showed the

extent of the Iraqi state's excommunication from the dysfunctional Arab family. It was not particularly difficult to glimpse a desire, if not for an Islamic State victory, then at least for a failure of the Iraqi state's campaign. The most easily encountered position was one that portrayed the episode in purely sectarian terms: Shiʿa orcs versus Sunni hobbits with nary a mention of the Islamic State that had occupied Fallujah for over two years. More disconcerting were those who openly framed the Islamic State as the lesser of two evils when compared to the Iraqi state and its "Shiʿa forces."

Beyond individual military campaigns and beyond Iraq, the ubiquity of sect-coding has prevented national fronts from emerging and has stood in the way of a politics of citizenship in several parts of the Middle East. In countries that are home to a significant sectarian plurality or that have a "sectarian issue," there is no surer way of undermining a political challenge than by sect-coding it. Indeed, sect-coding has even tainted how sympathy and morality are conceived. Recent years have seen the normalization of the ugly spectacle of sympathy and solidarity being selectively handed out on the basis of perceived sectarian solidarities rather than on any point of principle or morality. Tragedies, atrocities and victims are only deserving of attention and sympathy if they are "our" tragedies, atrocities and victims.

**Covering the Middle East in Sectarian Times?**

I have never been one to advocate shying away from the vocabulary of sects: some things simply cannot, need not, and should not avoid sect-coding. To deny the existence of Shiʿa and Sunni entrenchment today or to deny the sect-centricity of some political actors would be political correctness gone counter-factual. In responding to the journalistic obsession with sectarian categories some scholars have pushed too far in the other direction. For example, in a 2010 study on Iraqi identity, a legal scholar argued that Iraqis can be divided according to "national and ethnic divisions," most notably Arabs and Kurds or they can be divided on the basis of religion in which case it is a majority Muslim country with smaller religious minorities. "This," he concludes, "is the true picture of a historic, united, inclusive Iraq. Not a presumptive Iraq [of] . . . statelets, regions sects and ethnicities." The proverbial elephant in the room is of course Iraq's sectarian groups, most glaringly, Shiʿas and Sunnis all mention of whom is painstakingly avoided. This neither helps the reader understand Iraq nor does it help address Iraq's sectarian tensions. Clearly, this example shows that being allergic to the vocabulary of sects is no less distortive than being obsessed by it.

So, avoiding the vocabulary of sects or wishing them away is not the answer. But is it possible to come up with a hard and fast rule or formula for when sect-coding is appropriate and when it is not? Probably not, given the inescapable subjectivity that would be involved in such an exercise. However, we can still try to exercise caution in what we sect-code and how we use the vocabulary of sects. When it comes to something as complex as a state, regime or society we need to be particularly careful. Indeed it can be argued that sect-coding a regime or government cannot but be a loosely-veiled dismissal of its legitimacy. Whatever one's intentions there is no way of using phrases like "Shiʿa forces," "ʿAlawi regime," or "Sunni monarchy" without calling the state's legitimacy into question. If that is one's intention then one would do better to understand and critique the nature of a regime—something that is never fully captured in the vocabulary of sects.

The case of Israel offers us an interesting illustration of vocabulary and legitimacy. Despite the centrality of Jewish identity in the conception and practice of the Israeli state, few besides Israel's more active detractors would use the term "Jewish forces" to refer to the Israeli military. In other words, using ethno-religious markers to code the forces of a state that is explicitly based on an ethno-religious identity is, in this case at least, deemed politically incorrect

in western circles. As such, standard histories of Israel will refer to "Jewish forces" only with reference to pre-1948 paramilitary groups such as the Haganah. As soon as the narrative crosses 1948, "Jewish forces" become "Israeli forces"—national, legitimate, conventional.

In the case of Iraq, thirteen years of relentless sect-coding have had a considerable impact on how the country is perceived by outsiders. I have come across Middle Easterners who believe that a Sunni Iraqi soldier is a contradiction in terms; that the name Muhammad (repeat: Muhammad) will get one in trouble at checkpoints manned by "Shiʿa forces"; that Sunnis live in constant fear for their lives and so forth. The Iraqi state, such as it is, is an unmitigated disaster but none of this is true. Critics of the Iraqi state are better served by examining and highlighting the political system's failings rather than using sectarian labels that explain nothing.

Sect-coding is often as much an expression of personal biases as it is a sincere description of a particular state of affairs. What gets sect-coded and what does not says a lot about power relations in a given context. When is it a tribal uprising and when is it a Shiʿa or Sunni uprising? When is an actor's sectarian identity worth mentioning? When does a murdered corpse require sectarian affiliation? And at what point do we accept a person's sectarian identity as incidental? Sectarian categories are often relevant, particularly in these days of sectarian entrenchment. Yet it is that same climate that makes it incumbent upon us to exercise caution when using the vocabulary of sects. The consequences of careless sect-coding can go far beyond anything intended or imagined by an individual author or commentator.

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