The 44TH Annual Conference of the North American Association of Islamic and Muslim Studies (NAAIMS) cosponsored and hosted by Middle East Studies at Brown University on September 19, 2015) highlighted *"Sectarianism in Islam and Muslim Communities."* The Conference Program Chair, Beshara B. Doumani, the Director of the Middle East Studies (MES) at Brown University, and Sarah A. Tobin, MES Associate Director, welcomed the participants and expressed the Department's excitement for hosting a conference on sectarianism in the Muslim world with the goal of "bringing informed perspectives on one of the most pressing issues of our time." In her introductory remarks, NAAIMS Board of Director member, Maria M. Dakake (George Mason University, Fairfax, VA), welcomed the guests on behalf of NAAIMS President, Jon Mandaville (Portland State University, OR) who was not able to attend. In his prepared remarks to the attendees, Mandaville referenced the importance of this conference for analyzing the "enormous diverse aspects of Islam," and noted how the use of language and "word-choices" creates "different worlds" that generate labels and pejorative implications of the word "sect."

Established and emerging scholars examined critical aspects of sectarianism in four panel sessions. The following are among the questions addressed by the presentations and analyzed by the discussants: Are different Islamic sects [e.g., Ismaili, Shi'i, Sunni, Zaidi, Kharijite, etc] perceived as different religions or belief systems? Did politics play a role in the development of sectarianism since the advent of Islam? How did sectarian concepts develop in the early Muslim community? Are extremist groups products of modernity, and not of Islamic principles?

The first panel, **"Rhetorics of Sectarianism,"** was moderated by the chair, Faiz Ahmed (Brown University, Providence, RI), with Nancy Khalek (Brown University, Providence, RI) serving as the panel discussant.

The panel opened with a most fascinating presentation titled *"A Narrative Identity Approach to Islamic Sectarianism,"* by Adam Gaiser (Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL). It examined how narratives are used by people to form identities through which they interpret their experiences, and therefore, the "narrative identity approach might be fruitfully applied to the study of Islamic sectarianism by treating sect/school affiliations as one particular cluster of narratives." Gaiser explained how this approach "avoids essentializing sect and school affiliations by recognizing them as products of human beings – products that accumulate, change and develop (even break down) – over time … [and] it recognizes sect/school identity as part of the multiple, intersecting and competing identities that constitute a person or social entity."

According to the discussant, Nancy Khalek, Gaiser's paper was the "most poignant with respect to the proper terminology for assessing communal identification among doctrinal groupings," and that his examination of "strategies of narrative is an important intervention in how we study medieval Islamic sources, which are themselves often didactic, highly constructed, and put to political ends."

For example, in his response to a question about how he would formulate each chapter along a narrative identity line, Gaiser stated that "each sect/group would have to have its own answer to the question of difference." Gaiser argued that "the Kharijites viewed themselves as a righteous remnant amidst a sea of kufr, and they responded by separating physically from the rest of the Islamic community, or by hiding the Ibadi response in their midst." He explained that the Shi'ites, on the other hand, "clung to their Imams - who were assumed to be God's chosen representatives after the

Prophets, although they were not prophets themselves." Piety seems to be the dynamic force behind difference and identity.

Michael Pregill's (Boston University, Boston, MA) presentation *"Sects That Feign Forgetting Anti-Sunnism and Anti-Judaism in Early Shi'i Propaganda"* examined how various approaches toward understanding Islamic scripture are based on how the Qur'an is read, interpreted and understood. He argued that the "Qur'an hierarchalizes different kinds of beliefs, dividing people into idolaters, *Ahl al-Kitab,* and Believers/Muslims, so the early Muslim community kind of inherits that and uses it in its worldview - establishing hierarchies and drawing distinctions between different ranks of believers, and assimilating 'heretics'/sectarians to the Qur'anic hierarchy - so that sectarians are seen as not quite infidels, but not quite believers either - the way that Jews and Christians are kind of in-between disbelievers and believers in the Qur'an."

Finally, the presentation *"Modern Islamic Scholarship between Sectarian History and Histories of Sectarianism"* by Michael Dann (University of Illinois at Urbana, Champaign, IL) provided an examination of the case study undertaken by five twentieth century Arab *'ulama* (scholars), three Shi'ites, and two Sunnis, on the historical issues and inquiries that define the Sunni-Shi'ite controversy. Nancy Khaled, the discussant, noted that his presentation "alerts us to the economic and political constraints on the production and dissemination of contemporary scholarship from within and without the Muslim world."

These presentations complimented each other by examining how terminology and expressions define, distort or deflect from the meaning of sectarianism. They demonstrated how misunderstandings and problems began developing in the Muslim world through the use of inaccurate or improper terminology to define such words as "sect" and "sectarianism."

A brilliant discussion followed during the Q & A session. The discussant noted that each paper conveyed significant value and "meaning to bear on the rhetorics of sectarianism [by explaining] why rhetorical strategies and socio-political positions, more than an emphasis on theology or belief, were among the chief motivators for communal identification in the medieval Islamic world."

The second panel session, **"Contemporary Militant Sectarianism,"** which was moderated by the chair, Maria M. Dakake (George Mason University, Fairfax, VA) included Corri Zoli (Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY) as the panel discussant.

In his presentation *"Radical Discourse and the Killings of Civilians: Al-Qaeda and ISIS as Case Studies,"* Mohammad Hassan Khalil (Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI) explained that although the leaders of both terrorist organizations (Al-Qaeda and ISIS) portray the Shi'ia as unbelievers, ISIS "actually goes out of its way to fight and kill Shi'i combatants and civilians." Khalil asserted that despite their profound differences, "both al-Qaeda and ISIS follow similar lines of thinking when it comes to their religious-legal (shar'i) justifications for the killing of civilians."

According to the discussant, Corri Zoli, "this jihadist justification [by Al-Qaeda and ISIS] of the use of violent conflict with implications for civilians has no basis in Islamic legal doctrine. Given the significant global public confusion on this issue - the successful efforts of jihadist strategic communication strategies - it is essential to make these points clear."

The next speaker, Isaac Kfir (Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY), gave a presentation on *"Human (In)Security and Social Identity Group: The Case of Jihadi Terrorism in Africa"* where he argued that socio-political and economic conditions escalate human insecurity. He stated that a rise in militant jihadi activity in the continent of Africa is due to the "role of human insecurity on the formation of social identity groups." Kfir explained how terrorism in Kenya, Nigeria, and Mali stem from different elements of human insecurity that promote militant sectarianism. Given his argument that terrorist groups use human insecurities to attract recruits, Kfir concluded that "only by ending the marketplace of identities can one challenge the Islamic militancy in Africa."

According to the discussant, Kfir does a good job examining the role of human insecurity in Africa without allowing "ethnicity and religion … diverse and fluid constructs with much identity investment in certain views of these concepts … to become oversimplified and even essentialized." The discussant noted that Kfir's presentation also avoided the danger of allowing the "jihadist narrative to become an identity narrative about resistance via violence, instead of what it is, a political and social movement that gathers up local grievances and vulnerable populations to achieve power through political violence and repression."

The presentation on *"Toward a Political Theory of Sectarianism in the Middle East: The Salience of Authoritarianism over Theology"* by Nader Hashemi (University of Denver, Denver, CO) was delivered by Danny Postel (University of Denver, Denver, CO). Hashemi argued that "political mobilization and manipulation of sectarian identities are a key strategy for regime survival and it is within this framework that the question of sectarianism can be better understood." He also mentioned Vali Nasr's suggestion presented in his acclaimed book, *The Shi'a Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*, "that traditional concepts and categories used to explicate the Middle East, such as modernity, democracy, fundamentalism and nationalism, no longer adequately explain the politics of the region. [And] it is rather the old feud between Shi'is and Sunnis that forges attitudes, defines prejudices, draws political boundary lines, and even decides whether, and to what extent, those other trends have relevance." It is noteworthy that Hashemi rejected the concepts "old feud" and/or "ancient sectarian hatreds" between Sunnis and Shi'is, and placed the "roots of "sectarian conflict in the late twentieth century, and not in the seventh century." Hashemi stated that the "political context that illuminates the question of sectarianism is the persistence of authoritarianism – as the dominant feature of the politics of the Middle East – and the crisis of legitimacy facing ruling regimes that has followed as a consequence."

During the Q & A session, the discussant, Corri Zoli, added that "Danny Postel and Hashemi are right to see ethnic and religious identity constructs as – under certain conditions – able to reinforce one another in ways that create sectarian dynamics." Her analysis that the "utility of such mutual reinforcement [is viewed] as political – a tactic that achieves power under certain conditions – in ways that mobilize the notion of 'authenticity.' "

The second panel session was followed by an equally provocative **Luncheon Keynote Address** by M. Nazif Shahrani's (Indiana University, Bloomington, IN) on *"Why Muslim Sectarian Politics of Rage in the Age of 'Empires of Trust'? "* He argued that the "root causes of current Muslim politics of rage are not religious or sectarian [as often alleged]; instead they are externally imposed and forcibly maintained inappropriate systems of extractive governments" in the Muslim Middle East and Central Asia. Based on his analysis, understanding the concept behind the Western colonial theories of the 18th and 19th centuries is a viable key to understanding the politics of sectarian rage in today's Muslim world. Shahrani examined the three forms of Euro-American empires and the consequences

that their colonial policies and practices had on the Muslim Middle East. He argued that according to historian Thomas F. Madden, "the rise of new science and technology-driven Western or European colonial powers brought about significantly different imperial projects in character, if not in intent." He added that "Madden categorizes empires into three types: Empires of Commerce, Empires of Conquest, and Empires of Trust." Shahrani stated that the "most recent emergent type of Western imperial system - i.e., empire of trust or empire by invitation - with its highly pernicious effects, especially in the Muslim/Arab Middle East and Central Asia during the 20th century, may offer a window for understanding the causes of current ever escalating Muslim politics of rage."

The third panel session, **"Sect, State and Security,"** which was moderated by the chair, Maria M. Dakake (George Mason University, Fairfax, VA), consisted of presentations by Alexander Henley (Georgetown University, Washington, DC), Natana J. Delong-Bas (Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA), and Sarah A. Tobin (Brown University, Providence, RI). Nathaniel Berman (Brown University, Providence, RI) served as the discussant.

This session began with Alexander Henley's presentation *"New Roles of Religious Leaders at the Interface between Sect and State in Lebanon."* This paper focused on how "three Islamic religious leaderships have become institutional expressions of a distinctive Lebanese sectarianism, and how they have in the process become defenders of the nation-state." He analyzed how Lebanon's sectarian-based government can objectively govern a nation by examining the historical development of "communal autonomy in religious affairs." Henley highlighted the manner in which "communal self-governance – which included jurisdiction over personal status law – called for centralized religious institutions that could manage nationwide bureaucracies." His examination included a review of how a "Sunni mufti, Shi'i sheikh, and Druze sheikh al-'aql were each elevated to leadership of new religious hierarchies."

This was followed by Natana J. DeLong-Bas's paper *"Between Conflict and Coexistence: Saudi Shi'is as Subjects, Objects, and Agents in Wasatiyya and Wataniyya."* With her focus on the minority Shi'i population in Saudi Arabia, DeLong-Bas stated that "since 9/11 and the 2003-2005 terrorist attacks within Saudi Arabia, Shi'is have been variously considered as Iranian agents, terrorists within, apostates, political dissidents, partners in national dialogue, targets of development projects, and aspiring students and citizens." In her examination of sectarianism in this desert kingdom, she concluded that "ultimately, the question is whether Saudi society overall will continue to follow the twin paths of *wasatiyya* (moderation) and *wataniyya* (love of nation) declared by former King Abdullah, asserting a supra-identity uniting otherwise disparate identities, or if regional political instability will result in a resurgence of perceived sectarian strife."

Sarah Tobin highlighted concerns about the development of sectarianism in Jordan due to the influx of Syrian migrants in her presentation *"Syrian Refugees in Jordan: Carriers of Sectarianism."* She stated that "Jordanians reinforce the idea that sectarianism is not welcome in Jordan, and is even - as a few asserted – 'against Islam.' " She concludes that "the influx of sectarian outlooks held by Syrian refugees prompt Jordanians to reinforce the narrative that Jordan is free of such divisions and will continue to remain so in nationalist narratives."

The fourth panel session on **"Sectarianism and the Transnational"** brought together a diverse group of presenters: Alexander B. Stewart (University of California, San Diego, CA), Faegheh (Fawn) Shirazi (University of Texas at Austin, TX), and Lior B. Sternfeld (Pennsylvania State

University, University Park, PA). It was chaired by Sherine Hamdy (Brown University, Providence, RI) with Pelin Kadercan (Brown University, Providence, RI) serving as the discussant.

Although only one paper dealt with sectarianism in this session, according to the discussant, Pelin Kadercan, "all three papers had commonalities presenting new findings that are potentially very valuable." Kadercan noted that the common theme "highlighted transnational perspectives which … explored the field from a global standpoint [and] brought new intellectual challenges to major narratives in the field."

The first presentation *"Where is Allah? Sectarian Debate, Ethnicity, and Transnational Identity among the Salafis of Northwest China"* by Alexander B. Stewart highlighted sectarianism in China and analyzed practices among Chinese Muslims in the urban Hui community of Xining, Qinghai Province. It "examined sectarian conflict between the locally dominant, Wahhabi-inspired Yihewani sect that developed at the turn of the twentieth century and a rapidly growing Salafi minority." Stewart's penetrating discussion on interpreting and understanding Islamic texts examined how sectarian revival movements destabilized the religious and ethnic identity of Chinese Muslims.

According to the discussant, Pelin Kadercan, Stewart "emphasized the Salafis' own perception of Salafiyya as a method, not a sect which could have many implications." She noted that it was interesting to see "how an individual experience transformed into a nationalist movement [when] … Yihewani Muslims in the 1920s tried to strengthen the nation of China in order for Chinese Muslims to be accepted as equal members of the global ummah."

The next two presentations focused on transnational concepts and the discrimination of sects and/or religious and ethnic minority groups in Muslim-majority countries. The probing presentation by Faegheh (Fawn) Shirazi on *"Mandaeans of Iran and Iraq"* highlighted the repression and marginalization of the Mandaeans throughout history. Shirazi defined them as "an ethno-religious group of gnostic people living in different parts of the world with the largest group living in Iran and Iraq."

The final presentation *"Religious Minorities, Ethnic Minorities, Political Minorities: Jews in the Iranian Tudeh Party"* by Lior B. Sternfeld explained that after "thousands of Iraqi Jews fled to Iran … following the Farhud pogroms in 1941 … [they] joined the recently-established Tudeh Party and thus became an ethnic, religious, and political minority." He stated that most of the Jews who joined the Communist Party did so "to counter fascist and anti-Jewish inclinations in the Iranian society." According to the discussant, his presentation was concerned primarily with "how minorities contributed to the establishment of the Iranian Communist party, Tudeh, which became a vehicle of integration of the party and the Iranian society."

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