

NAAIMS 44th ANNUAL CONFERENCE
[Formerly the Association of Muslim Social
Scientists of North America (AMSS)]

“Sectarianism in Islam and Muslim Communities”

Cosponsored By:
Middle East Studies
Brown University, Providence, RI

Saturday, September 19, 2015

ABSTRACT

“Toward a Political Theory of Sectarianism in the Middle East:
The Salience of Authoritarianism over Theology”

By: Nader Hashemi, Ph.D.
(University of Denver, Denver, CO)

In his critically acclaimed book, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*, Vali Nasr has suggested 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. It “is rather the old feud between Shias and Sunnis that forges attitudes, defines prejudices, draws political boundary lines, and even decides whether, and to what extent, those other trends have relevance.” In keeping with this argument, President Obama has invoked on numerous occasions the phrase “ancient sectarian differences” to explain the turmoil and conflict in the Arab-Islamic world today. This raises the question how old is the feud between Shias and Sunnis and how far back in history can we trace the origins of sectarianism that is currently destabilizing the Middle East? By rejecting the paradigm of “ancient sectarian hatreds” this paper locates the roots of sectarian conflict in late twentieth century and not in the seventh century. More specifically, 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. This presentation argues that the political mobilization and manipulation of sectarian identities is a key strategy for regime survival and it is within this framework that the question of sectarianism can be better understood. Drawing on the literature of “ethnic political mobilization” and the literature in international relations (which explains the regional rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran), the question of sectarianism will be analyzed as a function of the “broken politics” of the Middle East, and not the result of irreconcilable theological differences between Sunnis and Shias.