

Why sectarianism is tearing Muslim societies apart.

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There will be many catastrophic outcomes to the [present political chaos in Egypt](#), but the one that every Muslim dreads which will have the worst consequences for the wider Arab and Islamic world will be the increasing spread of sectarianism and intolerance that will now flourish out of the Arab world's most important state and Islam's bastion of thought, learning and tolerance for centuries.

Even as the [Muslim Brotherhood](#) and the army continue to battle it out in Cairo's streets, Egypt's [vulnerable Coptic Christians](#) are getting the blame - for siding with the military or the US, or for just being different. Ten per cent of Egypt's 85m people are Christian and they have seen dozens of their churches and other symbols burnt down over the past two years.

In [Syria](#), where 8 per cent of its 23m population is Christian, the same thing is happening as the Christians are blamed and being killed by both sides. In [Iraq](#) where one thousand people - mainly Shias - died in July alone, [al-Qaeda](#) is trying to make it a fact of life to eliminate all non-Muslim minorities and even the majority Shias who do not follow the terror network's intolerant interpretation of Sunni Islam.

Beyond the Middle East sectarianism has gripped [Pakistan](#) like never before as Sunni extremists gun down Christians, Shias, Ahmedis and most recently Ismailis - the most non-violent and responsible Shia sect that has virtually single handedly built up Pakistan's teaching institutions. Pakistan's 700,000-strong army and its feeble, dithering government appear unable or unwilling to stop the violence or the collapse into a state of terror unleashed by the terrorists.

The truth is that no Muslim in history has ever lived in any state that belonged 100 per cent to one sect or even an orthodox Sunni-run state. The Prophet Mohammed lived alongside Jews and [peoples of many religions](#) including what were then called idol worshippers or heathens. The Koran has specific and repeated instructions as to how Muslims are to treat non-Muslim minorities - by protecting them.

That made Islam welcome in many parts of the ancient world where minority ethnic groups were groaning under repression of one kind or another. It was the Muslim world that took in the Jews after they were ousted from Catholic Spain in the 15th century.

Muslim empires of the past prospered by allowing multiple Islamic sects and non-Muslims to live under their protection. Failed Muslim empires and rulers were always those who insisted upon trying to assert a single sectarian state. The lessons of history are all but forgotten, for in this modern world Muslims have never known the extent of sectarianism that is today tearing Muslim societies apart.

In the modern era blame is to be shared by all sides as extremism has gripped Muslim politics worldwide - such as the Shia extremism that came out of the Iranian revolution and was force fed to many societies and Shias in particular; Sunni extremism did not just come out of the birth of al-Qaeda, but was due to the earlier massive funding of Wahhabism and other forms of extremist thought by the newly rich Gulf oil kingdoms.

If the money Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states have spent since the 1970s trying to spread Wahhabism had instead gone towards making every Muslim child literate, the Muslim world would be raking in the Nobel Prizes today rather than being the centre of illiteracy and ignorance. Saudi Arabia does not even allow Christians or those of any other faith to worship in their country - a complete contradiction to what the Prophet preached.

That is not to say sectarianism has not existed ever since the early Islamic world was divided between the majority Sunnis and the minority Shia, but it had invariably remained dormant until it was stoked by political forces or rulers with an aim to dominate the state or the religious polity. We only have to look to the Christian world for the best example. For centuries the wars between Protestants and Catholics - the destructive desire to rule according to the precepts of one religious sect - bled Europe white and ultimately helped found America.

But in today's world the methodical madness of many Muslim rulers in allowing sectarianism to flower is less understandable. When Pakistan came into being in 1947, 23 per cent of its population was non-Muslim, according to the scholar Farahnaz Ispahani. Now that figure is more like 3 per cent. As a Pakistani of the midnight's children generation, I have watched a steady procession of minorities leaving.

First the Anglo-Indians were driven out by intolerant regimes and extremist Sunni believers, followed by the Hindus and Sikhs who left soon after. The Christians followed and then a plethora of Muslim sects who are all now looking for foreign passports - Ismailis, Ahmedis, Shias, Boras and Memons. The drivers of sectarianism were not just extremists but politicians, generals and bureaucrats. Nobody with power is now prepared to defend the minorities.

Egypt will rapidly become intolerant of its minorities not just because extremists have suddenly taken over the helm of affairs, but because the ruling elites will find it convenient to become intolerant. Intolerance is a political act of revenge, vengeance and conquest. It has nothing to do with religion because it actually works against what Islam teaches.

If Muslims are ever forced to live under unitary, single sect states, they will no longer be true Muslims because Islam does not allow that. But who will remember the true religion when one sect after another is being eliminated by the fires of extremism.

The writer is a best-selling author of several books about Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia, most recently 'Descent into Chaos'