THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN THE MIDDLE EASTERN SECTARIAN DIVIDE

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Inflammatory and demonising mass media is not only dangerous, but turns seriously deadly in certain volatile ethnic, racist or sectarian contexts. In an atmosphere charged with religious fervour and references, some media degenerate into mere propaganda against whatever 'other' that may be different in religion, or even against another sect within the same religion. The extent of the destruction that this sort of media could inflict depends, of course, on the particular conditions of the given case. In the current evolution of regional sectarian divisions in the Middle East, religious media have been manipulated by rival parties, furthering these divisions. Although there is a lack of recent and credible audience research that might inform us about the actual impact of this manipulated media, a number of conceptual considerations can be noted. From the outset, it should be stated that extremist religious discourses on media platforms (and elsewhere) do not fully dominate the public debate. Moderate and mild religious approaches and media are also part of the scene, though not as vocal and sensational as the former. The following remarks, however, will examine the extreme elements of religious media, and attempt to conceptualise their role and dynamics within current regional politics and rivalry.

The focus in this discussion on television broadcasting, as opposed to other forms of media (for example, press and social media), is justified by the fact that TV remains the most influential of all media—old and new. This is the prevailing view among scholars and media researchers.[27] In the Arab and Middle Eastern context, TV's influence and

27   As Nick Couldry puts it: 'television is likely to remain most people's medium of communication in the

lead over other media forms is yet further enhanced in countries where levels of illiteracy are shamefully high, relegating the usage rates of social media and other readable media to a secondary position. Before exploring any of these considerations, and by way of preparing the ground for discussion, it helps to recognise some aspects of the media–politics dynamics and settings in the region. In the first place, it should be underlined that we have a mediascape that is extremely crowded, with spectrum-spanning forms, content, ownership and geography. In terms of form, we have transborder TV broadcasting, radio transmission by air and online, newspapers and magazines and, most recently, the rapid spread of social media. In terms of ownership, we have state-owned or semi-state owned media, privately owned media and media that is owned by parties or certain groups. With regard to their politics and discourse of 'mobilisation', these media vary from 'moderate' to 'radical', with wide shades of colouring in between. When categorised according to their religious affiliation, we may group them into Sunni, Shia and Christian-inclined media.[28] All these media should also be viewed from the perspective of the content they deliver, as news media, entertainment media, religious media or a combination of all three. Last but not least, one should ascertain whether these media are based in the region or beaming in from abroad and hoping to attract a following.[29]

Each media grouping has its own 'sub-categories' and is manifested in various ways and via different agents. But what matters more for the sake of our discussion here are the news and religious media where the fault lines of sectarian tensions and rising wars can be demarcated. News and religious channels in the region are mostly non-privately owned, with states, semi-statutory bodies or political/religious parties controlling the levers of money and orientation. Sunni news, entertainment and religious media encompasses a wide and diverse group, ranging from the mainstream Dubai-based MBC network (including al-Arabiya) and Qatar's al-Jazeera, spanning dozens of Sunni religious channels all the way to jihadist websites and online streaming, such as Minbar al-Tawheed, one of the main supportive hubs of al-Qaeda ideology.[30] Shia media spans no less diverse a spectrum, including the Hezbollah al-Manar TV; Iranian-backed TV and radio stations, such as al-Alam; and a plethora of Iraqi channels. Closely related to this group are the

foreseeable future, however delivered and with whatever web-based enhancements', Nick Couldry (2012). *Media, Society, World: Social Theory and Digital Media Practice*. Cambridge; Malden, MA: Polity, p. 18.

28   Apart from the Sunni–Shia tension manifested by TV media, there is the Muslim–Christian tension, where battles are fought between extreme TV channels belonging to each camp. This discussion falls outside the scope of this paper. For more on the structure and content of Christian and Salafi channels, see Khaled Hroub (2012). *Religious Broadcasting in the Middle East*. New York: Columbia University Press.

29   There are many media outlets that are based outside the Middle East but consider the region to be their main 'target audience'—including the broadcasting owned and operated by the big external players. Besides the oldest service, BBC Arabic (originally in radio but also in TV since 2008), and BBC Persian (established in 2009), we have the Al-Hurra network, based in Washington DC (2003); the German Deutsche Welle Arabic TV in Berlin (2002); the Russian Rousya Al-Yaoum in Moscow (2007); and the French France 24, near Paris (2006).

30   See Minbar Al-Tawheed wal Jihad, http://www.tawhed.ws [Consulted 15 January 2014].

media that consider themselves part of the 'resistance axis', such as the al-Mayadeen channel, which was founded in 2012 in Lebanon to support Syria and Hezbollah and is most likely financed by both. Though technically not a Shia channel, it nevertheless allies itself clearly to the Iran–Syria–Hezbollah axis. A more uneasy positioning is that of Hamas's al-Aqsa TV, for it identifies itself as a 'resistance media' but stands at odds with other 'resistance' and Shia-oriented media.

In addition to distinguishing the diverse mediascape in the region, this introductory remark must acknowledge the fact that when it comes to examining the manipulation of news and religious media, it is politics that we have to search for—and more specifically, state politics. As discussed elsewhere, the states in the region (mostly Iran and Saudi Arabia) are the main culprits of instigating sectarian politics: where foreign policy becomes aligned along sectarian divisions. The answer to the question of why, at this point in time, regional sectarianism is raging—when the very same sects and different religious populaces used to live in coexistence—can be found in the politics of competing regimes. 'Bad' and sectarian media is only reflective of 'bad' and sectarian politics. In a poisonous regional atmosphere, the media is perceived by the state as a tool in the service of its own interest, both internally and externally.

Post-Arab Spring religious media: occupying the 'public sphere'

Any discussion of the role of the media in current regional sectarian divisions should consider the significant unfolding chapter chronicling changes within the Arab media post-Arab Spring. In the countries where the uprisings were successful in overthrowing old regimes—Tunisia, Egypt and Libya—media that used to be subject to the full control of the state were liberated. Dozens of media outlets and TV channels were founded immediately after the full or partial collapse of the old establishments. One phenomenal aspect of the new political media territory shaping out of the old came from religious broadcasting, which saw both the strengthening of the old TV channels and the rise of new ones. Under the old authoritarian regimes, most religious channels (largely with Salafi orientation) were anxious not to deal with politics and to keep all their material and programming politics-free. The governments, in return, would allow them to operate, and were pleased with the 'pacifying' nature of these channels and the 'neutralising' effect they had on audiences, as opposed to the religious/political media deployed by the Islamist movements.

In the new post-Arab Spring context in a number of countries, where low ceilings of freedom of expression had been bashed through and the fear of the heavy hand of the state was no longer present, most of the previously apolitical religious channels became politicised. The leading ones, for instance in Egypt, allied themselves with the Salafi parties and politics suddenly dominated the screens—in a break with the recent past. The sweep of this 'politicisation' affected almost all forms of religious broadcasting and took place at a time when the region was heading steadily towards bolder sectarian positioning of states and groups, following the Syrian revolution. The chaotic post-Arab Spring regional media

landscape exacerbated existing problems concerning regional media, particularly the lack of regulatory systems, codes of ethics and sound laws and judicial regimes to maintain the balance between freedoms and individual rights. Within this scene, channels incited sectarian hatred and promoted calls for the excommunication of 'others' by invoking historical narratives and religious battles of the past, without facing legal liabilities.[31]

The collapse of authoritarianism in a number of Arab countries has freed up new space away from the heavy controlling hand of the state. In the classical Habermasian model, this growing 'public sphere', where people enjoy debating public affairs, express their views freely and feel empowered to criticise the authorities is a sign of healthier politics. It is a space where civil society, intellectual deliberation, media freedoms, creative art and other forms of emancipation express themselves. It is where the power of the public thrives, and where the power of the state is limited. In the wake of the downfall of any dictatorship, a suppressed public sphere starts to develop rapidly, if chaotically.[32]

In the context of post-Arab Spring politics, a state of 'chaotic freedoms' emerged soon after the collapse of every authoritarian system, out of which a healthy 'public sphere' it was hoped would grow. Instead, the vacuum created by the quick removal of the authoritarian state's heavy presence was mostly filled by the Islamists: their politics, discourse and media. In the aforementioned Habermasian notion of the 'public sphere', the assumption is that this sphere encourages freethinking within a given secular context. The only suppressive force in this context is that of the state. Once this force is confronted and compelled to withdraw from its occupied territories of public life, the public sphere thrives. Against this assumed state-control versus public-sphere dynamic, post-Arab Spring cases have introduced another configuration, in which the force of the removed authoritarian state is simply replaced by an authoritarian religious discourse. Instead of creating an atmosphere of freer thinking, Arab contexts in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya (and other countries to varying extents) fell prey to rising religiosity. Even if levels of religiosity were always somewhat high before the regime changes that took place in the Arab Spring, the nature of that religiosity tended to be milder and far less politicised. The Islamists' electoral victories gave them unprecedented public power and an omnipresent manifestation of Islamism, leading Islamists to ever-bolder discourse and aggressiveness. All this has materialised in the subsequent rise and dominance of religious media, mainly strengthening the dozens of influential religious channels and creating an attractive atmosphere for others to become

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31 In documented examinations of and research in this area, it is noted that the lack of clear laws and regulations has left a broad grey area where defamation and other sorts of 'collective insult' exist. See Matt J. Duffy (2013). 'Media Laws and Regulations of the GCC Countries: Summary, Analysis, and Recommendations', *Doha Centre for Media Freedoms.*

32 The 'public sphere' theory is widely debated and was originally introduced by Jürgen Habermas in 1962, in German then translated into other languages. See Jürgen Habermas (1989). *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society.* Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press. Many scholars have debated Habermas's notion: see, for example, the collection of Bruce Robbins (ed.) (1993). *The Phantom Public Sphere.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

established. What's more, the rise of an 'Islamist sphere' has not been limited to the countries where actual regime change took place. In fact, the Islamisation that has emerged from the Arab Spring is only an advanced stage of the years-long creation of what could vaguely be described as a 'regional Islamist sphere'. This is the sphere that has slowly been constructed by the practices, discourse, activism and religiosity infused into Arab society by Islamism and its media. One of the main structural changes that this Islamisation has succeeded in achieving in society has been the establishment of a new religious legitimacy, according to which norms and codes of sociality are measured.[33]

CHARACTERISTICS AND MANIFESTATIONS OF THE RELIGIOUS (SECTARIAN) MEDIA

Radical religious media, especially TV broadcasting, is a universal phenomenon, seen as part of the globalisation of communication in recent decades. The consequences have been varied, depending on the context, the politics behind the given media and the level of volatility surrounding the main players concerned. This method of using TV screens to spread religious messages on a mass scale was pioneered by religious broadcasting in the West, particularly in the United States.[34] Some of the characteristics and manifestations of this media are universal, regardless of geography or faith, while others are specific to the given cases. The following discussion concentrates on Middle Eastern religious media, specifically Sunni and Shia media.

To begin with, one should consider the common tactic used by religious media: of bringing to public consciousness religious intellectual battles and contestation of the past. In the Middle Eastern context, and amid the present regional rivalry between the Iran-led and the Saudi Arabia-led camps, religious mass media have been publicising arguments that used to be elitist, neglected or arcane theological conflicts and differences. As is the case with other religious traditions, there are deep differences between various schools of theology in Islam, which are typically limited to the specialised circles of the clergy. In the same way, differences between Shia and Sunni go back to the first century of Islam. Diverging religious interpretations of scripture evolved, entangling with politics as opposing political stances became entrenched in orthodoxies and uncompromising beliefs over the centuries. Throughout history, mass conversion to Shia belief or Sunni belief was led more by kings and rulers in shifts of power than any conviction in a given set of principles. The populace had little choice and often little compunction not to follow a

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33   The assumed 'regional Islamic sphere', relating to the spread of religious media across the region, is perhaps the Middle Eastern example of what Ingrid Volkmer describes as trans- or supra-national public spheres, which are not limited by the state or national boundaries. See Ingrid Volkmer (2014). *The Global Public Sphere: Public Communication in the Age of Reflective Interdependence.* Cambridge: Polity.

34   See, for example, Mark Ward (1994). *Air of Salvation: The Story of Christian Broadcasting.* Michigan: Baker Pub Group; on the impact of this media on audiences in relation to politics, see Brian Newman and Mark Caleb Smith (2007). 'Fanning the Flames: Religious Media Consumption and American Politics', *American Politics Research*, 35 (6), pp. 846–77.

victorious ruler, who would effectively force his subjects to adopt this or that particular school of religion. The actual fundamental religious differences and justifications would remain almost the exclusive business of scholars, especially those allied with the rulers. At the level of the people, where mixed Sunni–Shia communities persisted, varying degrees of coexistence would prevail, materialised in mutual social interactions including mixed marriages. This state of affairs continued to be the general mode of sociality in mixed communities until the 1970s.

At present, a sharp turn is taking place with the advent of transnational mass media and its deployment in regional rivalries. Since Ayatollah Khomeini's claim, after the victory of the Iranian Revolution, of speaking in the name of all Muslims (Shia and Sunni), Saudi Arabia has wanted to controvert this claim by instigating a 'Sunni' anti-Shia religious discourse. Since the 1980s, a radicalised Sunni (and fundamentally Salafi/Wahhabi) discourse has been shaped, questioning the very 'Islamic-ness' of the Shia altogether. In later years, and with the plethora of transborder TV broadcasting, the elements of this discourse became engrained in Sunni religious broadcasting, which dug deep into history to bring to 'incontrovertible' light evidence of Shia religious deviation and heresy according to the extreme versions of Sunni interpretation. Thus, all uncompromising orthodoxies and debates, previously fairly much consigned to theological circles, were brought to broad public awareness on the small screen.

Audiences with little religious knowledge started to 'discover' the un-Islamic essence of their fellow citizens, the Shia. It's the same story with radical Shia media, but in reverse, with Sunnis depicted as the usurpers of power and authority in Islam since the death of the Prophet Muhammad. Perhaps one of the boldest political examples, demonstrating clear sectarian references, is the statement recently made by the Iraqi prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki. During a visit to the Shia holy city of Karbala in Iraq on 25 December 2013, Maliki depicted the present fight against Sunni militant groups as a continuation of the ancient battle between al-Hussein and Yezid (two respectively Shia and Sunni figureheads, who fought against each other in the seventh century). He also described Karbala, where Hussein is believed to be buried, as the *qibla* for all Muslims.[35] The term *qibla*, which is symbolic of the holiest space and the direction to which Muslim direct their prayers, is reserved for Mecca. The statement was widely quoted and re-transmitted, causing uproar among many Sunnis, who considered it not only outrageous but heretical.

Within this mutual exercise to strip away the legitimacy of the other side, a self-proclamation of victimisation has become an integral part of the media's religious discourse. Present battles are framed in bitter recycled histories, with current grievances presented graphically in the light of the past. Hence today's Sunni–Shia rift is in fact a provoked

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35   See the statement on YouTube, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MKfN13pqKbs [Consulted 22 January 2014]; also a comment by Mohammad al-Musfir (2014). 'Iraq calls upon the Arabs', *Al-Sharq*, 13 January, p. 34.

religious cover for what is in essence a Saudi–Iranian conflict, which in turn is promoted as a continuation of old seventh-century battles between two camps of Muhammad's companions. In these clashes there is always a bold binary of truth and falsehood; there is no middle ground, for there is only one, absolute religious truth claimed by each side. If a claim has, throughout history, been buried in books and religious argumentation, now it is transmitted in the daily religious programming of TV channels.

This continuous stoking of the atmosphere by the media, using religious material with a clear and uncompromising sectarian bent, has expanded polarities in mixed societies such as Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. In tandem, the foundations of long periods of coexistence among Shia, Muslims and Christians started to erode. Sectarian violence, incidents and anecdotes of grievances were amplified and in many cases blown out of proportion by the media, attracting further anger and hatred. In such a poisonous climate, the corrosion of common living became increasingly manifested on a daily basis, from segregated religion- or sect-based neighbourhoods all the way to cases of divorce where the couple belong to different sects.

This has further weakened the already shaky notion of citizenship, which never had the chance to become really deeply rooted in any post-colonial Middle Eastern state. Consequently, religious and sectarian loyalties overtook national allegiance and citizenry, and sought points of reference and authority both inside and outside each country. Transnational media, particularly religious media, provided platforms and broadcast channels to communicate these loyalties beyond national borders. Therefore, Shia or Sunni constituencies in any given country could feel stronger ties to similar constituencies abroad. Many of the Shia of the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, for example, would bond more with Shia in Iran or even the Iranian state itself than Sunni Saudis or the Saudi state. Since the 2003 war in Iraq and the dominance of Shia power in the country, Iraqi Sunnis nowadays feel completely alienated by the state and perhaps by the majority of Iraqi Shia as well. Transnational media coverage of Sunni grievances and marginalisation in Iraq creates cross-national ties and expectations of help and support from 'Sunni brothers' elsewhere. The media is playing a significant role in the dismantling of the national sphere, replacing it with a vague, grey religious sphere that cuts across the region and connects communities that belong to the same sect.

In this chaotic sectarian atmosphere, the state is not neutral. As mentioned above, most of this media is directly owned by the region's states, or falls indirectly within their broad influence. Television media in the Middle East, particularly in the Arab region, is hardly profitable. Apart from a few networks whose focus is on light programming, music, soap operas and shows copied from the West, the TV industry is heavily subsidised and reliant on governments.[36] News and religious media falls, by and large, within the sphere of state

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36   The profitable/subsidised topography of Arab TV is neatly detailed by Naomi Sakr (2007). *Arab Television*

leverage, thus one could safely assume that it is within the capacity of the states concerned to mitigate sectarian media, reducing it or shutting it down completely.

There are, however, some complex media webs, especially involving religious channels, with ownerships that fall neither under the profit-making category nor under full state control. Over the past two decades or so, during the rise of Islamism and religious media in the region, forms of autonomous religious media supported or approved by rivalling states have emerged as part of the mediascape. These media are owned by religious groups, individuals, charities and/or (in the case of Shia media) religious figureheads, or *marji'* *al-taqlid* (literally: an authority to be emulated). These agents enjoy enough resources and a continuous stream of donations to further their agenda. Initially, the work of these institutions and individuals remains in line with the state. However, with the passage of time, accumulative experience and improved skills, these agents start to chart more independent and autonomous waters. In certain cases they grow in size, resources, networks and autonomy to a point beyond direct and automatic state control. Shutting them down or cracking down on them becomes a decision that warrants careful calculation, and even the success of doing so is questionable.[37]

Yet another manifestation of the current sweep of religious media in the region, which even further exacerbates sectarianism, results from the persistent promotion of artificial notions of homogeneity within widely diverse Shia and Sunni communities. The pluralist and diverse nature of almost every Shia or Sunni community in the region is utterly dismissed in the sectarian religious media. Instead, sharp dichotomous and exclusively top-down identities and categorisations are imposed. Individuals are identified only by their religious affiliation and reduced to the singular label of either Sunni or Shia. Embedded in this lies a set of assumptions about the individual, as being not only a believer but also religiously observant and politically adherent to 'our camp'. There is no place in such reduced and forced identities for non-religious individuals, secular Sunnis or Shias, or simply the vast segments of politically indifferent people.

Another ubiquitous characterisation of religious, and consequently sectarian, media is the phenomenal spread of fatwas[38] on TV screens. Fatwa shows—typically hosted by a well-known scholar who receives call-ins and instant messages from the audience, asking about the view of Islam on given issues—occupy a central place in the programming schedule of almost every religious TV channel or equivalent outlet. These shows attract more audiences (and commercials), creating competition between TV preachers over followers

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Today. London: I. B. Tauris.

37   A clear example here are the Saudi and Gulf-based groups and individuals who are supportive of al-Qaeda and other Jihadist armed groups. Despite years of regulating donations abroad and enforcing laws and punitive measures, money is still being funnelled from the Gulf to these groups.

38   Fatwa is a religious ruling issued by an established scholar on a specific matter brought to him by individuals who are unsure how to handle this newly arising issue. The fatwa would inform the individual if it is permitted *(halal)* or prohibited *(haram)* to practice that specific matter.

and ratings. Although a deeply rooted religious tradition in Islam, the excessive use and ease of the delivery of fatwas at the present time have created enormous socio-cultural impacts. Originally, a fatwa was only sought for difficult issues, leaving the individual to deal with lesser matters according to their conscience. In the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad there are clear teachings where Muslims are invited to first and foremost ask their heart when facing troubling new questions.[39] The rationale behind these teachings is to maintain the personal empowerment of the individual Muslim, with direct communication between individuals and Allah. Consequently, this would limit the authority of others, including religious scholars, and prevent them from claiming paternalistic hierarchy over people or seeking to derive religious power. The fatwa institution is an exception and a powerful authority that is bestowed upon scholars to influence and direct the lives of individuals. It is the judiciously used 'third man' that interferes with and occupies the vertical space between people and heaven.

The plethora of fatwas by various means, but mostly and more effectively through the use of TV screens, has led to what could be described as the 'fatawisation' of the public sphere, where *all* issues of social life have been placed under the lens of the fatwa to deem them legitimate or otherwise. Coupled with the rise of generations of *muftis* and TV preachers, the fatawisation of the public sphere has crippled individuals from thinking freely, from being guided by their own conscience and from relying on their own understanding of their religion. Even worse, this powerful tool, the fatwa, has ended up in the hands of hundreds of half-educated scholars, whose desire for religious authority has led them to expand the areas of life that should be covered by fatwas. In the midst of this intensification of religiosity and the fatawisation of public life, streams of fatwas relating to the 'position' vis-à-vis 'other' sects has emerged. People who for decades used to interact with their fellow citizens without any reservations have become cornered by fatwas that depict 'others' as enemies of Allah who should be avoided.[40]

Religious and sectarian media, last but not least, enhances self-superiority over others and promotes a discourse that glorifies and purifies one's own group while demonising and vilifying the other group. Insistent assurance that one is on the (sole) righteous path is delivered constantly and repeatedly emphases the other side as standing on false ground,

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39   It is reported that a man came to Prophet Muhammad asking him about rightdoing and wrongdoing and the answer he received was as follows: 'Consult your heart. Righteousness is that about which the soul feels at ease and the heart feels tranquil. And wrongdoing is that which wavers in the soul and causes uneasiness in the breast, even though people have repeatedly given their legal opinion [in its favour]'.

40   See, for example, fatwas given by Salafi preachers forbidding the marriage of Sunni men to Shia women, and forbidding eating their food in http://www.ahlalhdeeth.com/vb/showthread.php?t=147228, [Consulted on 23 January 2014]. Countless fatwas concerning Christians are issued on TV screens and online: forbidding, for example, congratulating Christians on the occasion of Christmas and New Year. See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RgsMgZZ805g [Consulted 23 January 2014]. It should be said, however, that despite the confusion that these fatwas have created, there are actually fatwas that take the opposite position and criticise the strict and radical stand of the 'forbidding' fatwas.

in the wrong camp. Framing this superiority within religious references, any convergence toward common ground is dismissed as religiously inconceivable. The Sunni and Shia orthodoxies on Arab regional and extra-regional TV screens are engaged in a zero-sum war, refuting totally and absolutely the beliefs of the other side and offering neither a compromise nor a solution for such a dilemma.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

Rival states and political actors in the Middle East, as in other parts of the world, have used religious media in different ways and for various ends: to amass legitimacy, mobilise people and enhance their control of power. In recent years, however, this (mis)use of religious media has taken precarious manifestations. With intra-national and cross-national political and violent conflicts sweeping several countries in the region, political actors have resorted to religious and sectarian references to justify their claims and positions. This has always been dangerous terrain and, falling into the trap of politicians, a significant part of the religious media has started to re-frame the political conflicts through the competing Saudi Arabia-led and Iran-led camps in religious Sunni–Shia terms. This discussion attempts to conceptualise the formation of this new religious media/political territory within the Sunni–Shia context, as well as its manipulative nature and impact.

KEYWORDS

Middle East sectarian media, religious media, Islamic public sphere.

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الملخص

تستعمل الدول و غيرها من الفاعلين السياسيين المتنافسين على السلطة في منطقة الشرق الأوسط ، مثلما يحدث في العالم بأسره، وسائل الإعلام الطائفية بأشكال مختلفة و من أجل غايات متعددة: منها إكتساب الشرعية، و

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تعبئة الجماهير و تعزيز تحكمهم في السلطة. لكن مع ذلك، فإن هذا الإستعمال (و الشطط فيه) إكتسى في السنوات الأخيرة تمظهرات تتزايد خطورتها بإستمرار: إذ و بينما تعيش عدة بلدان في المنطقة صراعات سياسية عنيفة،داخلية و عابرة للحدود، يلجأ الفاعلون السياسيون إلى مرجعيات دينية و مذهبية لتبرير مطالبهم و مواقفهم. و لأن هذا المجال هو مجال دائم التعقيد، فقد وقع جانب مهم من وسائل الإعلام الطائفية في يد المصالح السلطوية، و يتم إستخدامها من أجل إضفاء طابع ديني شيعي سني على الصراع السياسي بين الطرف الموالي لإيران و الطرف الموالي للعربية السعودية. و يهدف هذا التحليل إلى مفهمة تشكُّل هذا المجال الجديد الذي تحتله وسائل الإعلام الطائفية و المصالح السياسية في السياق السني الشيعي، و تحديد طبيعته التلاعبية و الآثار المترتبة عنه.

الكلمات المفتاحية

وسائل الإعلام المذهبية في الشرق الأوسط، وسائل الإعلام الطائفية، المجال العمومي الإسلامي.