Research Background

- The Abraham Accords crystallized what has been developing for years: the Muslim World is splintering along sectarian lines on almost all major issues, even those such as Israeli affairs upon which they have often spoke with a common voice.
- Understanding how one might counter sectarianism requires theological analysis as well as historical analysis of both post-classical and modern developments and political analysis of grassroots attitudes toward conflict and leadership.
- My key sources include: historical surveys, anthropological analyses, modern political developments, and current national surveys.

Research Question: What has driven the rise of sectarian conflict in the Middle East, what makes Middle Eastern sectarianism unique, and what hope remains to bring the region out of its sectarian moment?

History of Sectarianism in the Middle East

- From its beginning, the Islamic sectarian conflict between Sunni and Shi’a has always been both religious and political.
- Specific theological disagreements were deemphasized during the Abbasid (750-1258), Safavid (1501-1736), and Ottoman (1299-1922) periods as leaders instead focused on the social cleavages that political segmentation created.

The Contemporary Sectarian Divide

- The modern era of Middle Eastern sectarianism began in 1979 with the Iranian Revolution as Iran’s policy of “exporting the revolution” slowly awoke rivals in the Gulf, prompting an increased emphasis on theological counters such as Wahhabism.
- The Middle East experienced a period of relative sectarian peace in the 1980s and 90s as the incidence of sectarian conflict greatly reduced, save notably for the Iraq-Iran War.
- The American Invasion of Iraq is likely the proximate cause of today’s sectarian moment, bolstered by the Arab Spring which stoked fear in regimes causing them to capitalize on latent sectarian identity politics.

A Path Forward

- The majority in the Arab World see the sectarian divide as a political issue.
- Moving beyond sectarian struggle in the Middle East must mean a reframing of issues that clarifies the political nature of the struggle and deemphasizes unbreachable theological differences.
- Sunni and Shi’a camps may be able to find harmony on the issues of Turkey’s increasing sway in the region, Israeli relations, regional cooperation organizations, and openminded religious diplomacy.