



# SEPAD

Sectarianism, Proxies &  
De-sectarianisation

Sectarianism in the *Longue Durée*



## Sectarianism in the Longue Durée

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SEPAD receives funding from Carnegie Corporation. We would like to extend our thanks to Hillary Wiesner and Nehal Amer for their continued support.

## Introduction

This report stems from an event held at the London School of Economics and Political Science on the 11<sup>th</sup> September 2019. This event, co-organised by the LSE's Middle East Centre and SEPAD, explored the roots of sectarianism across the *longue durée* of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century history. Drawing on the case studies of Bahrain, Iraq and Lebanon, the presenters sought to locate sect-based difference within the fabric of political projects, offering an overview of the ways in which sectarian identities operate within states. The report emerging from this event develops these ideas further, reflecting on the history of sectarianism in three Middle Eastern states – and with it, the need to engage with historical experience when seeking to understand contemporary politics – and a comparative dimension on sectarianism in three different contexts.

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## Sectarian Games in the Longue Durée

Simon Mabon

Since the emergence of Arab states from the embers of the Ottoman Empire, political projects have been sites of contestation as elites engage in struggles with a range of parabolic forces that often undermine the stability of states. The establishment of political projects is closely tied to the development of exclusionary identities which seek to derive support from a collective. Within this, the cultivation of sect-based difference has been a prominent feature of the biopolitical governance strategies of sovereign power in divided societies across the Middle East. While the study of sectarianism gained momentum after developments across the region – notably revolutionary events in Iran, the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq and the Arab Uprisings- sectarian identities have been a prominent feature of political projects from the creation of states in the formative years of the 20th century. At this time, regimes across the region sought to ensure their survival amidst precarious environments by cultivating support from key constituencies, with sectarian affinity offering an easy means to achieve this.

Moving beyond the traditional understandings of sectarianism which group analysis into primordial, instrumentalist or constructivist, and so-called ‘third ways’, I argue that sectarian identities are routinely deployed and mobilised within political projects as a fundamental feature of biopolitical projects. Yet the inherent ‘stickiness’ of sectarian identities - notably their capacity to resonate within society - means that the mobilization of sectarian identities is not always without repercussions. This is pertinently stressed by Staci Strobl who argues that sectarianism is a strong force, a “heartfelt anxiety that cannot easily be put aside or shoved under the rug”.<sup>1</sup> These anxieties play out within and across the fabric - and development - of political projects across the Middle East, meaning that the regulation of sectarian identities is of existential importance for regimes across the region.

Reflecting on state building projects facilitates awareness of how regimes have positioned sectarian identities within the biopolitical machineries of power. Across the formative years of states, the biopolitical machineries of sovereign power were typically mobilised in such a way that privileged co-sectarian kin at the expense of others who were marginalised and routinely cast into what Giorgio Agamben termed bare life. Agamben’s work on sovereign power provides rich theoretical tools to reflect on the processes through

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<sup>1</sup> Staci Strobl, [Sectarian Order in Bahrain: The Social and Colonial Origins of Criminal Justice](#) (London: Lexington Books, 2018), 117.

which ruling elites ensure their survival and the possible repercussions for those marginalized from political projects by the sovereign.

Debate over the source of sovereign power has been a prominent feature of scholarship on the Middle East and beyond, revealing philosophical differences about the understanding of states. For the likes of Talal Asad, states should be viewed as the embodiment of sovereignty “independent of the entire population”, while others suggest that sovereignty should be located in offices or individuals.<sup>2</sup> It is here where Political Philosophers have a great deal to contribute to discussions. For Giorgio Agamben, building on the ideas of Michel Foucault, sovereignty possesses a biopolitical dimension, concerned with the regulation of life in spite of the presence of often violent contestation. In such conditions, the cultivation of biopolitical projects privileges and mobilizes sectarian identities in pursuit of survival.<sup>3</sup>

Identifying and exploring such processes is important when seeking to understand the ways in which sectarian identities operate across political life, and the means through which they are regulated. While sharing similarities with points made by scholars such as Morten Valbjorn and Ray Hinnebusch, Justin Gengler, Courtney Freer, Toby Dodge and others, this approach – as put forward in a recent article in *Middle East Law and Governance* - suggests that this is an on-going process amidst the drive for regime survival but one that cannot solely be reduced to elite interests.<sup>4</sup> Instead, to understand the position of sectarian identities within

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<sup>2</sup> Talal Asad, “Where are the Margins of the State?” In *Anthropology in the Margins of the State*, eds. Veena Das and Deborah Poole (Santa Fe, New Mexico: School of American Research Press, 2004), 281; Nazih N. Aubui, *Over-Stating the Arab State* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1995); Lisa Anderson, “The State in the Middle East and North Africa,” *Comparative Politics* 20, no. 1 (1987): 1–18; Charles Tripp, “The State as an Always- Unfinished Performance Improvisation and Performativity in the Face of Crisis,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 50, no 2 (2018): 337–342; Fred Halliday, *The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics and Ideology*. Vol. 4. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and Joel S Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States: state-society relations and state capabilities in the Third World*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> See: Toby Dodge, “Seeking to Explain the Rise of Sectarianism in the Middle East: The Case Study of Iraq,” in POMPES Studies No. 25 *Visions of Gulf Security* (2014): 30–35; and Bassel F. Salloukh, Rabie Barakat, Jinan S. Al-Habbal, Lara W. Khattab, and Shoghig Mikaelian, *The Politics of Sectarianism in Postwar Lebanon* (London: Pluto Press, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Morten Valbjorn and Raymond Hinnebusch, “Exploring the Nexus between Sectarianism and Regime Formation in a New Middle East: Theoretical Points of Departure,” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 19 no. 1 (2019): 2–22; Justin Gengler, “Understanding Sectarianism in the Persian Gulf,” in *Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf*, ed. L. G. Potter (London: Hurst and Company, 2013); Courtney Freer, “The Symbiosis of Sectarianism, Authoritarianism, and Rentierism in the Saudi State,” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 19, no.1 (2019): 88–108; Toby Dodge, “Seeking to Explain the Rise of Sectarianism in the Middle East: The Case Study of Iraq,” in POMEPS Studies No. 25 *Visions of Gulf Security* (2014): 30–35. See also: Simon Mabon, “Sectarian Games: Sovereign Power, War Machines, and Regional Order in the Middle East”, *Middle East Law and Governance* 12, no.1 (2020) 1-36.

political projects and the ways through which these identities are located within sovereign power we must reflect on the regulation of life across the *longue durée*.

Across Agamben's canon of work, sovereign power operates biopolitically, predicated on the ability to strip meaning from life. For Agamben, derogation from the rule of law in times of crisis establishes the state of exception as the prevailing paradigm of government. In this context, Agamben maps out a complex picture of the ways in which sovereign power operates, regulating life through biopolitical structures of governance which cast individuals into bare life. With the creation of these structures designed to regulate life, regimes were armed with the capacity to rapidly respond to threats to their rule.

Concerns about stability and regime survival are especially pronounced in divided societies which are often exacerbated when particular groups are charged with allegations of conflicting loyalties. Dating back to the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the states that followed sought to curb the potentially destabilising impact of these groups by generally – although not exclusively – locating sectarian identities within the governance structures and biopolitical machinery of state power. At stake, for those concerned about the presence of the sectarian other, was the presentation of an alternative ordering, drawing on contending memories, experiences and visions of the nature of political projects, and exacerbating concerns about survival. To understand how this operates, let us explore the way in which sectarian identities have been positioned within political projects across Iraq and Bahrain, which provide rich examples of the struggle over the regulation of life and the ways in which sectarian identities are regulated within political projects.

### **Sectarianism in Bahrain and Iraq**

Closer examination of state building projects in Bahrain and Iraq sheds some light on this which reveal the manipulation of sect-based identities in pursuit of regime survival, using the biopolitical tools of sovereign power in pursuit of this goal. This often plays out across a range of different aspects of political projects, notably access to institutions, the regulation of political space, and deployment of the coercive infrastructures of the state. For some such as Omar AlShehabi, sectarianism became a gaze through which life was understood and regulated. Here, fundamental political, social and economic questions were reduced to the reified categories of sect and ethnicity.<sup>5</sup> In the formative years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a new

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<sup>5</sup> Omar H AlShehabi, [\*Contested Modernity: Sectarianism, Nationalism and Colonialism in Bahrain\*](#) (London: Oneworld, 2019) p235.

biopolitical system of governance was established that sought to prevent intra-Sunni tensions, while reinforcing sectarian schisms.

This process of ensuring the Al Khalifa dynasty's survival created a "Sunni-normative environment" against the Shi'a-Persian other, seen to be a threat to the organisational structure of the state.<sup>6</sup> Socio-economic challenges hit Shi'a groups the hardest, prompting strikes and protests, further exacerbating regime concerns in the process.<sup>7</sup> Shi'a festivals took on additional meaning in this context, prompting further repression and cycles of violence. In the decades that followed, the biopolitical machinery of the Al Khalifa's rule continued to deploy its coercive apparatus, targeting Shi'a members of the lower classes, most prominently seen what Fred Wehrey referred to as in Bahrain's "decade of discontent".<sup>8</sup>

These practices were documented in a report for Bahrain's Ministry of Cabinet Affairs, known as the Bandar Report, which articulated a strategy of responding to the perceived "Shi'a threat". This included a range of strategies such as gerrymandering, election rigging, naturalization and the abandonment of Shi'a figures into bare life.<sup>9</sup> Al Wefaq, the main Shi'a party was targeted by the state apparatus, with Sheikh Isa Qassem – the country's top Shi'a cleric – imprisoned, while others including Jawad and Jalal Fairouz had their nationalities revoked. A fundamental feature of this strategy was the evisceration of political meaning from Shi'a agency, both collectively and individually, yet a number of wealthy Shi'a continued to support the Al Khalifa in an attempt to continue benefitting from the status quo.

Similar experiences are traced across Iraq which, in the early stages of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was described by Hana Batatu as "a congeries of distinct, discordant, self-involved societies" underpinned by class, tribalism, sectarianism and urban-rural tensions.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, as the intrepid British explorer Gertrude Bell articulated, the large Shi'a presence across the south of the state posed a threat to its survival, with strong "Persian influences".<sup>11</sup> The installation of a Sunni monarch over an Iraqi society with a Shi'a majority albeit wracked with cross-cutting socio-economic issues posed a serious challenge to the nascent state.

Over the coming decades, Shi'a communities were typically viewed with trepidation, whilst also captured by the biopolitical structures of the state which sought to ensure its

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<sup>6</sup> Sophia Pandya, "[Women's Shi'i Ma'atim in Bahrain](#)," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 6 no. 2 (2010): 40.

<sup>7</sup> Amy Austin Holmes "[Working in the Revolution on Bahrain: From the Mass Strike to Everyday Forms of Medical Provision](#)," *Social Movement Studies* 15, no. 1 (2016): 105–14.

<sup>8</sup> Frederic Wehrey, "[Bahrain's Decade of Discontent](#)," *Journal of Democracy* 24, no. 3 (2013): 116–26.

<sup>9</sup> Justin J. Gengler, "[Royal Factionalism, the Khawalid, and the Securitization of 'the Shi'a Problem' in Bahrain](#)," *Journal of Arabian Studies* 3 no. 1 (2013): 69–70; and Wehrey, "Bahrain's Decade," 120.

<sup>10</sup> Hanna Batatu, [The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of its Communists, Ba'athists and Free Officers](#) (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978), 13.

<sup>11</sup> Gertrude Bell, [A Woman in Arabia: The Writings of the Queen of the Desert](#) (New York: Penguin, 2015), 169.

survival. At this time, it was generally accepted that Shi'a were prohibited from accessing high school, administrative bureaucracies and military colleges, further exacerbating grievances amongst communities.<sup>12</sup> As the state developed, these processes became both more sophisticated and more explicit, particularly under Saddam Hussein. Following the Iranian revolution, regime fears were exacerbated – subjugated to death – prompting the execution of prominent Shi'a figures.<sup>13</sup>

The re-imagining of politics in Iraq after the toppling of Saddam Hussein created space for Shi'a groups to exert agency, perhaps best documented in a claim from the United Iraqi Alliance that “Iraq is the Shi'a [...] And the Shi'a are Iraq”.<sup>14</sup> The establishment of the Muhassassa System, explored elsewhere in this report by Toby Dodge, created conditions for a process of Shi'a centric state building, resulting in widespread feelings of abandonment amongst Sunni communities previously empowered by the political system.<sup>15</sup> A cycle of mistrust quickly emerged, driven by sectarian identities and the narratives that resonated around the identities, resulting in militia violence exacerbated the presence of Al Qa'ida in Iraq and Da'ish, both of whom articulated a vehemently anti-Shi'a agenda. While the governments of Haider al Abadi and his successor, Adil Abdul Mahdi, appeared to pursue efforts to eradicate sectarian difference, the extent to which sectarianism has been embedded within the Iraqi state, not only in its system of Muhassasa but also across history, means that this was ultimately unsuccessful.

Reflecting on the histories of Bahrain and Iraq reveals that the development of political projects across the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries has been plagued by existential fears about regime survival across different forms of government. The resonance of sectarian identities was seen to offer a means through which opponents of the state could coalesce, meaning that sect-based identities were drawn into the governance strategies of the state in an effort to ensure survival.

## Repercussions of Sectarian Games

In October 2019, protesters took to the streets of Iraq and Lebanon articulating anger at the dominance of sectarian identities in the political organisation of life. This anger manifested in calls for a re-ordering of life – a process of de-sectarianization – away from sectarian coterie which had created conditions where elites gained vast wealth while those

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<sup>12</sup> Adeeda Dawisha, [Iraq: A Political History from Independence to Occupation](#) (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2013), 72.

<sup>13</sup> Adeed Dawisha, “‘Identity’ and Political Survival in Saddam’s Iraq,” *Middle East Journal* 53, no. 4 (1999): 553–567; and Rodger Shanahan, “Shi’a Political Development in Iraq: The Islamic Da’wa Party,” *Third World Quarterly* 25, no. 5 (2004): 943–954.

<sup>14</sup> Fanar Haddad, “Shi’a Centric State-Building and Sunni Rejection in Post 2003 Iraq,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2015, 6, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP261\\_Haddad\\_Shia\\_Final.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP261_Haddad_Shia_Final.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> Simon Mabon and Ana Maria Kumarasamy, “Da’ish, Stasis and Bare Life in Iraq,” in [Iraq After ISIS: The Challenges of Post War Recovery](#), eds. Jacob Erikson and Ahmed Khaleel (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).



marginalised from political structures struggled for survival. At the time of writing, protesters continue to engage in resistance against the dominance of sectarianism within political life, yet untangling these identities from the fabric of the state proves incredibly difficult.

Across Iraq, Lebanon and Bahrain, the actions of actors are conditioned by experience across the *longue durée* of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century's political machinations. Sectarian identities have been positioned prominently in the biopolitical structures of sovereign power designed to ensure regime survival amidst divided societies. Sectarian allegiance posed an alternative ordering to that proposed by regimes, provoking existential concerns about the status quo, sovereignty, and the survival of political projects. In both Bahrain and Iraq, the manipulation of sectarian differences within the context of efforts to regulate life was not without resistance. The stickiness of sectarian identities provided a means through which regime opponents could easily mobilise through shared identities in an attempt to circumvent the biopolitical structures of sovereign power.

The socio-economic repercussions of these processes created and exacerbated divisions between rulers and ruled which largely - although not exclusively - has mapped onto sect based difference. This provided rulers with the means of surrounding themselves with loyalists and concentric circles of supporters in an attempt to circumvent domestic tension. As we have seen, this is not a new process, but one that dates back to the establishment of states across the region. Given this, to understand the position of sectarian groups within political projects and the mechanisms through which regimes seek to regulate their activity, it is imperative to trace these interactions over the evolution of states from their formation to the present day.

## A Curious Form of Justice in Modern Bahraini History: Being Hard on Shi'a and Soft on Sunnis

Staci Strobl

Since the Bahrain Arab Spring protests in 2011, human rights groups estimate that approximately one thousand Bahrainis, mostly Shi'a, have had their citizenship revoked under the banner of anti-terrorism enforcement.<sup>16</sup> In reality, most of these people have participated in nonviolent political protest activity aimed at highlighting widespread civil and human rights violations at the hand of the state.

Stripping citizenship is a shockingly illiberal measure that points to the enduring legitimacy problems of the Bahraini regime. In February and April of this year, citizenship revocation was imposed onto dozens of people simultaneously through the use of mass trials.<sup>17</sup> Daring to speak up about rights violations in this tiny kingdom unearths the apparatus of collective punishment of Shi'a and other marginalized Bahrainis. Although King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifah reversed the revocations in about 500 cases, several hundred Bahrainis remain newly stateless and have sought asylum in other countries. Further, those restored were not the major opposition figures, such as Sheikh Isa Qasim, the spiritual leader of many Shi'a Bahrainis.<sup>18</sup>

Revocations have occurred in the context of documented patterns of police torture, illegal arrests and detentions, as well as a state master-narrative that excludes Shi'a stories from the life of the nation and perpetuates the false notion that Bahraini activists hope the country will be one day absorbed by Iran.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, mostly Sunni loyalists operate with much more limited criminal accountability, a curious form of restorative justice that seeks to maintain loyal subjects in spaces of *de facto* immunity.

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<sup>16</sup> France 24. "[King restores citizenship of 551 Bahrainis after global outcry](https://www.france24.com/en/20190421-king-restores-citizenship-551-bahrainis-after-global-outcry)," France24.com, April 16, 2019. [Fhttps://www.france24.com/en/20190421-king-restores-citizenship-551-bahrainis-after-global-outcry](https://www.france24.com/en/20190421-king-restores-citizenship-551-bahrainis-after-global-outcry) (accessed October 6, 2019).

<sup>17</sup> Amnesty International. "[Bahrain mass trial revoking citizenship of 138 people a mockery of justice](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/04/bahrain-mass-trial-revoking-citizenship-of-138-people-a-mockery-of-justice/)," Amnesty.org, April 21, 2019. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/04/bahrain-mass-trial-revoking-citizenship-of-138-people-a-mockery-of-justice/> (accessed October 6, 2019).

<sup>18</sup> Reuters. "[Major opposition figures not among those given back Bahraini citizenship](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bahrain-security-idUSKCN1S50PC)," Reuters.com, April 29, 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bahrain-security-idUSKCN1S50PC> (accessed October 6, 2019).

<sup>19</sup> Kasbarian, Sossie, and Simon Mabon. "[Contested spaces and sectarian narratives in post-uprising Bahrain](#)." *Global Discourse* 6, no. 4 (2016): 677-696; Simon Mabon, [Saudi Arabia and Iran: Soft Power Rivalry in the Middle East](#) (London: I.B.Tauris, 2013).

Being hard on Shi'a and soft on Sunnis is one strategy employed to maintain Al Khalifah regime survival, but far from being merely instrumental, it is also symbolically rich for people within Bahrain whose cultural milieu has long experienced sect as a major marker of power or the lack thereof.<sup>20</sup> The persistence of sectarian hierarchies normalizes the recently ramped-up patterns of collective punishment of an underclass, primarily Shi'a. Discrimination, practically and discursively, remains institutionalized.

Collective punishment of Shi'a has long been the *modus operandi* of the Bahraini royal family when it comes to managing threats to its rule. Although many look to the period after the Iranian Revolution or the Iraq Wars as the most relevant history,<sup>21</sup> in actuality, collective punishment is baked into Bahraini government systems, in particular criminal justice institutions. Taking a wider historical approach makes clear that the Sunni privilege of restorative justice, and the corresponding Shi'a burden of criminalization and collective punishment, have been persistent features of Bahraini public life for at least a hundred years if not more.

The notion of a *longue durée* view of history suggests that permanent structures in society slowly-evolve over centuries.<sup>22</sup> Despite change, the detritus of the past remains in the present. Deep-seated cultural notions of who is dangerous live on-- even when dressed up in more contemporary practices of modern court systems and uniformed police. Colonialism legitimized and exacerbated an existing Al Khalifah anxiety over Shi'a as the internal enemy, necessitating criminalization, to protect state formation and later, state survival. Meanwhile, tribal social networks rescued Sunni criminals from punishment, first as part of customary tribal negotiations on issues of justice, but then increasingly, as a means of shoring up Sunni solidarity and loyalty in the nation-state.

Although some scholars have questioned the focus on sect difference in Bahrain as merely a product of colonial divide-and-rule strategies,<sup>23</sup> it is clear that the nature of Bahraini society under the Al Khalifah regime before significant colonial involvement was sectarian, reflecting a Sunni tribal anxiety about losing the land they occupied to a majority Shi'a *rafidha*, or religious rejectionists (from the Sunni perspective). That the British "noticed" a social division that was so natural to local people as to be rather unremarkable, created its

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<sup>20</sup> Staci Strobl, [Sectarian Order in Bahrain: The Social and Colonial Origins of Criminal Justice](#) (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books: 2018).

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel. "[Sectarianization: mapping the new politics of the Middle East.](#)" *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 15, no.3 (2017): 1-13; see Frederic M. Wehrey. [Sectarian politics in the Gulf: from the Iraq war to the Arab uprisings](#) (Columbia University Press, 2013).

<sup>22</sup> Fernand Braudel and Immanuel Wallerstein. "[History and the social sciences: the longue durée.](#)" *Review* (Fernand Braudel Center; 1958; 2009): 171-203.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Omar H. AlShehabbi. [Contested Modernity: Sectarianism, Nationalism, and Colonialism in Bahrain](#) (London: One World Academic, 2019) 17-25.

own disruption, as the British alternately underestimated sect-identity, and then exacerbated and exploited it for their own ends.

A look at the structure of criminal justice on the eve of deep colonial reform, shows that Al Khalifah *fidawi*, or tribal enforcers, were entrusted with the legitimate use of force. They collected Shi'a-discriminatory taxes, perpetuated the stealing of Shi'a lands and were notoriously violent. Many of them supported themselves through the spoils from this activity. However, reform would take the legitimate use of force from the *fidawi* and give it to the new state police (save for a few *fidawi* for the Emir's retinue) under the purview of the political agency, and then the British political advisor, Sir Charles Belgrave. In one administrative swathe the Sunni *fidawi* lost both their enforcement authority and their legitimate access to Shi'a as a subordinate class from which they could both perform Sunni hegemony and gain loot.

Unmoored former-*fidawi* are a dangerous predicament— perhaps akin to the firing of the Sunni military and police in post-war Iraq in this century. A period of lawlessness, including arbitrary massacres in Shi'a villages, routine at-a-distance shootings of police headquarters, and police murders ensue. The political agent at the time, Major Clive Daly, receives numerous complaints from Shi'a victims and communities gravely afraid of being the next victims of Sunni violence. By the late 1920s, the new criminal justice system criminalized this behavior and imposed a rule of law in the Orders-in-Council. Yet, the Al Khalifah dragged their feet in reining in the violence. Instead, records show that Emir Hamid walked the fine line between pretending to favor prosecutions of Sunni perpetrators, and negotiating an important place for the criminal Sunni notables no matter how grievous the crimes. In the tribal calculus of the time, maintaining power meant striking a delicate balance of Sunni alliances, and among those tribes, animosity toward local Shi'a was a part of life.<sup>24</sup>

From the point of view of the Al Khalifah, Sunni loyalty can be controlled because conflicts are workable within customary negotiations of tribal tributes and alliances. The danger, then resides in a Shi'a majority underclass who frame the Al Khalifah as brutal conquerors, and had been appealing forcefully to the British for more rights: economic opportunity, land ownership, and fair determinations of citizenship. It is very possible that the violence of the 1920s directly stemmed from a situation in which many local Bahrainis and the British momentarily dared to envision a Bahrain that would be relatively less sectarian, but that the Al Khalifah and Sunni allies feared this as the potential end of their rule.

From this point forward, there is a clear nexus between Al Khalifah and Sunni survival in the archipelago, and Shi'a violence and subordination. Ruptures along the way, when Shi'a asserted their rights--whether through petitions, social movements, poetry, or

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<sup>24</sup> Staci Strobl, [\*Sectarian Order in Bahrain: The Social and Colonial Origins of Criminal Justice\*](#) (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books: 2018).

burning tires—are dangerous moments for regime survival because they question the very social and political order in a symbolically powerful way. The legitimacy of the Al Khalifah vis a vis their Shi'a subjects is a living critique, but one that can be quenched by using the power of the state to criminalize and punish.

Historically, Bahraini rulers have extended olive branches of forgiveness for serious crimes, an opportunity for restorative justice that has been extended to Sunni wrongdoers and not Shi'a ones, almost down to a person. Restorative justice refers to an umbrella of criminal justice responses that are alternatives to merely seeking punishment for criminal behavior. Philosophically, it involves focusing on the harm done to victims and the community and working toward repairing relationships rather than punishing offenders. Although it represents a wide group of practices, restorative justice includes diversion from court processing and even forgiveness.

In the volatile 1920s, for example, members of the ruling family, Sheikh Ibrahim Khalid and his two sons, home-invaded and murdered Shi'a villagers in Sitra, killing dozens. Although the British political agency convinced Emir Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa to prosecute the royal murderers and their accomplices, within a few years these family members were restored to full rights as members of the royal elite, their confiscated lands returned, and a royal campaign of restoring their reputation ensued. Today, the descendants of these perpetrators form the hardline, or Khawalid wing, of the royal family.

Also, during this time period, colonial records show a Sunni rapist was released from police custody at the Emir's behest, and a Sunni man who murdered his sister had his sentence of 5 years cancelled at the one-and-a-half year mark. In addition, two ordinary Sunni criminals, an anti-colonial activist and a thief, were restored to good standing, their banishments and other punishments cancelled by the Emir. In most of these cases, Sunni notables negotiated leniency for their criminal brethren directly from the Emir, undermining the work of the recently-implemented colonial-style rules of law (Orders-in-Council, 1919).<sup>25</sup>

The importance of this forgiveness goes beyond the immunity it provided for elite Sunnis. It also represents a way in which the Emirs of the colonial era navigated British power and influence. They often reluctantly conceded to British demands to prosecute members of their family and people from Sunni allies. When they were unable to outright resist, they would undo those convictions later. Much ink was spilled as the British colonial officials conceded to Emir Hamad's demands for the return of murderous allied of the Dowasir, but tried to do so in a way that appeared to uphold the prior criminal convictions, even as all punishment was being cancelled: a return from banishment, a return of confiscated

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<sup>25</sup> Staci Strobl, [\*Sectarian Order in Bahrain: The Social and Colonial Origins of Criminal Justice\*](#) (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books: 2018), 79-80.

lands, and a reimbursement of lost rent from those lands (the latter of which the British re-packaged to the public as a government grant for development of the property).<sup>26</sup>

A contemporary example of this type of state forgiveness is that of the cabinet minister at the center of the infamous Bandargate scandal. Ahmed bin Ateyatalla Al Khalifah, an advisor to the cabinet affairs ministry, has never been brought to justice despite repeated calls from Al Wefaq, Shi'a Bahraini political party, as well as many international observers, for a public trial.<sup>27</sup> According to the whistle-blower report by Dr. Salah Al Bandar, the Al Khalifah advisor spent \$2.7 million to hire a secret intelligence cell to spy on Shi'a, create bogus NGOs friendly to the regime, foment sectarian strife on social media, pay Shi'a converts to Sunni Islam, and rig elections for Sunni candidates.<sup>28</sup>

Additionally, lesser members of the royal family have been fingered in personally torturing opposition activists in 2011, including a Swedish citizen.<sup>29</sup> The Shakhura incident, in which police brutally beat a group of Shi'a young men on a rooftop, was filmed by six different onlookers, going viral in 2011 on social media. The young men had their hands bound and at the time were not even under arrest. Police in Bahrain are overwhelmingly Sunni with a majority of them hailing from other Arab countries, what some have called a "mercenary" force.<sup>30</sup> Despite the inability of the Minister of the Interior to defend the incident, no criminal charges were brought up against the police involved.<sup>31</sup>

Underlying these long-standing patterns of *de facto* royal and/or Sunni immunity is the possibility that it is actually state policy to actively pursue these abuses, no forgiveness necessary. Although this would be reading beyond the data, many who have experienced the brutal reach of the regime have long felt that it exudes a kind of silent pride at being brutal toward its underclass. Indeed, by the late 1960s the regime had doubled-down on its brutality hiring Britain's Ian Henderson ("the butcher of Bahrain") as head of Bahrain's Security and

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<sup>26</sup> See official correspondence of which this memorandum is a part: Lieutenant Colonel L.B.H. Haworth to Foreign Secretary to the Government of India, Confidential memorandum No, 138-S. May 1, 1927 (British Library, India Office Records, R/15/1/346).

<sup>27</sup> Steven Wright. "[Fixing the kingdom: Political evolution and socio-economic challenges in Bahrain](#)", Georgetown University, *Center for International and Regional Studies (CIRS) Occasional Papers* (2010).

<sup>28</sup> [Bandargate Report](#): <http://www.bahrainrights.org/node/528> (Accessed October 15, 2019).

<sup>29</sup> Bahrain Center for Human Rights. "[Some members of the Bahraini royal family beating & torturing political prisoners](#)," Bahrainrights.org, August 11, 2011. <http://www.bahrainrights.org/en/node/4516> (accessed October 6, 2019).

<sup>30</sup> Marc Owen Jones. "Police deviance" in [Bahrain's Uprising](#), edited by Ala'a Shehabi and Marc Owen Jones (London: Zed Books, 2015), 221.

<sup>31</sup> It is not known if any internal disciplinary action was taken against the officers. Marc Owen Jones, 2015, 207-209.

Intelligence Service (BSIS) to run a long-standing anti-Shi'a and anti-opposition crackdown, involving beatings and torture of Bahraini citizens suspected of regime disloyalty.<sup>32</sup>

More ordinary examples of Sunni leniency and forgiveness are harder to ascertain in the current era due to the lack of transparency of Bahraini prosecutorial decision-making. Gossip in the archipelago, however, often revolves around stories of Sunni elites abusing their privilege in a variety of ways by failing to be held accountable for more everyday criminal transgressions, such as patterns of abuse of sex workers and drug abuse.

An interviewee in this author's fieldwork in 2005 confessed to personally running a guest worker scheme for an elite Sunni co-conspirator, bringing in women to work as prostitutes by forging paperwork that they were expert "metallurgists" for employment in the aluminum and oil refining industries. According to the interviewee, this type of fraud and corruption was commonplace, and he and his co-conspirator had never been challenged by the criminal justice system because of their loyalty to the regime and their sect-identities.

The same year, this researcher also witnessed police observing and comprehending that an illegal scheme to bring in prostitutes from Thailand was reforming *during* the process of deporting a group of approximately 30 Thai women for precisely that scheme. The male, Sunni unindicted perpetrator visited a detained Thai woman to allegedly say a fond farewell, but in addition, openly discussed her and others' future return to the country and to the same criminal operation. Two policewomen told this researcher that due to the notable identity of the unindicted perpetrator, it would be allowed to stand.

Unchecked criminality, though problematic for the rule of law, would not exhibit the problem of sectarianism if sect-identity did not matter in who could get away with performing it. However, the kinds of breaks the Sunni elite receives from the criminal justice system are almost never extended to Shi'a, nor anyone allied with them in political activism around a human rights agenda. In fact, the criminalization of Shi'a speech, that in the absence of the regime's sectarian anxieties would not be problematic-- such as Friday sermons calling for generalized social and economic justice- show that Shi'a bear a heavy burden of being labeled the dangerous class in Bahrain. That Western allies, in particular the UK and the US, maintain their cozy relationship with the regime, and the enduring influence of Saudi Arabia on local Sunni politics, means that this state of affairs is unlikely to change soon.

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<sup>32</sup> Emile Nakhleh. "[Ian Henderson and repression In Bahrain: A forty-year legacy.](https://lobelog.com/ian-henderson-and-repression-in-bahrain-a-forty-year-legacy/)" Lobe Log. <https://lobelog.com/ian-henderson-and-repression-in-bahrain-a-forty-year-legacy/> (accessed October 15, 2019); Naomi Sakr. "[Reflections on the Manama Spring: research questions arising from the promise of political liberalization in Bahrain](#)", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 28, no. 2 (2001): 229-231.

## What do Lebanon and Iraq's protests tell us about the theories of sectarian conflict?

Bassel F. Salloukh

What are the implications of recent protests in Lebanon and Iraq on the theoretical literature on sectarianism?

The violent struggles underway in Iraq since 2003 to impose a sectarian order on state and society resonate with the constructivist claim that the emergence of sectarian identities as the main source of political mobilization in a particular context is not rooted in pre-modern primordial essences but rather the result of a long-term material and symbolic process. After all, sectarian identities are always one among many other – sometimes more important – social, economic, and local markers in a fluid identities terrain. This is true of both pre-1861 Mount Lebanon and pre-2003 Iraq. The violence exercised by the sectarian political elite against successive waves of protests in 2011, 2015, 2018, and now is meant to neutralize attempts by those who embrace alternative national and socioeconomic identities as they resist from below the imposition of a top-down sectarian vision over Iraq's postwar political field.<sup>33</sup>

But if sectarian identities are always one among many other identities, and if sectarian orders are imposed by a combination of local and external actors, then what explains their durability? The anger fueling the protests in Iraq and Lebanon offer important clues: it is not about essential intrinsic cultural or sectarian constants. Rather, it is more about the role played by sectarian entrepreneurs in organizing the institutional architecture of consociational power-sharing arrangements – i.e., a combination of instrumentalism and institutionalism – and a commensurate political economy, both operating in tandem to entrench sectarian incentive structures, thus making sectarian modes of identification and mobilization a type of Gramscian common sense. But here's where Lebanon and Iraq go separate ways.

The genealogy of Lebanon's sectarian order may be traced back to the choices and reactions of confessional/sectarian entrepreneurs to the violent convulsions and transformations of 19<sup>th</sup> century Mount Lebanon, always overlapping with external penetration. This order was later reproduced – but not without resistance – first in *Grand Liban* in 1920, then in independent Lebanon, and most recently in the postwar period. Unlike the case in Iraq, however, Lebanon's political system is foundationally sectarian, anchored on a corporate

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<sup>33</sup> Toby Dodge, "[Tracing the Rise of Sectarianism in Iraq after 2003](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/09/13/tracing-the-rise-of-sectarianism-in-iraq-after-2003/)," *Middle East Centre Blog*, June 29, 2018, accessed November 24, 2019, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/09/13/tracing-the-rise-of-sectarianism-in-iraq-after-2003/>.



consociational power-sharing arrangement. With time, the sectarian system's ideological, institutional, and material capillaries of power penetrated deep into and across large swathes of society. It is undergirded by a sophisticated political economy in which the state serves as an archipelago of clientelist networks binding members of the political elite to their sectarian protégés. Corruption across different private and public sectors serves to lubricate this postwar political economy at a cost that has brought state finances to the brink of collapse. For example: the postwar public sector<sup>34</sup> ballooned to encompass anywhere between 310,000 to 400,000 employees and retirees. Moreover, public salaries, wages, and benefits amounted to 35% of government expenditures in 2018, the equivalent of \$46 billion or 21.29% of a total of \$216 billion in government spending in the period 1993-2017.<sup>35</sup> All this in the context of a tax regime that benefits the very rich at the expense of fiscal finances: the lower 50 percent of the population make as much income as the top 0.1%.<sup>36</sup>

The power of Lebanon's sectarian system is in great measure a consequence of how the political system's institutional architecture<sup>37</sup> and political economy work in unison to reproduce docile sectarian subjects. But for this dyad to operate smoothly requires economic growth and financial spoils to finance the political economy of sectarianism and its myriad technologies of corruption. Lebanon's perfect economic storm in the past years led to the drying up of these spoils and the clientelist swamps, however. The government's decision on 17 October 2019 to raise revenues by increasing a range of taxes – even on what should be free WhatsApp calls – rather than clamp down on corruption inside and outside the state, and tax wealth and those who have benefited from decades of monetary policies favoring the rich, unleashed a night of national rage across Lebanon.<sup>38</sup> Economic deprivation, and a deep sense of insult that they are taken for granted by the political economic elite, united many Lebanese across sects and regions, and later classes, the kind of mobilization the sectarian system is supposed to prevent. Lebanon's protests suggest that the postwar political economy of sectarianism has reached a dead end, and that many – but not all – of those expected to play by the rules of the sectarian order refuse to do so any more.

By contrast, Iraq's experience with sectarianism is an imposed and recent one – a veritable example of what Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel label 'sectarianization'.<sup>39</sup> The construction by exiled ethno-sectarian politicians, the US occupying authority, and Iran of a

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<sup>34</sup> Bassel F. Salloukh, "[Taif and the Lebanese State: The Political Economy of a Very Sectarian Public Sector](#)," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, Volume 25, no.1 (2019), doi: 10.1080/13537113.2019.1565177.

<sup>35</sup> Bassel F. Salloukh, "[Anatomy of Corruption in Postwar Lebanon](#)," *The Lebanese Center for Policy Studies* (blog), May, 2019, accessed November 24, 2019, <https://www.lcps-lebanon.org/featuredArticle.php?id=229>.

<sup>36</sup> "Lebanon," *World Inequality Database*, accessed November 24, 2019, <https://wid.world/country/lebanon/>

<sup>37</sup> Bassel F. Salloukh et al., *The Politics of Sectarianism in Postwar Lebanon* (London: Pluto Press, 2015).

<sup>38</sup> "Anger, frustration drive Beirut protesters," *The Daily Star*, October 8, 2019, accessed November 24, 2019, <https://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2019/Oct-18/493788-anger-frustration-drive-beirut-protesters.ashx>.

<sup>39</sup> Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel, *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East* (New York: Oxford, 2017).

sectarian political order is a post-2003 phenomenon; it runs against the play of Iraq's non-sectarian political history where the political field was contested by a plethora of nationalist, Arab nationalist, communist, Ba'athist, and religious visions; nor is it an example of a return to some primordial sectarian essence.<sup>40</sup> The imposition of a new exogenous vision of Iraq based on ethno-sectarian identities comes with its own incentive structures, however: in the form of a liberal consociational power-sharing arrangement – the notorious *al- muhasasa al-ta'ifiya* system – structuring access to state resources, public office, and political mobilization along ethno-sectarian lines. This power-sharing arrangement is coupled with its own political economy, with access to state resources controlled by the ethno-sectarian political elite and serving to incentivize sectarian modes of identification and mobilization. Consequently, the public sector expanded from 850,000 employees in 2004 to 7-9 million in 2016, with some 25% of public funds wasted in corruption schemes. The sectarian political elite uses access to subcontracts, border crossings, ports, and even gas fields to lubricate their clientelist networks.<sup>41</sup>

Iraq's leaderless and decentralized<sup>42</sup> protests triggered by cronyism, corruption, joblessness, dilapidated infrastructure, and the heavy-handedness of sectarian militias in the south of the country swiftly metamorphosed into a wholesale call for a revolution<sup>43</sup> against the sectarian system: a predominantly Shi'a intra-sectarian rebellion against a largely Shi'a-dominated political order that makes no sense by primordial explanations and brings back the role of socioeconomic drivers of politics. It is countered by inordinate violence from a political elite defending a sectarian political system and its clientelist political economy serving their narrow socioeconomic and political interests and those of their foreign backers, namely Iran. That this political elite is compelled to use substantial violence against co-sectarian protestors resisting the post-2003 order reflects the violence involved in the imposition of sectarian orders. It stands in contrast to the more hybrid<sup>44</sup> but no less disciplinary tactics<sup>45</sup> deployed by their Lebanese counterparts in the context of a harder and more sociologically diverse sectarian order with denser clientelist networks.

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<sup>40</sup> Toby Dodge, "[Bourdieu goes to Baghdad': Explaining Hybrid Political Identities in Iraq](#)," *Journal of Historical Sociology*, Volume 31, no. 1 (2018), doi: 10.1111/johs.12189.

<sup>41</sup> Toby Dodge, "Corruption Continues to Destabilize Iraq," *Chatham House*, October 1, 2019, accessed November 24, 2019, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/corruption-continues-destabilize-iraq>.

<sup>42</sup> Harith Hasan, "Iraq is Currently Being Shaken by Violent Protests," *Carnegie: Middle East Center*, October 4, 2019, accessed November 24, 2019, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/79993?lang=en>.

<sup>43</sup> Monkey Cage, "In Iraq, Demonstrators Demand Change – and the Government Fights Back," *The Washington Post*, October 9, 2019, accessed November 24, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/10/10/iraq-protestors-demand-change-government-is-fighting-back/>.

<sup>44</sup> Janine A. Clark and Bassel F. Salloukh, "[Elite Strategies, Civil Society and Sectarian Identities in Postwar Lebanon](#)," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Volume 45, no. 4 (2013), doi: 10.1017/S0020743813000883.

<sup>45</sup> Carmen Geha, "[Co-optation, Counter-Narratives, and Repression: Protesting Lebanon's Sectarian Power-Sharing Regime](#)," *The Middle East Journal*, Volume 73, No. 1 (2019), <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/721754>.

This brings us to another puzzle in the theoretical literature on sectarianism flagged by Melani Cammett: “how to incentivize politicians to pursue more inclusive economic and social policies and patterns of representation”?<sup>46</sup> In both Iraq and Lebanon’s unfolding protests, demands by the post-sectarian subaltern for accountable governance, economic relief, and an end to corruption stand at odds with primordial explanations of political dynamics. Moreover, the repressive response of Iraq’s sectarian elite, and the stubbornness of their Lebanese counterparts to recognize alternative modes of political mobilization, underscores the limits of instrumental and institutional avenues for desectarianization.<sup>47</sup> Rather, the unfolding protests in Baghdad, Nassiriya, and Basra, and all over Lebanon suggest that the drivers of desectarianization are bottom-up, always already in people’s search for “new practices of coexistence and cooperation”<sup>48</sup> beyond sectarian identities and modes of mobilization. Herein lies the origins of the drivers that can make ethno-sectarian power-sharing arrangements biodegradable<sup>49</sup> beyond sectarian identities and solidarities.

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<sup>46</sup> Melani Cammett, “Lebanon, the Sectarian Identity Test,” *The Century Foundation*, April 10, 2019, accessed November 24, 2019, <https://tcf.org/content/report/lebanon-sectarian-identity-test-lab/>.

<sup>47</sup> Simon Mabon, “De-sectarianization: Some Initial Thought,” SEPAD, August 19, 2019, accessed November 24, 2019, <https://www.sepad.org.uk/announcement/de-sectarianization-some-initial-thoughts>.

<sup>48</sup> Thanassis Cambanis, “Social Engineering in Samarra,” *The Century Foundation*, May 2, 2019, accessed November 24, 2019, <https://tcf.org/content/report/social-engineering-samarra/>.

<sup>49</sup> See Matthijs Bogaards, “Lebanon: How Civil War Transformed Consociationalism,” in John McGarry and Allison McCulloch, eds., *Power Sharing: Empirical and Normative Critiques* (London: Routledge, 2017): 148-165.

## The contradictions of systemic sectarianism in Iraq

Toby Dodge

Iraq's political system, an elite pact, was imposed upon the country in the aftermath of regime change in 2003. In Iraq itself, the system is known as *Muhasasa*, the division of government offices and the resources that come with them amongst the ruling elite.<sup>50</sup> Since its imposition, the system has been built on three pillars; corruption, sectarianism and coercion. In the sixteen years since its imposition, the balance between these three pillars has changed dramatically in order to sustain it. Corruption, as the central mechanism for elite cohesion has remained constant. It has also become the main driver for the de-legitimation of the ruling elite. The sectarianization of the system reached its high point with the first two national elections of 2005 and the writing of the constitution. However, after 2005, sectarianism increasingly failed to legitimise the system. The ruling elite has struggled to find a replacement ideology. An anti-systemic movement, built around a secular nationalism, equal citizenship and transparent government, gained momentum from 2011 onwards, reaching its peak in size and ideational coherence in October and November 2019. When faced with the de-legitimation of the system and the inability of sectarianism to rally the population, the ruling elite has had to increasingly rely on the deployment of both overt and covert coercion to defend the *Muhasasa* system and their place at its core.

### Understanding Iraq's political system.

On a superficial reading, the Iraqi state possesses all the attributes of a Weberian democratic state. It has a constitution that regulates national elections. In the aftermath of those elections, the parliament elects a speaker, then the country's President and finally, the Prime Minister is chosen from the largest parliamentary bloc. The state is served by an army, police force and judiciary, all operating within a territorially defined state. However, a closer examination of the state reveals not an institutionalised state but a political field shaped by the struggle between different groups for domination.<sup>51</sup> A rough and ready order was imposed on this political field through an elite pact. After the invasion of 2003, the formerly exiled politicians who had done so much to campaign for Saddam Hussein's removal, were placed in power by the United States. It is they, in alliance with the US, who built the *Muhasasa* system.

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<sup>50</sup> For a humorous Iraqi explanation of the system see The Al-Basheer Show, "Episode 2: Muhasasa" *YouTube* video English, 13:29, November 20, 2019, accessed November 24, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V-KVPWXWINK&feature=youtu.be>.

<sup>51</sup> See Toby Dodge, 'Bourdieu goes to Baghdad: explaining hybrid political identities in Iraq', *Historical Sociology*, Vol. 31, No. 1, (March 2018): 25–38, Sami Zubaida, '*Islam, the people and the state: political ideas and movements in the Middle East*', (London: I.B. Tauris & Co, 1989): 121-182; Joel S. Migdal, '*State in society, studying how states and societies transform and constitute one another*', (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2001): 22.

Cohesion within this elite pact is based on the distribution of resources taken from the Iraqi state's budget through corrupt practices. These resources are primarily extracted in two ways. The first is payroll corruption, the offering of jobs in a patronage system to the clients of the ruling elite in return for political loyalty. The second vehicle for systemically sanctioned corruption is endemic contract fraud. The politicians in charge of each ministry, and the senior civil servants they appoint, oversee the tendering of corrupt government contracts to companies they own or their allies control.<sup>52</sup> The resources obtained through contract fraud are used to fund the political parties and militias that dominate Iraq's political field. Government minister's I interviewed in Iraq across 2019 estimate that these two forms of corruption take as much as fifty percent of the state's yearly budget. It is endemic corruption at the centre of Iraq's system that has been the main driver of popular alienation.

From 2003 onwards, the elite pact at the centre of Iraq's political system was justified through sectarianism. As Ussama Makdisi and Fredrik Barth argue, sectarianization sees politicians or sectarian entrepreneurs impose religious and ethnic difference as the "... primary marker of modern political identity ...", solidifying both the internal coherence of each group but, more importantly, the boundaries that divide one group from another.<sup>53</sup>

In Iraq, national elections played a key role in this process. The ruling elite overtly interpellated, mobilised and sent the Iraqi electorate to the ballot box as members of specific ethnic and religious groups, primarily Sunni, Shi'a and Kurd. The elections of 2005 were dominated by large multi-party coalitions running on ethno-sectarian platforms. This left little or no space for those seeking to recognise and mobilise Iraqis on the basis of a unitary secular nationalism.

However, after 2005, the sectarian justification of Iraq's *Muhasasa* system quickly began to lose its ability to mobilise the population. The elections of 2010, 2014, and 2018 saw a steady reduction in voter turnout as sectarian rhetoric failed to resonate. There were two major reasons for this. First, the governments of national unity formed in the name of sectarian apportionment after each election proved incapable of rebuilding the institutions of the state and their ability to deliver services. The Iraqi population continues to suffer from a lack of clean running water and reliable electricity supplies, both crucial in Iraq's hot summer months.<sup>54</sup> The second reason was the civil war that engulfed Iraq in 2005 and lasted until 2008.

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<sup>52</sup> For more details see Toby Dodge, 'Corruption continues to destabilize Iraq', *Chatham House Expert Comment*, October 1, 2019, accessed 24 November 2019, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/corruption-continues-destabilize-iraq>.

<sup>53</sup> Ussama Makdisi, *The culture of sectarianism; community, history, and violence in nineteenth-century Ottoman Lebanon*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2000): 7; Fredrik Barth, 'Introduction', in Fredrik Barth (ed), *Ethnic groups and boundaries. The social organization of culture difference*, (Boston, Massachusetts: Little, Brown and Company, 1969): 9-38.

<sup>54</sup> See Toby Dodge, *Iraq: from war to a new Authoritarianism*, (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge 2012): 136-140.

The violence deployed during this conflict was largely justified through sectarian rhetoric. Once the violence declined, Iraqi voters in provincial election in 2009 and in national elections in 2010 increasingly refused to vote for parties who campaigned on overtly sectarian lines. The Iraqi ruling elite, when faced with the declining resonance of sectarian rhetoric, failed to develop a different ideological justification for their role at the top of the system. They also failed to constrain, let alone eliminate, the systemic corruption that tied them together and to the status quo.

From 2009 onwards, the Iraqi population, faced with a corrupt ruling elite and incoherent state institutions, began to protest against the system imposed after 2003. This social movement began to cohere both organisationally and ideologically. By 2015 it had developed a powerful critique of both the corruption and sectarianization that were crucial to the functioning and justification of the system. As a million people mobilised in central Baghdad, they chanted the movement's new slogan, 'In the name of religion the thieves have robbed us' (*Bismil deen baguna al-haramiya*).<sup>55</sup>

This movement reached its peak, in terms of geographical impact, the numbers mobilised and ideological coherence, in October and November 2019. During these demonstrations, over a million Iraqis have repeatedly gone onto the streets of Baghdad and cities and towns across the south of the country. At the core of this latest wave of protests is an attempt to directly challenge the post-2003 system and remove those who had built it from power.

As in the past, the demonstrations were initially driven forward by popular frustration and anger with the role that politically sanctioned corruption plays at the core of the system. However, as the protests grew and were subject to extensive and extended violence, their demands radicalised and expanded to encompass a programme for the transformation of the whole system. The protest movement demanded that the political parties renounce power. Party offices across the south of Iraq were burnt down. Those parties and organisations who supported reform in 2015, the Sadrist movement and the Iraqi Communist Party, were damned in 2019 for being co-opted into the government formation process of 2018.

In early November, the protest movement issue a manifesto of demands, a ten-point programme circulated in their own newspaper, *TuqTuq*, and promoted through the banners displayed on the demonstrator's headquarters overlooking Tahrir square in central Baghdad. At the centre of the protestors' demands was an assertion of equal citizenship and rights and a secular Iraqi nationalism. The manifesto called for the resignation of the current government and its replacement by an independent non-party caretaker administration. This was to be followed by the complete overhaul of electoral regulations and supervisory authorities, new

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<sup>55</sup> Faleh Jabar, "[The Iraq Protest Movement: From Identity Politics to Issues politics](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/88294/)," *LSE Middle East Centre paper series*, Volume 25, (2018): 9, <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/88294/>.

laws to identify the sources of party political funding and new national elections supervised by the United Nations.

The ruling elite who built the *Muhasasa* system were constrained by its own dynamics as they struggled to respond to the largest protest movement they had experienced. Their own position at the top of the system was justified by the notion of sectarian apportionment. They claimed to represent the divided ethno-sectarian communities that were meant to make up Iraqi society. However, Iraq's population, first at the ballot box and then in sustained and expanding protests, rejected the sectarian justification of the system. Instead, they mobilised around calls for the system to be torn down and replaced by one based on a secular nationalism and civic citizenship. In addition, the systemic corruption that triggered every demonstration since 2009 was so central to the system and elite participation in it that no government since 2003 had enacted any meaningful reforms to tackle it.

Iraq's ruling elite, when faced with an ideology that no longer worked and unable to end the systemic corruption they were all culpable in, reverted to the heavy use of system's third pillar, coercion, in order to survive. From the start of the demonstrations on 1<sup>st</sup> October 2019, the elite deployed both overt and covert violence in an attempt to demobilise the protest movement. From the start, the Ministry of Interior's anti-riot police used live rounds to kill demonstrators. Government sanctioned snipers were deployed on rooftops surrounding demonstration sites, with protestors being assassinated. Numerous teargas canisters were then shot directly at campaigners with the express intention of killing them. Ministry of Interior intelligence operatives then coordinated night raids on the houses of activists, while militias carried out kidnappings and the closing down of television stations. During a two-month period, thousands were arrested and tortured, over 300 killed and thousands more wounded.<sup>56</sup> When faced with coherent and widely shared demands to radically reform the post-2003 system they built, the ruling elite could only respond with extended violence and repression.

## Conclusions.

The elite pact imposed on Iraq after 2003 contained within it the inherent contradictions that fuelled the protest movement that sought its end. Systemic corruption deployed to secure elite cohesion and participation became the key driver of popular alienation and the sustained de-legitimation of the ruling elite. Sectarianization was meant to justify the system as a whole and the elite's role at the top. However, after 2005, sectarianization, culpable as it was with the violence used in the civil war and the corruption that undermined the state, could not play

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<sup>56</sup> See UNAMI, Human Rights Special Report, 'Demonstrations in Iraq', October 1-9, 2019, Baghdad, Iraq, accessed October, 2019, [http://uniraq.org/index.php?option=com\\_k2&view=item&id=11903:unami-special-report-on-demonstrations-in-iraq-22-october-2019&Itemid=650&lang=en](http://uniraq.org/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=11903:unami-special-report-on-demonstrations-in-iraq-22-october-2019&Itemid=650&lang=en); Ali Dab Dab, Human Rights Special Report, 'Demonstrations in Iraq Update', 25 October – November 4 2019, accessed November 5, 2019, [http://uniraq.org/index.php?option=com\\_k2&view=item&id=11995:human-rights-violations-ongoing-un-second-special-report-on-protests-in-iraq&Itemid=605&lang=en](http://uniraq.org/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=11995:human-rights-violations-ongoing-un-second-special-report-on-protests-in-iraq&Itemid=605&lang=en).



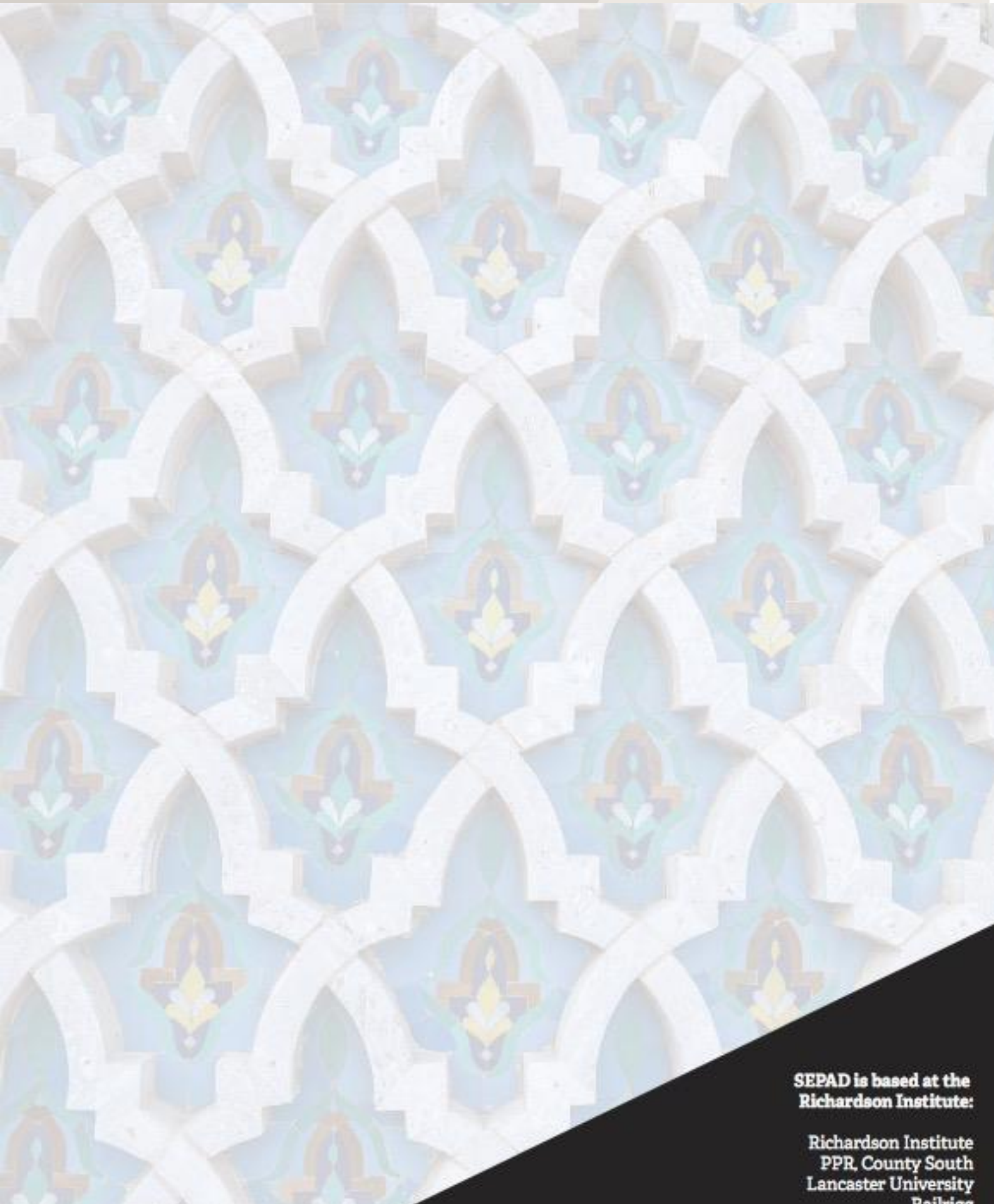
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the legitimising role assigned to it. As the ruling elite failed to develop any ideological alternative, they were forced to rely on increasing levels of violence to stay in power. If this current round of protests does not result in sustained systemic reform then Iraq's political field will remain dominated by very high levels of elite sanctioned violence used to suppress a population who have rejected the system as hopelessly corrupt and completely unrepresentative of Iraqi society.





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