SEPAD

Sectarianism, Proxies & De-sectarianisation

Desectarianization and the End of Sectarianism?

ABSTRACT

Literature that explores sectarianism can be grouped into two clusters: the first seeks to conceptualise and theorise sectarianism, while the second reflects on empirical issues pertaining to sectarian identities. In this report, we contribute to a growing third cluster which looks at the contestation of sectarian identities conceptually and empirically using the concept of *desectarianization*. This report uses both a *most similar* and *most different* methodological approach, that allows for a detailed analysis of how sectarian identities play out. On one hand, Lebanon's and Iraq's protest movements are two case studies similar in terms of how sectarian identities' play out in the political and social fabric of states with power-sharing political models. On the other, Bahrain offers an important comparative case because of its political organisation and geopolitical importance. The report draws on interviews with politicians, civil society activists, lawyers, human rights defenders, and academics from Bahrain, Iraq, and Lebanon. It brings together formal interviews and roundtable discussions to reflect on the intersectionality of questions about religious identity in political life. The report concludes that (1) desectarianization is a process that can take many forms, from the popular rejection of sectarian ordering such as that seen in Iraq and Lebanon to the state-led and ultimately elite-serving regulation of sectarian identities; (2) desctarianization manifests itself across our case studies in everyday dynamics that allow individuals to re-imagine social meanings; and (3) the process of desectarianization is neither inevitable nor linear. It is contingent on various political, social, and economic factors, not least the struggle of non-sectarian actors to overcome the episteme of sectarian politics and, subsequently, present a viable and organised alternative to sectarian orders.

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DESECTARIANIZATION AND THE END OF SECTARIANISM

In late 2019, protesters took to the streets of Iraq and Lebanon demanding change. In both states, long-standing frustrations at the social fabric, corruption of elites, and ordering of life prompted much anger at the status quo. In the years that followed, social movements, political parties, militias, and regional powers clashed in a competition to shape the nature of political life in Iraq and Lebanon. This contestation played out across urban environments in the form of popular protest, and through the ballot box as protesters sought to consolidate their influence within the context of formal politics. Central to much of what took place across Iraq and Lebanon were fundamental questions about the role of religion in everyday life. Yet these questions were not restricted to the events of 2019, but rather, featured prominently in states where sectarian identities were politically charged, and the regulation of such identities was a key facet of daily life.

This report reflects on the aftermath of the protests in Lebanon and Iraq, with a particular focus on the contested legacy of sectarianism as an ordering principle in political life. In order to do this, we use the concept of desectarianization, broadly understood as the reimagining of the role of religious identities in daily life. The report contrasts the Lebanese and Iraqi cases with that of Bahrain, where desectarianization plays out in a number of different ways, contingent upon the complexities of time and space.

Ultimately, the report argues that (1) desectarianization is a process that can take many forms, from the popular rejection of sectarian ordering such as that seen in Iraq and Lebanon to the state-led and ultimately elite-serving regulation of sectarian identities; (2) desctarianization has manifested itself across our case studies not only in its 'televised' moments of large-scale protests, but, importantly, in everyday interactions and contentions that allow individuals to re-imagine social meanings. But these 'micro-challenges' are yet to—and might not—culminate in the constitution of coherent and organised non-sectarian political actors; and (3) the process of desectarianization is neither inevitable nor linear. It is contingent on various political, social, and economic factors, not least the struggle of non-sectarian actors to overcome the episteme of sectarian politics and, subsequently, present a viable and organised alternative to sectarian orders.

PEOPLE AND PROTEST

The protests that engulfed Lebanon and Iraq in 2019 should not be viewed in isolation. In the summer of 2015, protesters drawn from a range of Lebanon's sectarian communities gathered in Beirut's Martyr's Square to protest against a political class that was seen to be corrupt, who had failed to address serious economic issues, and routinely failed to provide basic needs including water, electricity, and trash collection. In what became known as the YouStink protests, individuals belonging to, or considered to be, from different sectarian backgrounds chanted together against a cross-sectarian political class from all major parties, including Hizballah, the Future Movement and Amal.

The contours of political life in Lebanon (and Iraq) have long been shaped by the very political systems designed to regulate relations between sects. Whilst the power-sharing agreement is largely credited with ending Lebanon's civil war, it institutionalised an exclusively sectarian ordering, maintaining, in the process, a clientelist network of patronage that enshrined difference across socio-economic aspects of society. Consequently, key governance roles were delegated to private sector companies through patronage networks—reinforcing lines of in/exclusion in the process—leaving them vulnerable to political deadlock as rival blocs seek to curtail the influence of networks across the state. By 2015, this deadlock and political inertia affected refuse collection, resulting in 20,000 tons of uncollected rubbish amassing on the streets of Beirut. The protests that followed coalesced around the issue of refuse collection were also an opportunity to express collective frustration with the sectarian nature of the political system.

Similarly, Iraq's post-war muhasasa quota system of political organisation which enshrined ethno-sectarian elites in governance positions had long been seen as a vehicle through which external powers could influence Iraqi politics, whilst also operating as a means for communal mobilisation, with serious implications for political life across the state. This political structure embedded identity politics at the heart of the Iraqi state, at the expense of political, social, and economic issues. By the summer of 2018, public rejection for this system culminated in large-scale protests, centred around high unemployment and a poor level of public services.

Initially beginning in Basra, protesters expressed their frustration at the lack of public goods. These frustrations quickly spread to Baghdad, resonating across the Shi'a community, despite their dominance in southern governorates and in Baghdad broadly. Central to the protests were frustrations at government inability to address socio-economic challenges, including the economy, public services, health care, water, and electricity. The protesters gained cross-communal support as Sunni and Kurdish groups expressed support for what initially was a predominantly Shi'a wave of protests, demonstrating widespread frustration at socio-economic conditions across the state and the endemic corruption that pervaded Iraqi politics. Like events in Lebanon, the protests in Iraq were marked by chants calling for political reform, free from sectarian rhetoric. As a result of the emergence of such protest movements and apparent rejection of the ordering power of sectarian identities, questions emerged as to the enduring legacy of sectarianism. Much like the events of 2015, the protests in 2019 were characterised by expressions of unity and efforts to re-imagine the prominence of sectarian identities within political life in post-conflict re-building projects. Yet despite these early moments of unity, protest movements quickly became sites of contestation amidst competing visions began to emerge, and elites engaged in counter-revolutionary processes.

Dialogue between members of different communities has traditionally been restricted to rights-based or issue-based agendas, yet these operate within the contours of political systems typically designed to prevent such inter-communal collaboration. This systematic process of reproducing difference is reinforced by the informal Shi'a or invisible Shi'a structures that order life across socio-economic, cultural, and civil society realms, reinforcing communal identities whilst empowering elites. The establishment of power sharing agreements plays out across all aspects of life, often resulting in the creation of welfare programmes that serve particular communities rather than the national population. When national contracts are distributed, their allocation can serve to reinforce communal identities and exacerbate corruption, given the close ties between political and economic elites (Majed, 2020). Yet, in recent years, frustration at political, social, and economic conditions has facilitated the emergence of issue-based movements that draw support from across communal backgrounds.

Such processes are not limited to formal power-sharing systems, however, and can also be found within political projects beset by division. In Bahrain, for example, where the Al Khalifa ruling family from the country's Sunni minority rules over a Shi'a majority, sectarian divisions have long been used as a tool in the ordering of life. From the deployment of the state security law in 1974 to the banning of Islamist parties in the years after the Arab Uprisings, the ruling Al Khalifa have long manipulated sectarian and religious identities in pursuit of regime survival, creating a climate in which sectarian identity markers help order society in a particular way.

Across the three case studies, desectarianization takes various forms and reaches different milestones as actors seek to re-imagine the role of religious identities within political life. Despite the existence of striking variations, the elephant in all three rooms is: How does the alternative order look like? And who will claim it? A combination of repression, co-optation, assassination, and blackmailing have impeded the emergence of organised oppositional political force. So, none of the oppositional activists and intellectuals have managed to present a viable alternative to the public. Even when many see agreement in their opposition to sectarianism, there is still very little coherent framework as to what comes after sectarianism. Furthermore, most activists leading the way in desectarianization efforts are explicitly against 'party politics', or even 'politics' altogether. They consider either—or both—inherently corrupt and violence. This is the result of decades of sectarian politics monopolising political life and, consequently, reducing politics to its very own episteme. Rejecting all what politics has to offer became, for youth in Lebanon, Iraq, and Bahrain, a radical stance against all that sectarianism represents. But, in so doing, activists are stuck in a loop of demanding change peacefully from a system they collectively deem illegitimate.

Sectarian epistemes in the Middle East refer to the ways in which knowledge is produced, disseminated, and understood within different sectarian communities (Harb, 2016). This can include religious, political, and cultural factors that shape how individuals and groups within these communities interpret and make sense of the world around them (e.g., Al-Rasheed, 2002; Zaman, 2002). One key aspect of sectarian epistemes in the Middle East is the role of religious authority. For example, in Shi'a communities, religious leaders play a significant role in shaping how knowledge is understood and interpreted (Abouzeid, 2018). Similarly, in Sunni communities, religious scholars and institutions hold significant influence over the production and dissemination of knowledge (Al-Rasheed 2002). Another important aspect of sectarian epistemes in the Middle East is the role of political power. In countries where sectarian divisions have been institutionalised, the government—controlled by sectarian political parties or a particular sect—often monopolises systems of knowledge construction and dissemination within different sectarian communities.

The epistemological implications of sectarian politics have not been addressed sufficiently in the literature. But, in recent years, there has been a growing body of literature that touches on sectarian epistemes in the Middle East, particularly in the context of post-colonialism, securitization, and political upheaval in the region (Rivetti and Cavatorta 2021; Del Sarto 2021; Valborjn 2019; Abouzeid, 2018; Santini 2017; Al-Shehabi 2017; Mabon and Ardovini 2017; Harb, 2016; Teti 2009). Scholars have examined the ways in which sectarian identities and divisions have been used to justify and legitimise violence and exclusion, as well as the impact of these divisions on social and political relations.

Therefore, protest movements are consciously avoiding the formal aspects of the 'political'—political organisation and the pursuit of power—and consequently struggling to go beyond their sloganism and symbolic performances of resistance. Many activists interviewed in this research project explicitly denounced violence in a follow-up to their rejection of party politics. This seems like a coherent position: why consider violence when these actors are not
claiming to be an organised opposition challenging the status quo? Given the state of the opposition across our case studies, desectarianization seems to be limited by the absence of
political organisation, for actors who come together to speak the language of a power struggle. Accordingly, several looming questions remain pressing: Can desectarianization exist as a political phenomenon without a struggle for power? In other words, is desectarianization an alternative order(s) to sectarianism? If so, how do/does this/these order(s) look like? And who, if any, is claiming ownership of these alternative orders?

METHODS

This report uses both a *most similar* and *most different* methodological approach in an effort to engage with questions about desectarianziation. Lebanon and Iraq are regularly considered together by virtue of the salience of sectarian identities in the political and social fabric of the state, best seen in the establishment of power sharing systems of government. In contrast, Bahrain offers a dramatically different case for analysis. Although still a state beset by sectarian difference, communal tensions map broadly onto a relationship between rulers and ruled, with the minority Sunni Al Khalifa family ruling over the Shi'a majority. As such, Bahrain offers an important comparative case as a consequence of its political organisation, geopolitical importance, and this approach—of combining most similar *and* most different approaches—allows for a detailed analysis of the ways in which sectarian identities play out in the context of states across the Middle East. The report draws on interviews with politicians, civil society activists, lawyers, human rights defenders and academics from Bahrain, Iraq, and Lebanon. It brings together formal interviews and roundtable discussions to reflect on the intersectionality of questions about religious identity in political life.

STRUCTURE

This report begins with a discussion of sectarianism and desectarianization and the various debates around understanding the contestation of sectarian identities. It then turns to analysis of three case studies, beginning with Lebanon before turning to Iraq, then Bahrain. It concludes with observations about conceptual and empirical aspects pertaining to desectarianization.

1. PROCESSES OF SECTARIANISM AND DESECTARIANIZATION

Sectarianism is regularly deployed by scholars, analysts, policymakers, journalists, and students as a concept to explain the nature of politics in the contemporary Middle East. In the years after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, violent communal difference has played out across the region, from Lebanon to Yemen, Egypt to Iran. Yet despite its prominence, the concept of sectarianism is "notoriously difficult to define" (Potter, 2013), with some believing the concept to be "essentially contested". This ambiguity stems, in part, from questions about what is included within debate about sectarianism: should it be limited to doctrinal difference within a single faith, or does it include inter-faith divisions? What impact do other identity markers such as ethnicity, nationalism, tribalism, political affinity, gender, and class have on sectarian difference? And how does sectarian difference play out across levels of analysis?

Efforts to answer these questions have produced a vast literature. Literature on sectarianism typically falls into three camps: the primordialist, which suggests that identities are intractable, immutable and that tensions between Sunni and Shi'a are a consequence of centuries of animosity (Abdo, 2017; Ghobadzdeh and Akbarzadeh, 2015); the instrumentalist, which views identity as malleable, prone to manipulation and, as a result, subject to the whims of elites (Zubaida, 2014; Gause, 2014); the third camp is the constructivist, which takes religion more seriously, with group identity influencing interest and perceptions of reality (Hashemi and Postel, 2017; Darwich and Fakhoury, 2016). Such views are not ontologically given, but are rather (re)constructed through interaction, forged by the rhythms of everyday life.

As Morten Valbjorn argues, literature on sectarianism has evolved in such a way that Rogers Brubaker's (2009: 28) assertion that "we are all constructivists now" applies to discussions about sectarianism along with studies about ethno-nationalism. Yet, as Kanchan Chandra's exploration of constructivist approaches to ethnic politics reminds us, there are many different strands of constructivist thought. Acknowledging this, literature on sectarianism in the Middle East has become increasingly dominated by efforts to map out "*the* superior third way" of moving beyond the "primordialist Scylla and the instrumentalist Charybdis" (Valbjorn).

A key theme of literature on sectarian politics is the idea that sectarian difference is cultivated by regimes seeking to ensure their survival amidst widespread contestation. Ussama Makdisi (2000) defines sectarianism as "a process – not an object, not an event, and certainly not a primordial trait" whilst Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel describe a process of *sectarianization*. This instrumentalist thesis argues that, while sectarian identities have a long and often complex history resonating across states, there is nothing fundamentally violent about this difference. Rather, animosity between Sunni and Shi'a is constructed through regime efforts to ensure their survival amidst popular protests seen in the uprisings of 2011.

Fundamental to the sectarianization thesis is the thought that amidst particular contexts (shaped by the interaction of religious, political, social, and economic forces), authoritarian elites are able to construct and manipulate sectarian difference in pursuit of their own ends. Drawing upon elements of the Copenhagen School's *securitization* approach—in which members of particular communal groups are framed as threats—the sectarianization thesis presents the manipulation of sectarian tensions as a tool in the arsenal of those in power.

From Bahrain to Syria, Iraq to Yemen, sectarian tensions have been manipulated by leaders seeking to ensure their survival in the face of political, social, economic, and geopolitical challenges. As Hashemi and Postel opine, sectarianization is intimately linked to authoritarian survival, prompting the deployment of a raft of measures to ensure survival through cultivating social difference (2017), and to create a "reliable core" of support (Valbjorn and Hinnebusch, 2019). In doing this, elites discursively frame the other as posing a serious challenge to safety and stability. This discursive framing mobilises existing tensions, cultivating division in a deliberate process in pursuit of control (Mabon, 2020).

If one accepts the premise that sectarian difference is *constructed* through a process then it is possible to *deconstruct* communal difference, reversing the process of sectarianization in the process. Such processes of deconstruction play out in a range of different ways, determined by the complexities and contingencies of time and space. This process of the contestation of sectarian identities is understood as desectarianization.

UNDERSTANDING DESECTARIANIZATION

While efforts to understand the mobilisation of sectarian difference have produced a vast body of work, comparatively little work has been undertaken looking at the contestation of sectarian identities. We use desectarianization as an umbrella term to refer to the 're-imagining' of the role of religion in contemporary life (Mabon, 2020b). With the outbreak of protests in Lebanon and Iraq, terms such as post-sectarian, trans-sectarian, non-sectarian, and anti-sectarian have been used in an effort to understand developments. Post-sectarianism points to a context that has developed beyond the erstwhile sectarian ordering. Anti-sectarian and non-sectarian refer to movements that explicitly reject sectarianism as an ordering principle, whilst trans-sectarian mobilisation refers to collective action amongst members of different sectarian groups in response to a particular issue.

Whilst seemingly determined by the national context in which such processes occur, desectarianization may also possess a transnational element. The trans-state nature of sectarian identities, and conversely, the anger emanating from the political nature of such identities, means that anger can resonate across state borders. As a result, it is imperative to avoid the trap of methodological nationalism to understand of ideas resonate across the region.

Efforts to challenge the dominance of sectarian identities as ordering principles of political life differ across both space and time, conditioned by the organisational structure of states, the distribution of social capital, economic resources, political arrangements, and the nature of regional politics. Groups and individuals accumulate memories of, and lessons from, the different ways (and waves) of resisting or succumbing to sectarian structures. These lessons are both their own and that of their counterparts who have similar objectives. This is manifested in solidarity and the sharing of news/posts/blogs between Iraqis and Lebanese on social media. Moreover, the sharing of slogans and images between Iraqi and Lebanese protesters highlights expressions of trans-state solidarity, with Lebanese flags on sale in Iraq and Iraqi flags distributed across the Lebanese protests.

There are several forms of desectarianization, shaped by the complexities of time and space. These include the *hegemonic*—the ways in which dominant groups reproduce their way of seeing the world—which typically results in the reproduction of communal politics in the favour of those in positions of power; *constructive engagement*, in which groups seek to operate within the political system in pursuit of reform or policy change; and *active resistance*, wherein protesters openly challenge the dominance of sectarian identities within the ordering of life. In each of these approaches, the nature of processes is conditioned by the contingencies of contemporary life. Whilst easy to articulate in the abstract, the practice of this is replete with a range of challenges that require deeper reflection. Through this process of rumination, several questions emerge:

1. How do we conceptualise desectarianization?
2. Which spaces can desectarianization efforts occur in and why?
3. What processes should be understood as desectarianization?
4. Which actors are responsible for engaging in desectarianization?
5. What structural conditions are needed to facilitate desectarianization?
6. What are the implications of desectarianization for political projects?

Closer examination of existing examples of the contestation of sectarian identities and structures suggests that desectarianization is fundamentally a political process that seeks to re-imagine the dominant role that sectarian identities play in the ordering of political life. This may take place in a range of different ways, from the formal realm of parliamentary politics to the organisation of urban space.

Desectarianization may be comprised of different forms of protest, and may be a product of trans-sectarian activity, post-sectarian agendas, non-sectarian aspirations, or anti-sectarian movements. In many cases, desectarianziation is a people-centred approach to the re-imagining of the role of sectarian identities within political projects. Such protests represent the coming together of a range of issues in acts of intersectional protest, reflecting the coalescence of political concerns, economic challenges, corruption, social challenges, identity-based marginalisation, and more.

Understanding desectarianization can take many forms, with scholarship approaching the study of the topic from a number of literatures, including political theory (Mabon, 2019; Dodge), History (Makdisi, 2019; AlShehabi, 2019); quantitative (Gengler, 2019); ethnographic (Nucho, Fibiger); discursive (Menshawy); social movements () law (Alsarghali) and others. A key aspect of desectarianization relates to the (re)construction of space and the ways in which the "subterranean rhythms" impose structure on such space (Wigley, 1993). These rhythms are central in conditioning the capacity for political activity, with religion playing a dominant role in the performance of such rhythms. The re-imagining of the role of religion thus has a strong spatial component, shaping space and being shaped by the organisation of space.

As a result, actors involved in desectarianization have sought to transform urban spaces in pursuit of their causes. In a similar manner to the actions of social movements, laying claim to urban spaces allows protesters to challenge the dominant symbolic order and, through this, to "mobilise and concentrate their own symbolic, social and material power, and make the case for alternative possible worlds" (Miller and Nichols, 2013). Efforts to transform space reveal a disjunctive set of processes designed to disrupt the rhythms of life and their ensuing organisational structures. As Wigley observes, space is regulated by culture, tradition, and religion, and as a result, any efforts to bring about desectarianziation would impact upon the ordering of space. As Mabon (2020c: 6) argues, regulating

> *public space becomes a key aspect of both de-sectarianization and power more broadly, facilitated by the interplay between subaltern rhythms and the socio-political manifestations of communal organization. Yet the act of protesting across urban spaces is not an end in itself, rather part of a broader process of re-imagining the political order*.

While processes of desectarianization play out across space, they are undertaken by people. Here, the work of social movement theorists offers much. Drawing from this literature, four basic elements structure the opportunity of social movements: relative openness (or lack thereof) of a political system; the stability of elite alignments; the availability of elite allies; and levels of repression (Tarrow, 1998: 77). Despite the existence of widespread dissatisfaction with a range of structural factors, grievance alone does not automatically result in political activity. Instead, a particular set of processes takes place to facilitate the coming together of people with shared grievances and the emergence of common discourse and framing (Diane and Bison, 2004).

A range of different factors determine the performance of actors and desectarianization movements. From the social capital and strength of frames to geography and mobility (Nichols, 2009), several issues intersect to create particular "terrains of resistance" (Routledge, 1993). These terrains of resistance play out in a range of different and subtle forms, revealing the negotiation and manoeuvring between forces (Scott, 1987; Bayat).

These processes of negotiation and acts of resistance play out within the context of urban landscapes and the communal ordering of society, but have clear implications for social movements and acts of desectarianization. In societies divided along communal lines, difference is exacerbated by victimhood, memory, and the legacy of conflict, meaning that behaviour is conditioned by the nature of cross-communal interactions (Nagle, 2019). In the case of desectarianization, actors seeking to facilitate change do so in different ways yet are conditioned not only by relations with the state, but also with the communal other. Those seeking to facilitate change can do so in a number of different ways, from the transformationist (the complete transformation of identity) and pluralist (which encourages a broader range of identities and interests) (Nagle, 2017: 186).

In some cases, desectarianization is a bottom up, anti-hegemonic/status quo process, whilst in others, it is top down as a means of re-ordering society. Both top down and bottom-up forms of desectarianization represent the rewriting "the history of the present", shaped by the complexities, contingencies, rhythms, and context of everyday life (Abdo, 2017: 10). For example, in Bahrain, the

ruling Al Khalifa regime has sought to cultivate an exclusionary form of nationalism, with an ulterior goal of eradicating Shi'a political agency in a process of desectarianization aimed at desubjectification. This nationalism is centred around a particular vision of the Bahraini identity, moving away from the previous framing of identities in a sect-centric way. This process is supported by a draconian set of policies to eviscerate the capability of particular groups to assert influence on daily life. Initially beginning with a focus on Shi'a groups before turning to Islamist movements, desectarianization in Bahrain highlights the capacity of religion to serve as an ordering principle in a number of different ways. The Bahraini case also demonstrates the capacity for desectarianization to be deployed as a mechanism of control.

In both top-down and bottom-up cases, processes of desectarianization have resulted in the reimagining of identities within political, social, economic, and religious contexts. To critically reflect on desectarianization, better awareness is needed of the structures that regulate life and ultimately the conditions that may (not) permit the contestation and re-imagining of sectarian identities at particular times and places. In many cases, protests are conditioned by structural forces that are products of the complexities and contingencies of time and space. Typically, these forces transcend the realm of high politics, entering civil society and the socio-economic realm, shaping grassroots politics and daily life in the process. This interplay of high and low politics requires an intersectional approach to the study of desectarianization, cutting across disciplinary borders to better understand the root causes, mobilising strategies, repercussions, and their aftermath. As the fallout from protest in Lebanon and Iraq reveals, the complexity of desectarian movements—often comprised of myriad different groups with competing political visions—poses problems for parliamentary politics (SEPADPod, 2022).

2.LEBANON

The following findings on Lebanon are divided into two key themes within which desectarianization has been examined through this project: the evolution of the non- and anti-sectarian actor(s) since the Arab Spring, and the electoral opportunity in May 2022. This part will start off by explaining the nature of the post-war state in Lebanon before it uses this context to unpack the two key themes for desectarianization.

Lebanon's Post-war Context: Condensation of Sectarian Forces

As part of formally ending the civil war in Lebanon in 1989, sectarian warlords were handed the state as spoils of war (Bahout, 2016). Although, in theory, the peace agreement, known as the Taif Accords, presented consociationalism as a temporary and transitional phase towards a civil state, it did, in practice, give sectarian leaders ultimate power. They then began coordinating large-scale looting of the state to buy the loyalties of their sectarian subjects and enrich their families and entourage.

The state's legitimacy was thus reduced to sectarian representation. In other words, the state did not have to play any role in society, other than ensuring that it represents sects as per the post-war agreement, and subsequently, preventing any return to large-scale sectarian violence. This, in practice, meant that the state was merely a cow to be milked proportionately by different sects, because the state has no other function than representing—i.e., serving—warring sects. Consequently, its resources became mere spoils of war shared by the victors. Large-scale sect-based recruitment into the state was encouraged by the consociational framework, in which former warlords-turned politicians colonised the state through bringing ex-militia men into its institutions (Salloukh, 2019). Recruitment into the state has been unsustainable, with strictly clientelist calculations and sectarian cartelisation. But this clientelist model was sustained for three decades through two main avenues: systemic and large-scale migration of skilled youth, who in turn increased the share of remittances upon which the state then served its sects, and debt.

Consequently, while Nicos Poulantzas describes the state as a 'condensation of class forces', Lebanon's post-war state condensed sectarian forces. The tensions it was meant to manage are characteristic of a society organised vertically, which, through the process of sectarianization, structurally obviated class identification. It is thus not founded for the common purpose or function of modern states, namely managing conflicting class interests and protecting capital. It has been, by design, a state that organised looting, and by 2019, led to the large-scale destruction of wealth and economic capacity.

The Evolution of Non- and Anti-Sectarian Actor(s)

Early signs of the crisis triggered in October 2019 the largest wave of protests in Lebanon's post-war history. Unlike previous waves of protests which were largely centred in Beirut, this wave swept across the whole country. The unprecedented cross-class, cross-region, and cross-sectarian nation-wide protests was something for which the sectarian elites did not prepare (Salloukh, 2019; Majed and Salman, 2019). However, protests mushroomed precisely because, this time around, sectarian considerations helped in mobilising people on non-sectarian demands. Unlike previous rounds of protests that were regionalised, local protesters felt confident that their demands were not implicitly serving "the other sect" because, they reasoned, every region (read: sect) in the country was itself demonstrating in the streets (Halawi and Salloukh 2020). In some areas, but especially in Southern and Northern Lebanon, and perhaps for the first time in decades, protesters dared to point fingers at their own sectarian leaders, confident in the knowledge that their counterparts from other sects are doing the same. It seemed that, in a historic moment laden with possibilities, a taboo was broken momentarily, and that people across artificially erected sectarian barricades had finally re-imagined their sources of

deprivation away from sectarian othering. But imagining is one thing, and real political change is an altogether different challenge.

Yet, NGOs moved swiftly, along with future electoral candidates, to turn the largest cross-sectarian protests the country had witnessed in decades into 'carnivals drenched in national clichés and festivities which sometimes looked more like a live theatrical performance' (ibid.). 'Revolutionary entertainment' dominated public space, giving a glimpse of what will become an early electoral campaign for a handful of aspiring elites. Their pacifying electoral project undermined whatever potential there was for radical political organisation. The start of the pandemic, along with distortion by traditional media and traditional elites, spelled the end of this wave of protests. It left behind a sense of anticipation for turning the numbers in the streets into votes in the upcoming parliamentary elections.

However, the highly anticipated elections were due two years later. In the meantime, the public were increasingly facing the eventful and rapid erosion of any semblance of the state, in favour of a network of cartel-like business elites empowered by the sectarian rulers over the past three decades. The nascent opposition, on the other hand, was largely reduced to a group of hopeful candidates for elections, and thus had negligible organisational and ideological grounds to influence this dire outcome.

The Erosion of the State

Between the protest moment and the anticipated elections, the debt bubble had burst. The cow—i.e., the state—has almost been milked to death. The country is facing existential and overlapping fiscal, economic, political and health crises (World Bank, 2021). Hundreds of thousands of people have lost their pensions, social security, and savings as the banking sectors all but collapsed. Tens of thousands have migrated in the midst of a global pandemic and hundreds of thousands are preparing to do so. Thousands of cancer patients, among tens of thousands of patients with severe illnesses, have little or no access to medication or even painkillers. Almost half of the healthcare staff has left the country already. The same can be said about the educational sector. State-based clientelist channels have dried up. State employees are deserting their offices or seeking informal jobs alongside their state salary, which decreased from an average of $1,500 to no more than $70 (Reuters, 2022).

However, sect-based clientelism continues outside the state, through shadow institutions such as traditional political parties and new non-governmental organisations working explicitly and implicitly based on sectarian considerations. Of course, this does not compensate for the death of the cow. It buys traditional elites some time, with the hopes that some regional geopolitical arrangement would resurrect the cow in Lebanon. Therefore, despite the near collapse of the post-war state, the logic of sectarianism, manifested in the language of representation and the political economy of clientelism, lives on. And despite going through one of the deepest social, financial, and economic crises in contemporary international history, the political agenda remains largely centred on petty sectarian feuds. This was particularly the case in preparation for the well-anticipated May 2022 elections, in which new and aspiring elites organised non- and anti-sectarian electoral campaigns across Lebanon, in the hopes of capitalising on the initial anti-sectarian protests, as well as the crisis, to make it to parliament (Noe, 2022). They were celebrated in, and after, the elections. So, what does this context and projection tell us about desectarianization? The following section digs deeper into the 2022 electoral opportunity for non- and anti-sectarian actors, and what it tells us about the prospects and limits of desectarianization.

The Dilemma of Anti-Sectarian Electoral Politics in an Exclusively Sectarian System

One of the key motives behind sectarian politics is representation. When sectarianism encroaches on state institutions, representation becomes an euphemistic language for sectarian contentions over state resources. So, despite exponential decline, the sectarian establishment was able to present the 2022 elections as an opportunity to the public to 'choose better representatives', as Gebran Bassil, head of Maronite Free Patriotic Movement and son-in-law of the president, reiterated every time the interviewer asked him about 'overcoming the crisis' (Bassil, 2022).

Indeed, thirteen new members of parliament won based on 'reformist' campaigns, which explicitly denounced sectarianism and blamed sectarian parties for the concurrent crisis. Although they

didn't all run on exactly the same grounds, they were bundled together, and they systemically bundled themselves, under a parliamentary bloc called 'the reformist bloc', or '17 October bloc', in reference to the uprising three years earlier. In practice, they had little in common, other than the discourse of denouncing sectarianism and corruption, and, of course, being new to parliament. There was no roadmap or political programme for desectarianization, nor a theory of change upon which to design their 'fight from within'. Overwhelmed with the new position of power and public expectations, this group of academics, lawyers, journalists, and activists have struggled to keep the line, with their differences, even contradictions, showing in parliamentary sessions and media appearances.

Consequently, and regardless of their intentions, non-sectarian MPs fell for the sectarian poison of representation discourse. On one hand, they promised so much as part of their campaign, and inevitably realised the limits of their delivery. As aspiring candidates, they sold people inflated hope that, if 'new faces' (some refer to themselves as more competent faces) were to be represented inside the parliament, they would gradually change the system by tabling decrees and laws in favour of the people, as if what is impeding inclusive governance is a set of decrees rather than the nature of the state itself, and what led to the crisis is a shortage of 'good laws'. On the other hand, they began performing politics as a 'sect' of their own, representative of the segment of the population that is non-sectarian: *a non-sectarian sect*. Indeed, they have neither sought nor had access to the clientelist system of traditional sects. But their political performance and discourse has been targeting—and speaking on behalf of—a specific segment of society that made itself heard and seen in the consecutive waves of protests since 2011, not least in October 2019. Thus, Lebanon's political landscape today represents three over-arching political forces, one of whom is non-sectarian and all of whom are labelled based on their largest mobilisation event: 8 March bloc, 14 March bloc, and the nascent 17 October Bloc. This new representation bundled and minoritised non-and anti-sectarian voices, and contributed to resurrecting the legitimacy of the sectarian state, despite its deep fiscal and financial crises. The minoritised bloc, 17 October or 'reformist bloc', is left scrambling for direction without a political programme and for influence without being co-opted by the traditional sectarian blocs.

The Future of De-Sectarianisation in a Sectarian "non-state"

Most Lebanese families have at least one member employed in the state, thanks to sectarian shares. Now, the logic of representation, which protects this access to jobs, contributes to collective denial of the severity of the crisis. The public is not confronting this reality precisely because its traditional and aspiring elites are acting as if what has just happened can be reversed through representation. The absence of the state in the politics of post-war Lebanon was a source of humour for many Lebanese, with the famous rhetorical question: *wayn el dawle?* [where is the state] (Mouawad and Bauman, 2017). Now, this question remains rhetorical, overshadowed by bickering elites, despite it being the most pressing one for a society subjected to the harsh realities of state erosion.

The state must be the answer to how desectarianization can be effective. It is what has been missing after the war and what should be done from here onwards. Any serious effort to do so cannot coincide with the logic of representation in this ailing system, which the non- and anti-sectarian actors are falling for. The question of the state can only be brought to the table seriously based on the logic of civil rights for those who identify as sects and those who do not: healthcare, housing, and education. Otherwise, the Lebanese people's resources, dignity and future will continue to be sacrificed under the pretence of representation by old and new elites. And much like the Lebanese state was the spoils of war for sectarian warlords, the Lebanese society will be the spoils of peace.

3. IRAQ

Since 2003, the average Iraqi citizen has been going through a psychological war often overlooked in public discourse that aims to alienate, isolate, and weaken. It had begun with Saddam Hussein and continued with the U.S.-led invasion, as the intention behind state reconstruction was to alienate the average Iraqi from political state structures, society, and one's own agency. The invasion and intended reconstruction of Iraq were fuelled by economic imperatives to make a profit regardless of consequence, reducing the Iraqi social and political to the market economy, which radically meant the production of a new social world. State-building quickly devolved to what seems to be the intended disintegration of Iraqi state structures and society, primarily with the swift dissolution of the Iraqi Armed Forces and healthcare system under the guise of de-Ba'athification (Mako, 2021). Anyone with nominal affiliation to the Ba'ath Party required for employment during the former regime was suddenly economically, legally, and socially alienated, as well as equated with their former aggressors. The U.S.-led state-building effort was fraught with a complete lack of legitimacy and understanding of Iraq's complexities. The American occupation's Counter-Insurgency Doctrine (COID) led to an "absent state" (Dodge, 2010) in the functional sense, yet present in a militant, authoritarian capacity. Now prioritising the political, the American occupation established the extension of political power through various arms and apparatuses of the government with the potential to contribute to political and social alienation (Al-Hassani, 2020a). Education through academic institutions and the media would shape people's minds and ideologies; the law would shape people's behaviour; and the military apparatus would police people's bodies. To ensure security and control, the American reconstruction of Iraq prioritised political power and oil market profits as well as created public mistrust of government power. At the foundation of such state-society relations is a system designed to keep the people alienated politically and socially.

This expansion of American interests was bound to draw and legitimise other foreign involvement, particularly of Iran, who would intervene in domestic Iraqi affairs under the guise of resisting Western neo-imperialism and defending Shi'a interests. Foreign interests contributed to the formation of an undemocratic, consociational system maintained by, and upholding, corruption. With consociational governance or *muhasasa ta'ifiyya*, ethnosectarian and gendered discrimination (Dodge, 2020; Mikdashi, 2018) became institutionalised as policy. Political parties argued that political representation alone—without palpable transitional justice measures—would promote national and political reconciliation among Iraq's diverse peoples. Ironically, this system excludes religious and ethnic minorities from the political process, tokenizing a few. While Iraqis have generally been feeling unrepresented by their politicians, Indigenous minorities are especially alienated from the political process. Relying on an ethnosectarian and party quota, this system boosted unelected politicians into power, denying the public their votes and disempowering them. This system allowed Iran to funnel funds to both non-state and hybrid militants (Al-Hashemi, 2020; Cambanis et al., 2019) in Iraq, and turned a blind eye when they tortured Iraqi civilians (Parker, 2015). This consociational system's reliance on corruption deepens inequality as it relies on exploitation through mechanisms that allow a party to establish privilege and power through the hoarding of opportunities (Al-Hassani, 2020c). Corruption in Iraq has placed it at 162 on the World Corruption Index (Worth, 2020; *Country Data: Iraq*, 2020). Political corruption has left many Iraqis in poverty and without basic services, such as sustainable health care, consistent electricity, and clean water (Aboulenein & Levinson, 2020; Agence, 2020; Kullab, 2021b). Besides the lack of basic public services, there is a great lack of opportunities, and an increase in gendered corruption like sextortion (Al-Hassani, 2020b; Bettinger-Lopez, 2018).

As memory is an indirect expansion of power, post-2003 consociational governments have been sectarianizing (Hashemi & Postel, 2017; Mabon, 2020) Iraqi society through various state apparatuses, primarily education and the media. Through historic revisionism, altering textbooks to erase the former Ba'athist regime from public narratives, and running media networks that perpetuate ethnosectarian, divisive rhetoric, governments since 2003 have been conditioning Iraqi society to think in purely sectarian terms, where one sect is superior to, privileged over, and needs protection from, the other. Popularising inflammatory rhetoric, these media outlets perpetuated the idea of a primordial sectarian

war, and incited violence that peaked between 2007 and 2009 with foreign meddling and had a spill-over effect throughout the region, especially with the ISIS surge. Historic revisionism and control of new knowledge are part of a larger attempt to manipulate public recollections of the past, dissociating people from their own stories, and denying them the knowledge and tools they can use to challenge and disable current and future oppressors. Controlling public memory and narratives to deny people social justice is an incredible undertaking that will always remain challenged because humans naturally hold on to their memories, their truths, and their ideas of justice as they define themselves and their stories. This has forced a re-examination of Iraqi national identity and given the impression to outsiders that Iraqis lack one. Iraq's Tishreen (October) Movement, however, tells another story.

Protests, Pedagogy, & the Future of Desectarianization

While Iraq has witnessed protests annually, the protests erupting throughout the country in October 2019 were most expansive. With the slogan "Nreed Watan" or "We Want a Homeland", protests were inclusive and pointed to a direct need for belonging as a "homeland" points to a place of belonging, as opposed to a "dawla", which is a country or state (Al-Hassani, 2020a). Slogans such as this one throughout the movement have not relied on exclusive language or that which specifies certain groups as superior to others (Taher & Sbayyeh, 2020). This not only made the movement an inclusive one but also drew out greater support, even from people who did not physically join street protests. Although Sunni-majority, Western and Northern provinces felt somewhat alienated because of their fear of being demonised as pro-ISIS (TRT World, 2019), they attempted to mobilise, but local security forces swiftly arrested activists (HRW, 2019). In the Shi'a-majority Centre and South, people were more organised and had more protest experience (Arraf, 2018; Taher, 2017). Data from a nation-wide survey we conducted in Iraq over the past year points to non-Arabs' hesitancy towards participating in protest, likely because they felt less safe doing so. For example, protests in the Kurdish north took place a year after the Tishreen Movement began, only to be met with violence from regional Kurdish forces (AFP, 2020). A notable number of our respondents identified greatly with their ethnicity and sect, but identified more with their religion and nationality, which are relatively more inclusive identities. One could be proud of their identity but not prioritise it over the greater good. Indeed, over seventy percent of our respondents believed that politicians from a different sect can represent them, and this belief made them more interested in politics. Our survey findings also showed that people under the age of 35 have greater distrust in state and society institutions than those older, pointing to a generational disconnect. The issues respondents prioritised were common across the board. Corruption was the top issue they wanted to see addressed. This data aligns with what the Tishreen Movement showed on the streets two years prior as it empowered average Iraqis to reimagine politics and their roles in it (Alkhudary, 2022) as well as what Iraqi "culture" and identity mean to represent a new generation of Iraqis (Abdul Amir Ijaam, 2022). Thousands of protestors filled public squares and blocked roads in each city. In the months that followed, Iraq witnessed a shift in its public consciousness driven by the protest movement. Iraqis of various religious, ethnic, and class backgrounds gathered in public squares, placing demands. The protest movement continued for months until the pandemic hit, pushing protests to cyberspace, where mobilisation continues (Ali Al-Hassani, 2022). Some surveys have shown that more people supported the movement than those who took part (Nidawi & Gustafson, 2021). One of the most notable demands of the movement was the dissolution of the ethnosectarian consociational system in a vocal and explicit rejection of ethnosectarianism and its replacement with a political system based on merit, political platforms, and transparent, democratic elections. Art and chants emerging from the protest movement celebrated Iraqi identity and rejected divisiveness (Ali Al-Hassani, 2023b). Many have called this movement a step towards the desectarianization of Iraq on both the political and social levels. This was a social movement pushing for deep change, and indeed, a shift in collective consciousness could be seen, albeit not in all pockets of Iraqi society.

In interviews conducted with activists and academics in Iraq on desectarianization, they agreed that there needs to be an integrative relationship between state institutions and civil society but note the first's failures. Essential to desectarianization, they unanimously agreed that identities in Iraq Shi'a, especially sect-based ones, Shi'a need to be reconstructed. By suggesting that identity is a social construct developed through social, political, and other interactions, they discussed how identity can be similarly reconstructed through the same means. This aligns perfectly with the literature on

desectarianization, which argues that, because of the social construction of sectarianization, it can be deconstructed (Mabon, 2020). To desectarianize Iraqi society, they agreed that a robust national identity is crucial, however is grossly lacking. According to them, the Tishreen Movement was a step towards bringing people together, regardless of ethnosectarian identity, and centring their agency in the fight against ethnosectarian consociationalism. However, an activist claimed that the Tishreen Movement opened the door to further sectarianism and radicalisation, where new identities and labels are used to create schisms in society Shi'a labels such as "Joker" and "stooge" to describe anti-establishment activists and Iran loyalists, respectively (Al-Hassani & Shea, 2021). When asked how one can help reconstruct a national identity and retell a story of social cohesion and desectarianization, all academics interviewed unanimously promoted the social sciences and humanities as significant to the solution. Based on these conversations, the social sciences in Iraq need to be resuscitated as they are currently dated and rooted in only classical theories. Modern and critical theories need to be introduced into the syllabus and students must learn to engage more critically with the texts. All the educators interviewed complained of a system that exhausts both educators and students, keeping them from exploring new methodologies in the classroom. Critical engagement with the status quo would allow youth to address discriminating policies such as ethnosectarianism and societal hiccups around the subject.

For instance, while many Iraqis are cognisant of pervasive sectarianism in both government and society, others treat it as ordinary and non-aberrational, therefore denying its existence as discriminating and harmful. One interviewee asked, "Do we face our responsibility in sectarianism?" Without acknowledging the prevalence of sectarianism and one's role in it, it would be difficult to address it. Those who deny Iraqis' role in sectarian discrimination claim that it is an import imposed on society. While foreign meddling has contributed to the sectarianization of Iraqi and other societies, locals cannot deny their agency in this process. One interviewee asked why the study of sectarianism in Iraq and the region is de-historicised and only focuses on the post-2003 context. Accepting Iraqi agency and state institutions' role in sectarianism in a historicised context forces people to confront their prejudices and acknowledge their responsibility for the sectarianization process. Does sect-based discrimination serve their interests as part of a dominant group, and at what expense? Do they contribute to dangerous stereotypes of whom they consider the "other"? This is especially important considering the Tishreen Movement and the demonisation many face for their political leanings and sect-based identities. Moreover, where do minoritised people fit into this conversation, and are they tokenised in political discourse? How do people's complex identities factor into sectarianization? These very questions demand that desectarianization be approached using Critical Race Theory (CRT).

Critical Race Theory (Delgado et al., 2012) and desectarianization discourse share a common point of departure Shi'a deep scepticism and criticism of the mainstream primordialist position in their prospective fields. A primordialist perspective shapes and assesses people's socially constructed identities, differences, and any arising conflict between them by always elevating one identity-based group over another and reducing identities to invariable traits. Both CRT and desectarianization discourse depart from a mainstream perspective in their fields that denies the active role of systems of prejudice in shaping social and political dynamics based on identity. Both theories lean on the social construction thesis that identity Shi'a whether race- or sect-based Shi'a is a product of social thought, relations, and storytelling (Al-Hassani, 2021b), and can be similarly reconfigured. While CRT rejects the linear narrative of racial progress in the American context, desectarianization discourse rejects the linear narrative that claims departure from and denial of sectarianism in, say, Iraq. Both invite people to confront their prejudices as members of social structures perpetuating identity-based discrimination. Implementing CRT in desectarianization discourse can help expand understandings of identity and its repression in Iraq, most notably complex, ethnosectarian identities. This means approaching sect-based identity as one would do with race-based identity. While there are differences between the two, especially in terms of historical narratives and biological markers, there are similarities between the two in terms of political, social, and legal discrimination, as well as deep social schisms based on identity-based differences. Policing each of these identities has often led to various forms of violence, legal oppression, dehumanising media portrayals, and national divides around political elections. Approaching sectarianism through a framework adapted from CRT can help reshape research and activism. Among the analytical tools that CRT offers are intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2015) and anti-essentialism, which would help understand how state institutions oppress those who cannot be adequately identified by membership in a single group, such as Fayli Kurds, Sunni Turkomen, Yazidi

women, and other minoritised groups. Multidimensionality and anti-subordination are CRT tools that help challenge notions of ordinariness, blindness to, or denial of, identity-based discrimination. Much like "colour-blind" conceptions of equality hinder the redress of identity-based discrimination, sect-blindness conceptions of equality do the same. Despite contextual and other differences between the two, the overlaps between CRT and desectarianization discourse beg for their integration into a new model for the study of sectarianism in Iraq and beyond.

CRT offers what current literature on sectarianism in Iraq does not. While both discuss forms of identity-based discrimination, the first examines systems of power and their direct impact on daily life. The latter centres political players responsible for sectarianization and overlooks victims of sectarianization, especially non-Muslims. It reinforces limited perspectives of Iraqi society by focusing on Sunni-Shi'a divisions and excluding minoritised non-Muslims as victims of divisive politics. When terms like "Shi'a politics" (Haddad, 2022) are used and redefined for further use, they perpetuate an Islam-centric analysis which views Sunni-Shi'a sectarianism as inevitable, natural, and central to conversations on Iraq. Such analysis can be seen as populist in its own sense as it erases ethnoconfessional groups from Iraq's map. Conversations on sectarianization and desectarianization need to be less concerned with Muslim and political players, and more concerned with how discriminating politics directly shape socioeconomic systems that actively change demographics and dynamics for decades to come. To engage in desectarianization and evolve our study of it, it may be helpful to de-centre those responsible for sectarianization at the "top" of the power hierarchy. Highlighting the agency of the average citizen and their role in re-conceptualising identity and reshaping social dynamics may offer greater potential in forming new bodies of knowledge around both sectarianization and desectarianization.

Introducing CRT to postsecondary students in Iraq can help restore the educational system's integrity by inviting them to engage critically with social, political, and legal structures. Studying CRT will debunk the common misunderstanding that the law is moral by nature and will invite students to view the world through a broader yet more penetrating lens. By engaging with CRT, students can engage in the destabilisation of hegemonic discourses pushed onto them in and outside the classroom. Through such a process, each will learn to be more mindful of their own positionality in the sectarianization and desectarianization process. While CRT has the potential to yield a critical consciousness of one's positionality in sectarian societies and invites reconsideration and action, it has the potential to do the same to researchers and policymakers. Although there is not much literature yet on CRT's implementation outside the American context, and especially in desectarianization discourse, clarity in critical knowledge of social and structural formations can invite researchers of sectarianism to consider their own positionality. Adapting CRT to desectarianization discourse invites us, as researchers, to look inward and acknowledge our own prejudices, personal experiences with sectarianism and/or racism, and examine how we may inadvertently perpetuate Orientalist and sectarian essentialism in our own work. CRT can also help us look at sectarianism beyond a strict Sunni-Shi'a dualism and explore how sect-based discrimination impacts people who do not necessarily identify as either. Implementing critical approaches in Iraq, however, is becoming more dangerous as the political elite edge closer to authoritarianism.

Authoritarianism or Desectarianization?

The Tishreen Movement has revealed the lengths to which both state and non-state actors will silence free speech. Iraqi activists and protestors have been subjected to vicious and persistent hate speech campaigns—both online and offline—that aim to discredit them and the movement. Iran-affiliated groups label them foreign agents or "Jokers" hellbent on destruction (Al-Hassani & Shea, 2021). As the protest movement gained widespread support despite such efforts to silence it, Adel Abdul Mahdi's then-government enforced a series of internet blackouts to prevent online coverage (Netblocks, 2019), illustrating the very systems of oppression that protestors wanted to dismantle. Besides "soft" attempts to silence protestors and activists, state- and non-state forces targeted the demonstrations with live ammunition; rubber bullets; tear gas canisters fired directly at protestors, permeating their skulls (Amnesty International, 2019; Waters, 2019); and beatings. Within months, snipers killed over 700 protestors, injured over 20,000, and permanently handicapped dozens (Al-Hassani, 2021a). Numbers

have continued to rise since, and as of March 2021, 1,035 protestors are reported to have been killed, and 26,300 injured (*ibid*). Meanwhile, in the Kurdish Region of Iraq, Kurdish security forces killed at least six protestors and arrested 400 in December 2020 (Arab News, 2020).

As state and non-state forces continue to target protestors with systemic, fatal violence, enforced disappearances—a longstanding tactic—have also been weaponised. Around 7,663 people have been forcibly disappeared between 2016 and 2019—a number which has grown since 2019 (Abu Zeed, 2019). This is part of a greater trend on which the United Nations recently called for "urgent action" (OHCHR, 2022), citing 250,000 to one million forcible disappearances in Iraq since 2003. Among the most notable enforced disappearances are those of Sajjad al-Iraqi, lawyer Ali Jasseb Hattab, and Abdul Masih Romeo (Al-Hassani, 2021a). The assassination of Hattab's father, who was vocal in his search for him, sent a resounding and terrorising message to silence missing persons' families (Kullab, 2021a). Assassinations of outspoken activists and critics have increased since the Tishreen Movement began, with dozens killed across the country. Assassinations have targeted activists, protestors, journalists, lawyers, and academics, making it explicitly clear that there is no place for free speech and critical thinking in Iraq (Al-Hassani, 2021a). A more recently weaponised legal action against proponents of free speech has been vexatious litigation, targeting dissenters and critics with over 100 cases in each of Diwaniyah and Nasiriyah alone ('Tishreen Muhāsarah Bil Makā'id', 2022). Legislative suppression also involves proposed bills such as the Combatting Cybercrimes Bill and Freedom of Assembly and Peaceful Demonstrations Bill. Both have been introduced in parliament several times, despite warnings from international organisations about their posed risks to free speech, privacy, and the right to assembly (Al-Hassani, 2021a). Using creative means of suppression, policing Iraqi voices and bodies has become a way of governance. However, what motivates people to mobilise and protest is their own very disenfranchisement. This is why the Tishreen Movement has explicitly maintained its peaceful means of protest. Activists and protestors openly acknowledge that relying on violence would only discredit the movement. Burning tires and empty political and militia headquarters at night in regions like Basra and Thi Qar has been the most "violent" behaviour thus far. Disruption of the status quo through the strategic use of bodies and space (Ali Al-Hassani, 2023c; Ali, 2023; Alkhudary, 2022) has been the most important means of protesting it. Mobilising people, bodies, and spaces as infrastructures, the Tishreen Movement has set itself apart from previous Iraqi protests and as a framework for other protests around the world (Ali, 2023). The peaceful nature of the movement, despite all violence enforced against it, would reinforce the movement's role as a victim of authoritarianism and as one which practices agency towards a peaceful and promising future. The Iraqi protest movement turned into much more than an anti-corruption and anti-establishment movement, including various human rights causes under its umbrella. While the Tishreen Movement pushes for desectarianization and popular sovereignty, the political elite pushes back. The 2021 elections and their aftermath are a case in point.

Although an early election was one of the Tishreen Movement's demands in 2019, it was conditional on electoral reform, accountability, and the dissolution of the consociational system. Instead, elections took place in 2021, with slight electoral reform that divided governorates into electoral constituencies not based on parliament seats, but on demographics, thus criticised as racist and sectarian (Sattar, 2020). Moreover, while the political elite claimed to campaign across sects, they in fact perpetuated the same divisive rhetoric as always. The same corrupt politicians ran in the new election with absolute disregard for protestors' demands, one of which was accountability of kleptocrats and of those behind anti-protest violence. A new election with no accountability was bound to fail, as accountability and electoral reform are not interchangeable. While both rely on overlapping legal frameworks, they are entirely different and need to be achieved together, especially when those partaking in the electoral process are guilty of alleged crimes or control militias that violate civilians' rights and national security. Accountability and reconciliation cannot be accomplished without transitional justice mechanisms that allow for, and are built on, restorative approaches that place the people at the centre of the process. The ethnosectarian consociational model is designed to do the opposite. It takes punitive, securitised, and divisive approaches to police the public and marginalise social, denominational, and ethnic groups. As a result, there is great popular distrust in state institutions and a great disconnect between Iraq's people and political elite. Activists within the Tishreen Movement debated at length whether their participation in the election in one capacity or another would delegitimise or weaken their cause. On one hand, a political party must emerge from the movement to

represent its interests; and on the other, participating in the political process means legitimising it and compromising any demands to dismantle it. Accordingly, the 2021 elections witnessed record-low turnout and the Tishreen Movement mobilised towards forming a united opposition (Arraf, 2021). People either actively boycotted the election or were apathetic about seeing positive change (Ali Al-Hassani, 2023a).

Due to the low turnout and the political elite's relentless grip on the consociational system, Iraq went without an elected government for a year, and the election was a failure (Alkhudary, 2021; Sakai et al., 2022; Taher Alhammood, 2021). In the meantime, verbal and physical clashes took place between Muqtada al-Sadr's party and that of the Coalition Framework, which was formed around the elections. The first, who had won the popular vote, demanded reform that involved dismantling the ethnosectarian consociational model, only to eventually retire from politics. The latter was formed on strictly sectarian terms, had won a few parliament seats, and fought for a redefinition of the majority at the Constitutional Court. A year of political tension and deadlock eventually turned violent, albeit briefly (Atwood, n.d.; Bobseine, 2022; France24, 2022; Saadoun, 2022). What set this political apart from previous ones was the intra-Shi'a rivalry, which was bound to occur. When a political system is based on sectarian representation, it invites questions about who legitimately represents a sect-based demographic. Shi'a cleric Kathem al-Haeri's questionable resignation in August 2022 raised such questions (Tollast & Aldroubi, 2022). Who has the legitimacy to represent Shi'a, Sunnis, or any of the co-opted, minoritised groups? The past year of political stalemate in Iraq has indicated that the ethnosectarian consociational model in Iraq is fragile. This is precisely why the newly selected government sponsored by the Coalition Framework is leaning on authoritarian measures to maintain it, and the Iraqi people are its victims.

Conclusion

Sectarianism never emerges out of a vacuum; it results from a process of political, legal, and social conditioning. It is ever-pervasive throughout Iraq's political system, despite politicians' denial of its existence (Al-Hassani, 2022) to gaslight Iraqis (Davis & Ernst, 2019; Rietdijk, 2021). We cannot divorce critical social and political engagement from education and free speech. Recent interviews with activists and academics in Iraq emphasise that this is a root issue in conversations around desectarianization, and key to state institutions' control of the masses. Iraqis' voices must not only be respected and protected, but amplified and centred in discussions about Iraq's statehood, governance, and sovereignty. For years, the ethnosectarian consociational model has marginalised Iraqi voices and centred a U.S.-Iran proxy war. Sectarianizing Iraqi politics and society pushes aside the very voices that fight for Iraqi sovereignty. When Iraqi protestors chant "Stooge, toady, to hell with Iran and the U.S.!" they clearly reject all sides meddling in Iraqi politics and their enablers. However, they are met with militia affiliates who claim the status quo protects their interests. This is the direct outcome of the sectarianization of Iraq, where some groups claim that they need protection from the ethnoconfessional "other". This cannot be easily shaken off, but will require much effort towards the desectarianization of Iraqi society and institutions.

4. BAHRAIN

On 14th February 2011, Bahrainis took to the streets demanding political reform. Rejecting an ordering of life that privileged the wishes of a Sunni minority ruling family over a Shi'a majority, chants of not Sunni, not Shi'a, just Bahraini rang out across the streets of the nation's capital. After decades of regime manipulation of religious divisions, this chant of unity was a desectarian moment, an instant where an emergent collective national identity transcended sectarian difference, rejecting communal schisms in favour of a broader sense of unity. Ultimately, however, it proved to be a mirage as the ruling Al Khalifa family set out on a process of sectarianizing the protests and destroying scope for grass roots expressions of unity along the way as part of a broader counter-revolutionary move (Al Rasheed, 2011). In the years that followed, the success of the sectarianization process led to the removal of all forms of Islamist expression—first Shi'a then Salafi—from public and political life, in another form of desectarianization.

In contrast to the events of Lebanon and Iraq, after the failure of the 2011 protests, desectarianization in Bahrain has taken on a different form as the Al Khalifa privileged belonging to the national project over religious communalism in an effort to ensure the survival of their rule. In doing this, space for political groups whose essence was shaped by faith was eradicated, first targeting Shi'a groups before moving to Sunni Islamists as regional developments began to resonate across the island.

The Bahraini case highlights the complexity of desectarianization and the multifarious possibilities that are revealed by actors engaging in the reimagining of the role of religion in daily life. In reflecting on desectarianization in Bahrain, one sees several processes at play, from the top-down regulatory form of desectarianization led by the Al Khalifa ruling family to a bottom-up rejection of constructed divisions during the uprisings of 2011. This reflection highlights the importance of context and the contingencies of local, national, and regional politics in shaping desectarianization across both *space* and *time*. As a result, examination of the Bahraini case offers much to the broader intellectual study of desectarianization, while reflecting on desectarianization on the island offers valuable insight as to the evolving interplay between religion and politics in Bahrain.

The Bahraini Context

Chapter 1, Article 1 of the constitution of Bahrain declares that "The Kingdom of Bahrain is a fully sovereign, independent, Islamic Arab State whose population is part of the Arab nation and whose territory is part of great Arab homeland". Ensuing articles set out that Islam is the official religion of Bahrain, and that Arab and Islamic heritage are to be protected by the state. Islam is positioned centrally within the fabric of the state, providing "strength" for the family unit, which is the basis of society, and serving as a "code of laws" and a way of life. While Islam is mentioned 26 times, there is no reference to different schools of Islamic thought or sects. One of three Shi'a majority states in the Middle East, Bahrain is home to a complex melange of identities cutting across sect, ethnicity, class, tribe, ideology, and geography. These identities are often politically charged and, in the post 2011 political landscape, life in Bahrain is conditioned by the intersectionality of politics, identity, economics, religion, security, and geopolitics. While the Bahraini constitution stresses equality within the Arab nation and the broader Muslim community, the reality of political life on the erstwhile archipelago is much bleaker.

The history of sectarianism in Bahrain is intimately tied up with the survival of the Al Khalifa ruling family, who have long sought to manipulate social divisions to retain power. From the establishment of Al Khalifa rule over Bahrain—a process described by some as a form of 'settler colonialism'—the ruling family have manipulated communal tensions as part of a broader 'divide and rule' strategy which plays out in the context of broader geopolitical tensions (Strobl, 2018; Alshehabi, 2019; Jones, 2020). Ably supported by the British and later the Saudis, the Al Khalifa's strategy of biopolitical regulation meant that dissent was largely avoided across the 20th century. Whilst Iranian support for the establishment of the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain appeared to pose a serious challenge to the Al Khalifa's rule, the legacy of the thwarted *coup d'état* is far more powerful,

constructing a narrative of Shi'a groups operating with support from Iran which continues to resonate amongst many. Indeed, on a trip to Bahrain in 2013, one interviewee looked down at the souk from the financial harbour and gesticulated, "the Persians are everywhere" (Mabon, 2019b). Although fears of Iranian manipulation of Shi'a communities in Bahrain are often evoked in order to justify the actions of the Al Khalifa and their Saudi backers, the emergence of popular protests across communal divisions posed an existential challenge to the Al Khalifa's rule.

This view, along with other derogatory stereotypes about Shi'a Muslims in Bahrain and across the region, manifested in a range of different forms, from casual conversations to school curricula. The salience of these views amongst Sunni Bahrainis points to the existence of what Pierre Bourdieu terms the *habitus* (Mabon, 2023), but also demonstrates the prominence of sectarian identity markers within the broader discourse and production of knowledge around regional politics.

Academic literature on the post-Arab Uprisings landscape in Bahrain regularly identifies the process of sectarianization as the key strategy of the Al Khalifa in their effort to retain power (Matthiesen, 2013; Mabon, 2019a; Mabon, 2020a). This process of sectarianization resulted in the entrenchment of politically charged sectarian difference (Hashemi and Postel, 2017; Matthiesen, 2017). Privileging the fusion of Arab and Sunni identities above all others created a political landscape that was exclusionary to the majority of people living in Bahrain, allowing the ruling Al Khalifa tribe to continue the divide and rule policy initially implemented by the British (Strobl, 2018) at the turn of the 20th century, with the help of the British.

The decades after the British withdrawal from 'East of Suez' witnessed political life in Bahrain playing out in the context of a state of emergency, declared after an electoral experiment in 1973 (Mabon, 2020). This state of emergency allowed the Al Khalifa to suppress dissent with the support of Saudi Arabia (Khalaf, 1998). This following period was punctured by acts of protest amidst demands for democratic reform and geopolitical uncertainty, notably the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979 and the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. These events shaped the perceptions of Shi'a groups in Bahrain, creating a complex relationship between rulers and the Shi'a majority. And yet, it was the onset of the popular protests in 2011 that posed the biggest challenge to the Al Khalifa's rule through the coming together of opposition groups united by a desire for change. At this time, chants of "not Sunni, not Shi'a, just Bahraini" rang out across the island, posing an existential challenge to the survival of the Al Khalifa.

The years leading up to the 2011 protests were themselves replete with frustration at the political, social, and economic conditions impacting on everyday life in Bahrain. Calls for political reform were largely ignored, and while Shi'a parties operated, their efforts to bring about change within the political system were unsuccessful. In such conditions, it was hardly surprising that protests which spread across the Middle East in early 2011 would also take hold in Bahrain. This expression of unity posed an existential challenge to the Al Khalifa, who quickly embarked on a process of sectarianization, framing Shi'a groups as Iranian sponsored 5th columnists. A holistic campaign of sectarianization led to deepening of divisions within Bahraini society, ranging from the deliberate manipulation of communal difference (Gengler, 2013; Jones, 2020) to urban design (Mabon, 2020b), enabled and supported by Sunni Islamist groups such as al-Minbar. The conclusion of this process of sectarianization was the widespread removal of Shi'a voices from political life, a form of desectarianization. This top-down process of desectarianziation was a product of the systematic sectarianization of all forms of political, social, and economic life, pushing Shi'a groups to the margins of life in Bahrain.

Desectarianization in Bahrain

Closer examination of the post-Arab Uprisings political landscape in Bahrain reveals a process of desectarianization taking place after the sectarianization of Shi'a groups. This secondary process of desectarianization was itself multifaceted, beginning with the de-politicisation of Shi'a groups before focusing on Islamist groups more broadly. Central to both facets was the broader desire to retain power, controlling the role of sectarian – and then religious – identity groups in pursuit of survival, using the mechanisms of sovereign power to achieve this goal.

Since the turn of the 20th century, Bahrain's ruling Al Khalifa family has been concerned with the possible threat posed by the Kingdom's Shi'a majority. Across the century, a range of strategies

were used to ensure dynastic survival, facilitated by the deployment of the mechanisms of sovereign power. Much of this revolves around processes of sectarianization, which sought to create an artificially binary distinction between those loyal to the regime – defined typically as ethnically Arab, Sunni, and loyal to the—and those seeking to topple the house of Khalifa—viewed either as ethnically Persian (Ajam) or indigenous to the state Arab (Baharna). Mechanisms of control designed to regulate life and ensure the survival of the Al Khalifa sought to regulate these lines of division—inclusion and exclusion—as a means of preventing widespread protest (Mabon, 2020a). Using tools legitimised by the deeply unpopular state security law and the emergency legislation declared in the aftermath of the 1973 elections, the ruling family ensured their survival despite the turbulence of regional politics at this time (Khalaf, 1998; Mabon, 2020).

In the years following the marginalisation of Shi'a groups, the shifting contours of regional politics – namely Saudi and Emirati fears about the influence of groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood – meant that attention turned to Sunni Islamist groups. In Bahrain, such groups had played a key role in facilitating the sectarianization of Shi'a actors in the years after the uprisings, yet the influence of powerful regional allies prompted the Al Khalifa to curtail the ability of Sunni Islamists in the state (Freer, 2019; Mabon, 2023). As a result, an additional process of desectarianization took place, with the Al Khalifa once again reimagining the role of religious groups in political life in pursuit of control, albeit influenced by regional powers.

Impediments to Desectarianization and Political Reform

The Bassiouni Independent Commission Inquiry into the Al Khalifa's response to the Arab Uprisings reveals a systematic practice of exclusion and discrimination that was forged in the previous decades (BICI, 2011; Mabon, 2020a). One former Bahraini MP recalled a meeting with Bahrain's Minister of Justice in 2012. During this meeting, the minister "clearly told us that the conflict in 2011 is between Sunnis and Shi'a as that it has nothing to do with us. The minister tried to convince us that the root of the problem is sectarianism. In the elections of 2006, we could see how the ruling family attempted to finance radical Sunni hardliners to make the parliament a sectarian platform. They supported Sunni hardliners against Shi'a. It was part of their policies".

In the years that followed the Uprisings, opposition efforts to reimagine relations between rulers and ruled required challenging the role of religion - and Sunni identities - within the fabric of Bahraini politics. Although processes of sectarianization were responsible for the emergence of politically charged communal divisions and, with it, the survival of the Al Khalifa regime, some Bahrainis continue to engage in a struggle for political and human rights reform. In doing so, Bahrainis predominantly in exile or in the diaspora have engaged in a process of reflection over the role of sectarian identities within the political fabric of Bahrain, with the need to overcome such divisions deemed essential to facilitate political reform. Discussions with Bahrainis over recent years point to several factors preventing a process of desectarianization, predominantly coalescing around a desire for regime survival and the nature of political life in the state.

Although the Bahraini constitution depicts a state that is inclusive and representative of its broader citizenry, the reality is far bleaker. As one Bahraini observed, "the state plays a role in stoking and capitalising on the 'divide and rule' principle established in history by the British […] The state magnifies the role of religion in order to stay in power." This magnification is such that religious identities are fused with geopolitical, charged fears about the external manipulation of domestic affairs (Mabon, 2023; Mabon, 2020a).

Despite the presence of an elected chamber, efforts to facilitate political or constitutional reform were typically thwarted by members of the Al Khalifa, particularly when it tried to guarantee the denunciation of discrimination, even in fields such as housing and scholarship. For one Bahraini political observer, the parliament "is handicapped" if not "paralysed". Fundamentally, legal processes have taken on a regulatory component, with sectarian identities becoming entangled within the mechanisms of sovereign power. As one Bahraini observed, the ruling family "plays a critical role in controlling and implementing law selectively. If two people from different sects went to the law as they commit the same crime, the judgement will be different". This point was supported by a constitutional lawyer who observed that the constitution gives freedom to the ruling family, creating a problematic

situation whereby constitutional processes "are obstructed by the ruling family." One former Bahraini MP claimed that the Al Khalifa believe they "own the country and the constitution as well", suggesting that members of the ruling family are free from prosecution, as the case of Eman Salehi suggests.

Yet Al Khalifa efforts to dominate political, economic, and social life transcend arenas of politics and law. Education curricula serve to deepen the discrimination, with oversight directly from the Ministry of Education. This oversight ranges from school curricula to investigation of PhD theses written across the world which have to be submitted to the Ministry of Education (and Interior) for vetting. A consequence of this, of course, is the establishment of intellectual red lines around topics that were not to be discussed. These red lines led to the banning of prominent journalists and academics from visiting the island, and a wider engagement within the *Pegasus* surveillance programme.

Reimagining National Unity?

The manipulation of communal difference in the pursuit of regime survival has had serious repercussions for broader visions of national unity. As one Bahraini suggested, the end result of the privileging of one sect over the other is that "National unity is not part of the state". Beyond this, debate about the nature of belonging and citizenship was prevalent, albeit predominantly taking place in the diaspora. One Shi'a cleric suggested that "equal citizenship" offered a means of addressing political and social issues, yet the "superiority" of religious identities over political identities reinforced communal difference, preventing lasting reform.

There is little doubt that political reform and desectarianization are intimately intertwined in Bahrain. To facilitate reform, desectarianization is necessary to move beyond the politicised and securitised forms of religious difference, yet desectarianization appears possible only with some form of political reform. At the time of writing, despite being under pressure from international actors, the US State Department put out a tender for strengthening the rule of law and fundamental freedoms in Bahrain. There is little appetite for political reform amongst the Al Khalifa. Instead, reform takes place predominantly in the human rights sphere in support of a reframing of Bahrain as a state worthy of foreign direct investment. While such reforms are undeniably welcome, grass roots desectarianization—and with it, substantive political reform—appears unlikely.

The Future of Desectarianization in Bahrain

Over the past decade, close to 1000 Bahrainis have had their citizenship revoked and, as a result, been forced to leave the state. The vast majority of these people were politically active, either in the realm of high politics, civil society activity, or human rights. As a result, the decision to revoke citizenship has a devastating impact on the state's future political activity. Whilst talk of an improvement in living conditions is routinely heard, the absence of figures with political experience will have a negative impact on the political life.

The importance of religion as an ordering principle in Bahraini politics and society means that it has long occupied a position of importance in the minds of officials. Yet, much like other states in the region, religious identities are themselves imbued with geopolitical meaning, further adding to the complexity of religious identity markers.

Whilst initially focussed on Shi'a groups, the Bahraini state's decision to focus on Islamists broadly after 2014 highlights the shifting perception of religious identities within domestic politics along with the importance of Bahrain within broader regional currents, further emphasised by the state's involvement in the Abraham Accords. It also stresses the ongoing dominance of the Al Khalifa in shaping the nature of Bahraini politics. Despite the widespread protests of 2011, the deployment of machineries of sovereign power eviscerated Shi'a opposition groups. As a result, there appears limited scope for political reform that would give Bahrainis from all backgrounds a greater say on their future, demonstrating the power of the habitus created by the Al Khalifa and, perhaps, more broadly, the position of sectarian identity markers within the *episteme*.

CONCLUSIONS

Over the past two decades, sectarian identities have played a prominent role in shaping the nature of political life within and between states across the Middle East. The emergence of a vast body of literature engaging with theoretical and empirical questions pertaining to sectarianism and cutting across disciplinary divisions demonstrates the salience of sectarian identities. Much of this literature can be grouped into two clusters: the first seeks to conceptualise and theorise sectarianism, while the second reflects on empirical issues pertaining to sectarian identities. In this report, we contribute to a growing third cluster which looks at the contestation of sectarian identities, conceptually and empirically using the concept of desectarianization.

Fundamentally, desectarianization is about the reimagining of the role of religion in everyday life and the efforts made by actors to change the role of religious identities in ordering life. Yet, as this report shows, processes of desectarianziation play out in several ways, driven by the aspirations of actors involved and conditioned by the complexities and contingencies of time and space. These processes are not linear, nor are they necessarily consistent across contexts. Reflecting on the cases of Bahrain, Lebanon and Iraq reveals much about the nature of desectarianization and, more broadly, the future of religious identities in the contemporary Middle East. As each case study reveals, contextual factors—the contingencies of time and space—determine the forms that desectarianziation takes, meaning that political, social, economic, geopolitical, demographic, and religious factors all shape processes of desectarianziation, whilst instances of desectarianization, in turn, shape the nature of the political. At the heart of these contextual factors is an environment supported by an *episteme* that positions sectarian identity markers central in the ordering of life through the production and organisation of knowledge.

As each case has shown, albeit in contrasting ways, reflections on desectarianization are intimately bound up with questions about the nature of the state and the political, which play out formally and informally. The emergence of protest in Bahrain, Iraq, and Lebanon across the past two decades reveals much about the nature of political life and the widespread frustrations found amongst people from all backgrounds. As this report has demonstrated, structural forces operating across political projects reinforce communal divisions, meaning that desectarianization processes are shaped by these structures that regulate political, economic, cultural, and religious life. In both cases, protest movements were able to draw support from across communal groups, demonstrating the capacity of issues to transcend sectarian identities. Perhaps the most prominent examples of this are widespread anger and frustration at the inertia of political elites and seemingly endemic corruption that ultimately served to reinforce sectarian identities. Yet the coming together of people from different communal groups was also precarious, with nascent cross-communal identities facing pressure from the status quo sectarian elites.

A key reason for this is ongoing prominence of consociational power sharing agreements in post-conflict states. Consociational systems of power sharing have long been used as a means of providing communal groups within divided societies with access to political systems. The organisation of power sharing agreements reflects the demographic construction of the state, albeit leaving it open to serious challenges. Critics of such approaches argue that power sharing serves as a means of reinforcing communal differences, doing little to incentivise efforts to create collective identities. These communal identities are siloed in a range of ways, from the organisation of political life to the distribution of welfare and education. In reasserting communal identities through the organisation and regulation of life, engagement with the day-to-day affairs of the other is seen as a negative force.

As each case reveals, the role of the state is essential in contextualising, enabling, restricting, or regulating processes of desectarianization. Understanding state forms and the regulatory processes deployed by those in positions of power is essential in gaining a better grasp of desectarianziation. From calls for political and constitutional reform in Bahrain to the re-imagining of a state in Lebanon, processes of desectarianization can ask existential questions about the very nature of the political. Here,

perhaps, we reach the greatest challenge for those seeking to engage in acts of desectarianization, particularly from a bottom-up perspective.

These developments play out in a regional episteme, in which sectarian difference is seen as a central feature. Indeed, in many states, sectarian identity markers are built into the fabric of the state, but also in the ideas and assumptions about knowledge. Such a claim requires far greater exploration than is possible here, but it is important to note that one of the reasons for the enduring legacy of sectarian difference is its centrality within an episteme already beset by ruptures with modernity, as Wael Hallaq sagaciously observes. Such a claim moves beyond the conditions explored by Social Theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu, who argue that action is conditioned by the interplay of *capital*, *field*, and *habitus*. Yet, on a broader level, the prominent position of sectarian identities within the production of knowledge and the organisation of life means that those wishing to engage in desectarianization must come to terms with—and contest—the salience of sectarian identities within the *episteme*. Accepting this means asking a range of challenging questions about the organisation of life and, more broadly, the ways in which we study sectarianism, the state, and the political.

In addition to this are normative views of desectarianization. As the events of Iraq and Lebanon have shown us, bottom-up forms of desectarianziation are generally viewed as a normatively good step as people seek to circumvent the legacy sectarian difference and the structural impediments to democratic engagement. Such actions are typically viewed positively by those supporting the eradication of structural violence, yet various issues remain unresolved with regard to the future of political organisation and what identity markers may replace sectarian identities. Though there is little doubting the toxicity consequences of politically charged sectarian identities, more work is required to consider possible alternatives. While some have pointed to Arabism as a means of locating a collective identity across the 20th century, ethnic minorities across the region were routinely excluded and marginalised from political life. As political philosophers have long espoused, collective identities define themselves by virtue of what they are not.

Top-down processes of desectarianziation are typically viewed negatively as they are routinely mapped onto the biopolitical machineries of sovereign power, an additional tool in the arsenal of elites seeking to ensure their survival. Yet this may not necessarily be the case, as events in Saudi Arabia suggest. Although beyond the purview of this report, it is useful to note that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is engaging in a process of desectarianziation, seeking to reintegrate its Shi'a communities into the social, political, and economic fabric of the state. Under the tutelage of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, overtures have been made to leading Shi'a clerics and vast sums of money have been invested in the Eastern Province in an effort to re-imagine the role of the Shi'a in Saudi Arabia. Alongside this strategy are efforts to curtail the influence of the Wahhabi *ulema*, creating a different Saudi state that is more tolerant of sectarian difference and espouses a strong nationalist vision. Although this may be an example of a successful instance of desectarianization, serious issues remain about Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen, its treatment of political prisoners, LGBTQ+ movements, the killing of Jamal Khashoggi, sports washing and others.

More work is required on the nature and forms of desectarianization at all levels. Although we can point to forms of protest in Lebanon and Iraq and draw parallels, much more work is required to work through the complexities of group membership, goals, methodologies, forms of inclusion, and other factors. Such questions cannot be answered by political analysis alone. Rather, to understand the actions of protesters and the structural factors that condition their actions, a more philosophical and holistic account is required that reflects on the interplay of people, the state, the political, and knowledge.

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