SEPAD

Sectarianism, Proxies &
De-sectarianisation

Sectarianism in disguise:
de-sectarianisation in Syria and Kuwait

Executive Summary

Politics in the Arab region is marked with a specific striking contradiction: regimes witnessing sectarian tensions and divisions have always claimed the opposite. Rulers have touted their countries as home to a unique sense of faultless social harmony, ideal cross-sect unity, and unquestionable national consensus. This report investigates the process of constructing the 'as if not' (Wedeen 1998) case as a process of discourse-making traced through the speeches of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad (2000-present) and Kuwaiti Emir Sabah al-Ahmed al-Sabah (2006-2020). The discourse analysis found that the two countries are not opposite poles, as runs the dominant impression separating Kuwait as a 'success story' in de-sectarianisation. Assad and al-Sabah are two sides of the same coin as they have built discourses that deny, falsify, or hide sectarianism regardless of its different levels or volumes across the two cases. They share not only this twisted process of discourse-making, but also the function of it. That is, an attempt to ensure their regime security and consolidate their power strategies. Depending on specific understandings of sectarianisation and de-sectarianisation as markers of boundary-making and othering, the two leaders both end up with what I call 'sectarianisation in de-sectarianisation', that is entrenching the very problem which they claim that they are fighting against. Sectarianisation and de-sectarianisation are thus not opposites, as the two leaders construct their discourses through the interplay between both terms. Nevertheless, Assad and al-Ahmed have their own points of dissimilarities relating to history and political culture in each one country.

About the Author

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Sectarianism in disguise: de-sectarianisation in Syria and Kuwait

Syria is a country shaped by its sectarian identity. The Alawite minority, almost 17 percent of the population, represent the 'backbone' of the regime's patronage system and *raison d'etre*.[1] Fabrice Balanche summed up power dynamics as such: '[i]n exchange for political support, they [Alawites] were given material benefits that only increased their sectarian solidarity.'[2] The regime has also guaranteed the loyalty of the Alawites through further levels of sectatrianisation such as 'agitating the Islamist threat'[3], mostly emanating from groups related to the majority Sunni population. This regime has always resorted to the 'revival of sectarianism during particular sociohistorical contexts'[4], as has been the case in the conflict sparked in 2011 by protests demanding the end of Assad's rule. Assad reacted to the protests demanding democracy and his removal with resorting to its 'faithful community', i.e. Alawites, at his back'[5] and also by adopting the full use of force to oppress the Sunni majority. One result of this policy is that sectarian differences got further reinforced with the rise of 'sect-homogenous' territory in places like Idlib and Aleppo which are now more Sunni than before' as many Christians and Alawites are reluctant to return to them[6] amidst the lack of inter-communal trust. These developments are served by a background under which sectarianisation has also been part of the 'national political climate in Syria's modern history'[7] and already existing since the early formation of the Syrian republic (1920-1946).[8]

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[1] See Hinnebusch, Raymond, *Syria: Revolution from Above* (London, Routledge, 2001)

[2] Balanche, Fabrice, 'Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War: A Geopolitical Study,' The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, p. XVI, February 5, 2018, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/sectarianism-syrias-civil-war-geopolitical-study

[3] Ibid. On the use of Islamism as an 'asset' and a gift that keeps giving', see Davidson, Christopher, *Shadow Wars: The Secret Struggle for the Middle East* (UK: Oneworld Publishing, 2016), pp 469-501.

[4] Matar, Dina, 'The Syrian Regime's Strategic Political Communication: Practices and Ideology', *International Journal of Communication*, 2019, 13 (19), p.2400.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Osseiran, Hashem, 'How Sectarianism Can Help Explain the Syrian War, The New Humanitarian', 6 March, 2018, https://deeply.thenewhumanitarian.org/syria/articles/2018/03/06/how-sectarianism-can-help-explain-the-syrian-war

[7] Ibid.

[8] References are always made to the early period in the 20th century, marked with plots which 'fragmented historic Syria', Hinnebusch, Raymound, *Syria: Revolution from Above*. The battle of national struggle against imperialism got based on resisting the divide and rule policies under the French mandate (1920–46). These policies included weakening Sunni notables by strengthening minorities or by dividing up its 'Greater Syria' territory for a Christian rule in Lebanon; see Neep, D., *Occupying Syria under the French Mandate: Insurgency, Space and*

To a lesser extent, Kuwaiti politics also have its own share of sectarianisation, especially if we judge it by an obvious sense of 'resentment' among Kuwait's Shias, forming around a third of the 1.3 million native population. Many Shias complain about exclusion from 'positions of political influence' and that they are not 'promoted beyond certain levels in the military, oil industry and other sensitive sectors'.[9] Complaints vary to include the lack of funding for Shiite mosques, as opposed to Sunni mosques which were state-funded along with their clergymen.[10] Although the elder Shias have accepted the status quo as 'second-class' citizens, the younger restive generation taking a 'divergent path by drawing attention to Shiite grievances and pressing for change'.[11]

In reaction to these realities and grievances, the regimes in both Syria and Kuwait take the same position. That is, denying, hiding or fully ignoring any traces of sectarianisation. In Syria, the ruling elites have never considered sectarianism a 'major issue worthy of public discussion'.[12] In Kuwait, the regime has always hailed itself as an exception, portraying itself as distinct from sectarian policies adopted by regimes in surrounding countries in the Gulf region or in the Middle East in general. The report aims to trace this *process* of 'acting as if not' through analysing the speeches of both Syrian President Bashar Assad, ruling Syria since 2000, and Kuwaiti Emir Sabah al-Ahmed al-Sabah, in power from 2006 until 2020.[13]

The speeches are the main site of analysis, as they represent significant 'spaces of appearance' where the leader and his strategies would 'appear to others' explicitly.[14] Second, they also carry with them agency, revealing part of the leader's 'capacity to act'[15] and to mobilize people on basis of his twisted understandings of (de-)sectarianisation. The speeches offer a well-regulated, public, and documented source of data. As Denton and Woodward argue, 'everything the president does or says… communicates "something"'.[16] Along with manifesting the leader's agency, the speeches also offer glimpses of interaction within the agency or structure under which these texts are scripted, rehearsed, and propagated.

Methodologically, I adopt discourse analysis and frame analysis, mainly searching for thematic constructions. The main interest is not language *per se* but more general 'global' meanings, which it conveys regarding the use and functionality of (de-)sectarianisation as

State Formation. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2012; White, B. T., *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East: The Politics of Community in French Mandate Syria*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press: 2011.

[9] Boghardt, Lori Plotkin, *Kuwait Amid War, Peace and Revolution* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006)*,* p. 32.

[10] Ibid, p. 31.

[11] Ibid, p. 32

[12] Ibid

[13] The acting 'as if not' phenomenon is adapted from, and indeed inspired by, the excellent insightful article of Lisa Wedeen's 'acting as if'. The article originally and innovatively demonstrates how the regime of Assad's father, Hafez, had forced Syrians into obedience and acquiescence, see Wedeen, L. (1998). Acting "as if": symbolic politics and social control in Syria. Comparative Studies in Society and History, 40(3), pp.503-523.

[14] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition: A Study of the Central Dilemmas Facing Modern Man* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1959), p. 177

[15] Mary Ann Tetreault, *Stories of Democracy: Politics and Society in Contemporary Kuwait* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p.7.

[16] Denton, Robert E. Jr. and Woodward, Gary. (1990) Political Communication in America. New York: Praeger.

strategies of power and tools of survival and legitimation. The discourse analysis found three themes: unification, externalisation and legitimation. They are identified on basis of repetition, frequency, and coordination of meanings, building up each theme on its own or consolidating each other as 'building blocks[17]' of a much larger discourse and resonance judged by how these themes cling to a supportive background reality including history or geopolitical context. I went through all of Assad's speeches delivered since 2011, as found in the 'search and find' in Syria's official news agency (SANA). I traced al-Sabah's speeches as found on the state's main portal archiving these speeches. The analysis includes looking for patterns in texts and relating them to the three pre-defined themes. Selective as it is, the process of identifying and grouping meanings in texts as such still gain its value by linking it with the context where surrounding circumstances are shaped or shaping them. For example, the externalisation theme is studied within the context of relations with the West in the case of Syria and stronger neighbours such as Iraq, Saudi Arabia or Iran in the case of Kuwait.

I stay away from seeking a specific definition of sectarianisation, an attempt deemed futile regarding a term 'notoriously difficult'[18] to define, 'imbued with considerable ambiguity'[19] or 'essentially contested'.[20] Rather, it is taken as a process, amounting to the 'production of meanings'[21] manifested through the three themes and under which attention is paid to 'where does (de) sectarianisation occur and how?'[22] The analysis takes as a point of departure political actors who process sectarianisation 'within specific contexts, pursuing political goals.'[23] Therefore, as evidenced in the cases of Syria and Kuwait, it is authoritarianism, not religion, that is the 'critical factor that shapes the sectarianisation process.'[24] Part of the process is mobilizing people through shaping a dominant form of group identity.[25] The identification within the group feeds into a sense of othering and boundary-making with the outside world against which the group would gain its identity as unified entity. Scholars such as Simon Mabon and Lucia Ardovini thus succinctly consider sectarianisation as a process of identity-making or becoming 'different.'[26] If so, de-sectarianisation would be a process in the opposite direction, that is of becoming 'similar', homogenous, united or 'getting together'[27] where people would adopt a mostly imagined group identity, be it religion, nationalism, or Pan-Arabism.

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[17] Luke Temple and others, 'Neoliberal Narrative in Times of Economic Crisis', p.557.
[18] Potter, Lawrence G., 'Introduction', In *Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf*, edited by Lawrence G. Potter (London: Hurst, 2013), p.1–30.
[19] Matthiesen, Toby, *The Other Saudis: Shiism, Dissent and Sectarianism*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014, p.14.
[20] Valbjørn, Morten, 'Studying Sectarianism While Beating Dead Horses and Searching for Third Ways', *LSE Middle East Centre—Blog*, September 17, 2018.
[21] Steinberg, Marc C., 'Tilting the Frame: Considerations on Collective Action Framing from a Discursive Turn', *Theory and Society* 27 (6), 1998, pp.845-872.
[22] Ibid, p. 4
[23] Hashemi, Nader and Danny Postel, 'Introduction', In *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*, edited by Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp.1_22 (4).
[24] Ibid, p.5.
[25] Ibid, p. 6
[26] Mabon, Simon and Lucia Ardovini, 'People, Sects and States: Interrogating Sectarianism in the Contemporary Middle East', *Global Discourse*, 6:4, (2016), pp.551_560 (552).
[27] Beshara, *Sectarianism Without Sects*, p.61.

From this perspective, the main trends in literature have attempted to describe and explain de-sectarianisation as antithetical to sectarianisation, i.e. the meanings of the latter can override, modify, or cancel out the opposite meanings of the other. Mabon's analysis shows that states and societies can get de-sectarianised if they adopt a number of specific steps in the opposite direction. Mabon suggests that reforming the political landscape may be a strategy to bring in commonality and reduce differences as part of 'accommodating the plurality of society by guaranteeing political representation to adversarial ethnic groups'.[28] In this vein, de-sectarianisation is conceptualised as a moment, constituting the 're-imagining of political life' and where sectarian differences could be 'de-constructed'.[29]

Building de-sectarianisation on *what is not there* (the imagined) to replace or ameliorate the *what is there* (the real) approach is further developed as other scholars consider de-sectarianisation as a 'potentiality' which can be realised if actors change their behaviour. Such changes can take place in a range of different forms, at different levels of analysis and with contrasting outcomes, as a recent issue of *The Review of Faith and International Affairs* on the topic demonstrates[30]. For example, Samira Nasirzadeh and Edward Wastnidge set de-sectarianisation as a possibility or a condition which Iran can push forward by adopting a new 'region-first' foreign policy based on 'de-securitization through diplomacy'.[31] The report is not meant to (in)validate or engage with these conceptual and methodological approaches of de-sectarianisation. Rather, it attempts to map how political actors themselves such as Assad and al-Sabah developed their own understandings of de-sectarianisation that left its meanings conflated with its antithesis. Discourse analysis shows how their attempts to consolidate their rule made de-sectarianisation and sectarianisation into two faces of the same coin. Equally staying away from definitions, I take de-sectarianisation in the report to mean a *process under which leaders attempt to hide and falsify sectarianisation through amplifying frames of faultless social harmony and cross-sect unity, and under which they can also manipulate this constructed idealised reality to legitimate and justify their authoritarian durability.* This process is not just a political behaviour drawn on a mere contrived 'sect blindness' or sect neutrality' randomly 'misplaced' or a practice that went wrong as some would argue.[32] Rather, it is based on articulations deliberately and systematically crafted by leaders across the years or decades of their rule, and a favourable environment made available by those leaders to operationalise these articulations as constituent parts of their power strategies. In this vein, the process also entails setting its own layers of sectarianisation, albeit cloaked into what is supposed to be its opposite.[33] The process thus depends on not separating sectarianisation and

[28] Mabon, Simon, 'Desectarianization: Looking Beyond the Sectarianization of Middle Eastern Politics, *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 2020, 17:4, 23-35, DOI: 10.1080/15570274.2019.1681776, p. 31.

[29] Mabon, Simon. 'Four Questions about De-sectarianization, *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 2020, 18:1, 1-11, DOI: 10.1080/15570274.2020.1729528, p. 2.

[30] The special issue can be accessed via https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/rfia20/18/1

[31] Nasirzadeh, Samira and Edward Wastnidge. 'De-securitizing through Diplomacy: De-sectarianization and the View from the Islamic Republic', *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 18:1, 23-33, DOI: 10.1080/15570274.2020.1729529

[32] Haddad, Fanar, *Understanding Sectarianism: Sunni-Shi'a Relations in the Modern Arab World* (London: Hurst & Company, 2020), p. 200.

[33] Haddad also contended that 'sect blindness' or 'sect neutrality' policies in Iraq have been counterproductive as it 'did not make people less aware of sectarian identities, even if it deepened the taboo surrounding their discussion', Haddad, Fanar, *Understanding Sectarianism*, p. 200

de-sectarianisation into opposite poles or mutually exclusive classifactory units, but rather on relating them together as equally beneficial tools in the authoritarian toolbox. Both terms are thus equivalent on basis of use and functions drawn on their differentiation in the toolbox of authoritarianism.

The first section explores the example of Assad, to be followed by that of al-Ahmed. The two examples intersect as I seek to understand commonalities in how they functionalise the two themes as part of their power strategies and as instruments of survival and legitimation.

The Case of Assad

Assad has fully denied the presence of sectarianisation in his country on the basis of adopting a very specific meaning of it, a meaning that revolves around constructing Syrians as fully unified as the first theme identified in his speeches shows.

The Theme of Unification

Even though his country was fully buffeted by a sectarian conflict from 2011, Assad maintained a thematic loyalty to the argument that 'Syrian society has never been sectarian'.[34] He always celebrated a 'perfect sense of 'common or shared living'[35], 'blending and integration ... among sects, ideas, traditions, concepts, visions.'[36] He repeatedly mentioned how the 2011 conflict turned Syria's inter-sect relations from just coexistence or tolerance to full integration and harmony.[37] The Syrian president described the components of the Syrian society of today

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and pp 199-215. Haddad showed these policies are more 'misplaced' or inadvertently 'counter-productive' than systematically abused or deliberately manipulated by the ruling elites.

[34] Assad's speech, August 20, 2017.
[35] Assad's speech, July 16, 2014.
[36] Assad's speech, July 1, 2013.
[37] Ibid.

as 'complementing each other and integrating to build the unified national colour.[38] Meanings are heavily repeated as he stressed that the Syrians now 'surpass ideas of common or shared living, existing before the events, to have a stage of full integration and social cohesion'.[39]

Assad took the past 10 years since the eruption of the conflict as a *redemptive* moment, helping doubtful Syrians to get rid of any 'hidden or 'unconscious' feelings of sectarianism as they now 'learn the lessons that they have to condemn sectarianism otherwise their homeland would descend into destruction.'[40] Those with 'sectarianism in their souls as fire under ashes' found enough reasons to get rid of it', he said.[41] The timing of the conflict is considered by Assad perfect since 'if we waited longer or more years these sectarian sentiments could have gone deeper into the souls of Syrians.'[42] He added the conflict is an opportunity for sectarian repentance of 'those who were misled and wanted to abandon their wrong path on the other'.[43]

The thematic construction gains part of its value beyond texts by resonating with established policy and long-standing history. Across the years of his rule since 2000, and that of his predecessor and father Hafez al-Assad in power from 1971, Assad has long imposed a strict policy of hiding and denying sectarianism. It is imposed through propaganda under which Syrians were subjected to a 'constant barrage of its rhetorical iterations'[44] to ensure they are unanimous in their adoption of the same version of 'sectarianisation' based on hiding their views or feelings on the rampant sectarianism in society and politics in the name of unity and cohesion. The policy is also implemented through force that ensures the 'absolute prohibition' of any discussion of it.[45] In 2006, the regime imprisoned writer Michel Kilo after publishing an article entitled 'Syrian obituaries'[46] in which he criticized the regime for 'treating any talk on these issues of sects as treason'.[47] The regime thus managed to maintain the issue as a 'deadly elephant in the room'[48] and create a case of 'sectarian chastity' under which the ruling elite have long built in the name of the unity of all of Syrians or 'the absolute Syrianism.'[49]

The Theme of Externalisation

Assad's speeches are full of references to external forces or an 'outside' threatening the idealised present of de-sectarianisation. Sectarianisation is a plot by 'some invisible hand's

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[38] Assad's speech, August 8, 2017.
[39] Assad's speech, July 16, 2014.
[40] Assad's speech, July 26, 2015.
[41] Assad's speech, August 20, 2017.
[42] Assad's speech, August 20, 2017
[43] Assad's speech, July 16, 2014.
[44] Lisa Wedeen, 'Acting "as if": Symbolic Politics and Social Control in Syria,' *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 1998, 40 (3), 503-523 (504).
[45] Dibo, Mohammad, 'Assad's Secular Sectarianism', Open Democracy, November 27, 2014 https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/assads-secular-sectarianism/
[46] Kilo, Michel, '*Na'wat Suriya*' [Syrian Obituaries], May 16, 2006, https://www.voltairenet.org/article139073.html
[47] Cited by Dibo, Mohammad, 'Assad's Secular Sectarianism'
[48] Ibid.
[49] Saleh, Yassin al-Haj. *The Impossible Revolution: Making Sense of the Syrian Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 108.

machinations, the fruit of some foreign conspiracy'.[50] 'Conspiracy' is a word heavily repeated in the speeches of Assad. In one single paragraph of his speeches, he stressed the need to 'maintain our success and protect ourselves against any conspiracy which might be hatched against us in the outside world' and to know that 'Syria is facing a great conspiracy'.[51]

In all speeches, Assad blamed Western forces for plotting the conspiracy through their attempts to 'destroy and divide Syria ... through sectarian channels.'[52] He blamed the West on blocking 'dialogue'[53] among Syrian sects and sending 'terrorists' to disrupt the internal social harmony and unity in his country.[54] He reminded the audience that the West would use sectarianisation to justify interfering into Syrian affairs on claims of protecting specific sects.'[55] Assad cited examples such as Iraq, where external interference revealed that the West's 'sectarian plots'[56] led to 'sectarian polarisation'[57] and the full occupation of the country. This externalisation theme depends on a well-entrenched culture of communication by the ruling Baath Party adopting a 'mistrustful international outlook'[58], and portraying the country as being in a constant war with outside forces. Indeed, some argue that the regime has always depended on conspiracy theories as 'central to the regime's political doctrine and worldview'.[59]

Assad's externalisation is also based on conflating the outside with specific elements of the inside. He accused internal opposition forces of threatening the country's unique de-sectarianized 'living together' cohesion.[60] He named the Muslim Brotherhood as the main internal enemy harbouring conspiracies with the West in order to sectarianize Syria. The Brotherhood, he stressed, is a 'criminal[61]' group manipulating religion as part of plots of sectarianisation, and he has reminded audiences of events in the 1980s.[62] Indeed, the behaviour of the Brotherhood during the Hama uprising against the regime in 1982, was mainly sectarian. Its leaders appointed themselves as 'representatives of Sunnis' in Syria fighting against 'the Alawite-dominated' Assad regime and the tyranny of the whole Alawite community dismissed as 'un-Islamic'.[63] This 'Sunni sectarianism' provided the regime with the 'perfect alibi' to crush any discussion on sectarianism in the name of its alleged status as a *de-sectarianisation keeper*. The regime has long adopted policies of 'exporting'[64] and expelling opposition groups

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[50] Beshara, *Sectarianism Without Sects*, p.9.
[51] Assad's speech, March 30, 2011.
[52] Assad's Speech, June 4, 2012.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Assad's Speech, January 6, 2013).
[55] Assad's Speech, June 7, 2016.
[56] Assad's Speech, August 20, 2017.
[57] Assad's Speech, June 17, 2014.
[58] Saleh. *The Impossible Revolution,* p.95
[59] Ibid.
[60] Matar, 'The Syrian Regime's Strategic Political Communication', p.2409; see Saleh, *The Impossible Revolution.*
[61] Assad's Speech, July 16, 2014
[62] Assad's Speech, August 20, 2017.
[63] Pinto, Paulo Gabriel Hilu, 'The Shattered nation: The Sectarianization of the Syrian Conflict', In *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*, 2017, pp.123-142 (129).
[64] Mabon, Saudi-Iranian rivalry, p. 38.

as part of 'limiting political space' and a general tendency of 'de-politicisation'[65] The Muslim Brotherhood is thus dismissed as part of the outside, serving the externalisation theme especially amidst the regime's 'widespread paranoia' against the 'evil conspirators', working to undermine its internal unity.[66] In his speeches, Assad also groups 'radical Islamists' and their 'sponsor states', which he named as Turkey, Saudi Arabia or the US among others, as sharing the same target of breaking the unity of Syrians and 'destroying Syria.'[67]

The externalisation theme not only negates the internalisation of unity; it also reinforces it on the basis of Pan-Arabism adopted as part of Baathist ideology. Pan-Arabism supports acting 'as if not' as it is also constructed as 'an imagined *homogenous* Arab identity that glossed over all different forms of identifications—religious, minority, ethnic, or sectarian.'[68] Assad clearly cited Pan-Arabism as de-sectarianising due to its 'inclusiveness' and its capacity to group 'all ethnicities, religious and sects … without exceptions.'[69] He set it causally that the 'narrower levels of belonging' could appear when 'other more collective ones' disappear.'[70] If we combine the Syrian and Arab identities, Assad argued, sectarianism 'would cease.'[71] Also, it is within the very meanings of Pan-Arabism, drawn on calls for unity, solidarity and integration, that we can also identify opposite meanings of othering and boundary-making especially towards a far outsider, i.e. the West, the coloniser and their 'collaborators' in the region. In its absolutist form, the ideology is partly 'thriving in atmosphere of war… towards strangers and suspicions regarding infiltrators at home.'[72]

The Case of Al-Sabah

As is the case of Assad, I also found the two main themes in the speeches of al-Sabah traced since he came to power in 2006.

The Theme of Unification

The speeches of the Kuwaiti emir also denied any sectarian tension marking social or political relations in the country. This denial was intensively constructed in each speech. These are citations from the first of his two speeches after taking over in January 2006: the Kuwaitis are 'fully united by heart and pathways, enough that we have become one united and solid bloc'[73]; it is 'God's will' to have all the Kuwaitis 'standing in one line as a patterned

[65] Cavatorta, Francesco, 'The Convergence of Governance: Upgrading Authoritarianism in the Arab World and Downgrading Democracy Elsewhere?', *Middle East Critique,* 2010, 19 (3), pp. 217-232 (224).
[66] Saleh. *The Impossible Revolution,* p.107.
[67] Assad's Speech, July 16, 2014.
[68] Matar, 'The Syrian Regime's Political Communication', p.2406.
[69] Assad's Speech, November 14, 2017.
[70] Assad's Speech, November 15, 2017.
[71] Matar, 'The Syrian Regime's Political Communication', p.2411.
[72] Saleh. *The Impossible Revolution,* p.95
[73] Al-Ahmed's Speech, January 30, 2006

structure'[74]; 'We send prayers to Prophet Muhammad for teaching us that safety of the community lies in its unity and its strength lies in its cohesiveness.'[75]

Unlike Assad, the unity constructed by al-Sabah has been multi-directional, separately targeting specific groups such as the ruling family or the parliament. In his second public speech after taking office, he addressed the ruling al-Sabah family and stressed that 'acting in unison/solidarity'[76] is significant and even 'existential' for its survival and legitimation. He said that 'If our unity got weaker, we would become weaker and the meaning of our existence disappears'.[77] The emphasis resonates with the background of internal divisions between the two branches of al-Sabah family, namely Al-Salem and Al-Jaber, and reports that some family members challenged the selection of al-Sabah of Al-Jabir branch after ousting the then ailing Emir Saad al-Abdallah al-Sabah of al-Salem branch in violation of the whole historic agreement of power sharing.

This unity discourse was also directed at the parliament, whose mission was set by the emir as 'maintaining unity' and 'avoiding sectarianism.'[78] He repeatedly urged MPs to 'stand in one line' and protect citizens against 'sectarian *naarat* [sentiments] only leading to division and destruction'.[79] The unity theme was part of al-Sabah's discipline and punishment against disobedient members of parliament (MPs). He justified his decision to dissolve the parliament on repeated occasions on claims that it 'caused *fetna* [dissent] … and weakened our national unity which is the solid protector for our dear Kuwait'.[80] The theme is part of 'acting as if not' since the emir can also ignore addressing sectarianisation at the parliament itself. In June 2015, one Kuwaiti Shia MP, Faisal al-Duwaisan, resigned due to a sectarian slur hurled at him by a Sunni MP, Hamdan al-Azemi. The latter told the former 'you should rectify your sect'.[81]

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[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Al-Ahmed's speech, February 5, 2006.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Al-Ahmed's Speech, October 26, 2010
[79] Al-Ahmed's Speech, October 26, 2010
[80] Al-Ahmed's Speech, May 21, 2006
[81] No author, 'Kuwait MP Quits Over Sectarian Insult', *Khaleej Times*, June 25, 2015, https://www.khaleejtimes.com/region/kuwait-mp-quits-over-sectarian-insult

The Theme of Externalisation

The Kuwaiti emir set any traces of sectarianisation as an external import by external forces. He always emphasized that a lasting and continuous unity among the Kuwaitis is threatened by sabotage of 'external' forces.[82] He warned his audience of 'vicious attempts targeting our cohesiveness'[83], and urged the security forces and the army to 'firmly stand against everyone who is lurking to cause such evil to us'[84] and fight anyone 'plotting to cause chaos and *fetna*'.[85] The latter is a term with historical religious connotations that refer to intra-community division, including the Sunni-Shia feud. However, the emir used it more figuratively and symbolically to highlight its connoted meanings of division.

Unlike Assad's use of Pan-Arabism as a constitutive part of the externalisation frame, the Kuwaiti emir used the Arab orbit rather as a source of threat rather than solidarity. He warned his audience that they have to be united against regional threats where 'civil wars and armed conflicts and sectarian conflicts raging not far from where we are'.[86] The difference between Assad and al-Sabah can be understood geo-politically as the main source of threat to Kuwait has always been regional. The two Arab countries, namely Iraq and Saudi Arabia, and Iran as a regional power, have always stood as external threats adding to Kuwait's geopolitical vulnerability.

Nevertheless, the emir has never named any one of the three countries in his speeches. This resonates with Kuwait's historic strategy based on co-opting and placating them. The regime has always been keen to build good relations with the ruling regimes in the three countries. Indeed, the Kuwaiti regime fully realizes the grave repercussions of misbalancing its relations with the three neighbours, mostly described as the 'triangle of pressure'. The Iraq-Iran war is a clear example. Despite Kuwait's initial attempts to retain cordial relations with Tehran, Kuwait ended up pledging over 2 billion of war aid to Iraq. This enraged Iran. Numerous bomb attacks followed in Kuwait, including the attempted assassination of the emir by groups linked to Tehran. Internal relations with the Shia also deteriorated, as the regime cracked down on Shia citizens and deported many Iranian expatriates. Un-naming external threats is a gesture of caution and desire to maintain balance.

Also, the emir stayed away from conflating internal and external threats at the same level adopted by Assad. Although the regime or media outlets controlled by it had targeted and discredited the Shia community by depicting them as a fifth column or 'traitors' breaking the national unity or threatening the social cohesion in Kuwait[87], it has always sought to win over and better integrate the Shia minority. The regime's timid and limited conflation of the internal

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[82] Beshara, *Sectarianism Without Sects*, p. 9.
[83] Al-Ahmed's Speech, October 26, 2010
[84] Al-Ahmed's Speech, May 13, 2019
[85] Al-Ahmed's Speech, June 4, 2017
[86] Al-Ahmed's Speech, October 24, 2017.
[87] Ibid, 118.

and external comes with the full desire to maintain the geopolitical balance especially as its Shia communities are historically and inseparably linked with Iran through religious and even 'politically-oriented'[88] affiliation. Unlike Assad's references to the Muslim Brotherhood and the full demonisation of radical 'Islamists' as internal threats to the de-sectarianised Syria, al-Sabah stayed safe away from naming any internal forces.

Linking Use with Function: Legitimation and Survival

The 'legitimation' theme links use of the two other themes with function, that is by demonstrating how the leaders can justify and normalise their long stay in power. Assad and al-Sabah always emphasise that they have a mission to carry out. As al-Sabah has stated: 'Let us make our goals clear… Protecting Kuwait's unity... taking serious measures to end chaos… keeping homeland united as we have always pledged to our forefathers.'[89] Assad also said his mission is to 'liberate' Syria and end any external threat to its de-sectarianised society.

As part of leadership is also an 'impression' and 'style' along with policy directions, the leaders can build a positive image for themselves by distancing themselves from sectarianisation, a term 'mired in negativity.[90] Leading their nations towards de-sectarianisation also looks more democratic as the leaders' choices are prescribed by their constituents' interests in having internal unity and social cohesion. Furthermore, de-sectarianization thus benefits leadership by allowing Assad and al-Sabah to give the false impression they take actions to stand against sectarianisation. Acting 'as if not' thus subscribes to a 'status quo ideology'[91] or 'whatever is right'[92]. They not only deny or hide sectarianisation, but also do not rock the boat itself. Their leadership thus lies in the ability or potency to act towards sectarianisation, already denied, hidden or downsized, rather than the action itself. Al-Sabah always reminded his audience that he would not 'allow anyone, whoever, to play with or touch our national unity or social fabric'.[93]

The two thematic constructions can prevent internal opposition and act to suppress internal voices of dissent in the name of maintaining legitimacy in both Syria and Kuwait. As Assad consolidated his power on privileging his Alawite minority, he, at the same time, prevented any criticism of these sectarianising actions. To talk about Assad or the preferential treatment of Alawites (such as examples in the security forces or in the army) is considered by the regime as a threat to the 'unification' messages propagated by the regime. It was a 'common practice' of security forces since the 1980s under which they painted walls with sectarian slogans including 'We want to overthrow the Alawite regime' before storming into a

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[88] Albloshi, Hamad H. 'Sectarianism and the Arab Spring: The Case of the Kuwaiti Shi'a.', *The Muslim World,* 2016, 106 (1), pp. 109-126 (112).
[89] Al-Ahmed's Speech, October 26, 2010
[90] Fanar Haddad, 'Sectarianism' and its Discontents in the Study of the Middle East,' *The Middle East Journal,* 2017, 71 (3), pp.363-382 (364).
[91] Edelman, Murray, *The Symbolic Use of Politics*, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, *1985*, p.75.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Al-Ahmed's Speech, August 12, 2012

neighbourhood to arrest members of the Communist Action Party or other political groups'.[94] The 'as if not' policy thus views 'pluralism' as a threat to the regime's very 'restrictively framed and coercively imposed state-defined 'unity', and has also allowed Assad to 'marginalize and silence differentiated group identities'.[95] In this sense, de-sectarianisation could be itself an act of reinforcing sectarianisation.

Finally, a de-sectarianisation discourse also benefits authoritarian leaders from a psychological perspective. People, mostly suffering from 'alienation, anomie, despair of being able to chart one's course in a complex, cold, bewildering world'[96] are always in search for reassurances from a leader who gives the impression that 'he knows what to do and is willing to act'.[97] Leaders can use the de-sectarianization narrative to serve the disposition of 'alienated masses' to project their psychic needs upon incumbents of high office'.[98] This perhaps justifies how the two leaders took advantage of the reactions of fear in the wake of the Arab Uprisings leading to divisions and tribulations in the region. The Kuwaiti emir urged his audience to use the uprisings as a 'lesson to be learnt'[99] and warned them to be united lest they would face 'sectarian conflicts raging not far from where we are.'[100]

Conclusion

The report shows how leaders of two Arab countries, Syria and Kuwait, similarly construct specific meanings of de-sectarianisation. The latter is portrayed in the speeches of Assad and al-Sabah as a process of creating a discourse of unification drawn on unification and similarity-making. Nevertheless, the process is sectarianising as it suppresses practical differences in the name of articulations such as 'national unity', 'integrity' and 'consensus'. This reinforces a contradiction in Arab politics constructed out of an 'unwillingness to contend with the topic even as sectarian conflicts are being openly fought in the region'.[101] This contradiction serves Arab leaders by allowing them another level of separation from reality. This separation can thus act as a camouflage, hiding social and national fragility'.[102] It can also give a good impression that leaders are working towards meanings of unity and similarity. The discourse also offers opportunities for blaming the other, as leaders can show that sectarianisation is an import, infiltrating what they portray as an inherently de-sectarianised environment that is naturally peaceful. They can absolve themselves of any responsibility for any contemporary sectarian disputes. Meanings of both sectarianisation and de-sectarianisation also serve leaders as collectivising terms. The people are a 'national unit' and have always been

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[94] Ibid.
[95] Haddad, 'Sectarianism' and its Discontents, p. 374. See also Moustapha Safouan, *Why Are the Arabs Not Free? The Politics of Writing* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), pp.8–11
[96] Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*, p. 76
[97] Ibid, p. 77
[98] Ibid, p. 78
[99] Al-Ahmed's Speech, October 28, 2014.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Beshara, *Sectarianism Without Sects*, p. 8.
[102] Ibid, p.5.

unified, peacefully living and benevolent by their very nature.[103] This opens no space for sub-groups or individuals to construct their individuating grievances.

The findings of this report hopefully open the door for further research, focusing on how leaders act as 'political entrepreneurs' incentivised to instrumentalise sectarianisation in specific times for specific purposes such as mobilising sects in intra-state competition over resources. This includes not just inter-sect tension or inter-state conflict such as the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. De-sectarianisation based on claims or actions of 'what is not' is part of this sectarianisation process, where meanings of the two terms can be twisted, conflated, falsified, or, more significantly, hidden.

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[103] Ibid, p.9.

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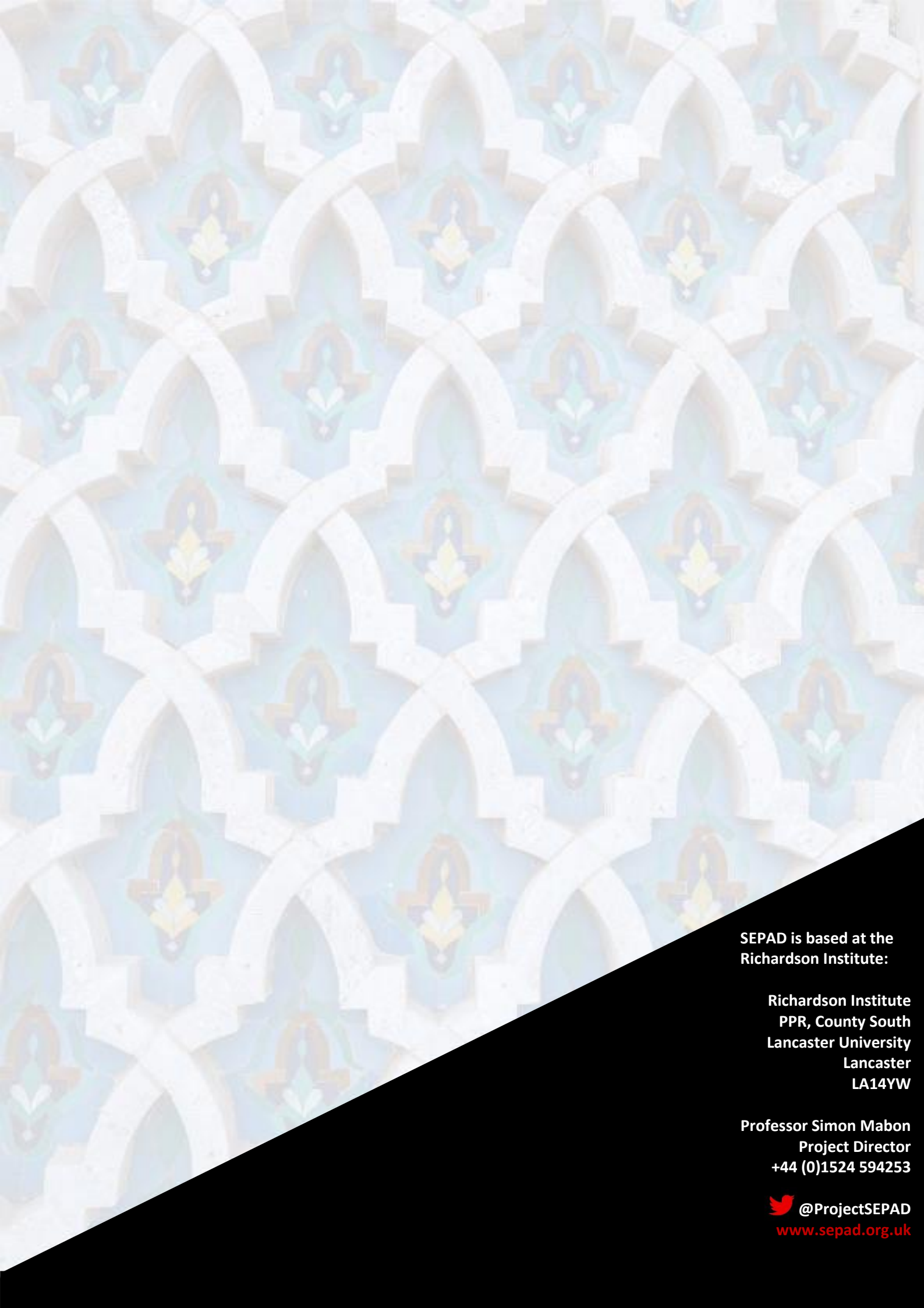
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