Sectarian Games:
Sovereign Power, War Machines and Regional Order in the Middle East

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Amidst violent contestation across the Middle East leaving regimes facing – or fearing – popular protests, the regulation of political life became increasingly important. Across the past century, the development of political projects has been driven by regime efforts to maintain power, constructing regime-society relations in such a way to ensure their survival. As a consequence, security is not given; rather, it reflects the concerns of elites and embeds their concerns within society, using a range of domestic, regional and geopolitical strategies to meet their needs. These strategies play on a range of different fears and currents to locate regime interests within broader concerns. A key part of such efforts involves the cultivation and suppression of particular identities, often resulting in contestation and uncertainty within and between states. Drawing on the ideas of Giorgio Agamben, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, the article argues that the regulation of sect-based identities – and difference – has been a key part of governance strategies in divided societies across the Middle East, albeit varying across time and space.

Sovereignty; sectarianism; war machines; state building

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In recent years, focus on the concept of sectarianism and its manifestation in political, social and economic realms has been a common feature of much work on the Middle East. From Bahrain to Lebanon, Syria to Yemen and spaces in-between, analysis that acknowledges the importance of sect-based difference in myriad forms from a plethora of disciplines has become increasingly popular across much academic writing. After years of violent contestation, a great deal of which has been between sects, the prevalence of sectarianism within this literature is hardly surprising; yet its dominance is not without its critiques.

In a recently published piece, Steven Heydemann and Emelie Chace-Donahue argue that since 2003 the Middle East has endured a period of political turmoil and contestation amidst a struggle for ordering which pits state sovereignty against the rise of vitriolic sectarian difference.[1] Heydemann and Chace-Donahue suggest that amidst efforts to understand such contestation two approaches emerge that privilege accounts advocating either the rise of identity politics or state weakness. In spite of this, the authors reject these accounts, suggesting that the increasingly antagonistic sectarian difference is a consequence of state-building processes and efforts to ensure regime survival.

Amidst violent contestation across the Middle East leaving regimes facing – or fearing – popular protests, the regulation of political life has become increasingly important. Across the past century, the development of political projects has been driven by regime efforts to maintain power, constructing regime-society relations in such a way to ensure their survival. As a consequence, security is not given; rather, it reflects the concerns of elites and embeds their concerns within society, using a range of domestic, regional and geopolitical strategies to meet their needs. These strategies play on a range of different fears and currents to locate regime interests within broader concerns. A key part of such efforts involves the cultivation and suppression of particular identities, often resulting in contestation and uncertainty within and between states.

This article seeks to build on the idea set out by Heydemann and Chace-Donahue by exploring the ways in which sect-based difference serves a biopolitical role as a tool of sovereign power and, as a consequence, the way in which sect-based identities can operate as 'war machines' against the state. Drawing on the ideas of Giorgio Agamben, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, it argues that the regulation of sect-based identities – and difference – has been a key part of governance strategies in divided societies across the Middle East, albeit varying across time and space. This article draws examples from a number of cases that have been viewed through the lens of sectarian difference. Bahrain, Iraq and Yemen have vastly different experiences of sectarian tensions in the fabric of political life which help illustrate the complexities of sect-based tensions. In Bahrain and Iraq, sectarian identities were positioned within biopolitical structures of control across state-building and consolidatory periods. In contrast, Yemen serves as an example of how sect-based difference can be constructed and mobilized. To do this, the article is split into four sections. The first outlines the way in which states and sect-based identities have been conceptualized and the second sets out

[1] Steven Heydemann and Emelie Chace-Donahue, "Sovereignty Versus Sectarianism: Contested Norms and the Logic of Regional Conflict in the Greater Levant", in *The Levant: Search for a Regional Order* ed. Mustafa Aydin (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2018).

Agamben's understanding of sovereign power. The third explores the emergence of war machines as expressions of political protest whilst the fourth looks at the biopolitical characteristics of sectarianism and the regulatory structures that have been deployed as a means of exercising sovereign power in Iraq and Bahrain.

Sects and States

Within the academic study of the Middle East, states were long viewed as the dominant unit of analysis.[2] This idea of the state – as a sovereign unit – is characteristically viewed in a Westphalian sense, free from external interference and able to determine the nature of political life within its borders. Yet the construction of identities across the region, wherein myriad identities exist, often poses a challenge to such approaches, leaving states open to interference and manipulation from a range of identity groups. As I have argued elsewhere, the focus on states and regimes results in a great deal of important work,[3] yet more work is required on the way in which sectarian identities are embedded within the governance structures of political projects.

Debate over states has long been a feature of Middle Eastern politics. From their creation, described by Ghassan Salame as "the original sin", [4] states and the organization of political life have continued to dominate analysis of regional affairs. A range of scholars have pursued intellectual inquiry into the nature of states in the region, including Nazih N. Ayubi, Lisa Anderson, Sami Zubaida, Rober Owen, Charles Tripp, Fouad Ajami, Philip S. Khoury and Joseph Kostiner, who have interrogated theoretical and ontological issues relating to statehood in the across the Middle East.[5]

Central to this work are questions about the source of sovereign power, which has serious implications for the ordering of life. For some, such as Talal Asad, the state is the embodiment of sovereignty "independent of the entire population".[6] Others suggest that sovereignty is

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[2] Martin Kramer, *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America* (2001)

[3] Simon Mabon, *Houses built on sand: Sovereignty, sectarianism and revolution in the Middle East* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).

[4] Ghassan Salame, *Introduction,* in *The Foundations of the Arab State*, ed. Ghassan Salame (Oxon: Routledge, 1987), p3.

[5] See, amongst others: Talal Asad, "Where are the Margins of the State?" in *Anthropolgy in the Margins of the State* eds. Veena Das and Deborah Poole (Santa Fe, New Mexico: School of American Research Press, 2004); Nazih N. Aubui, *Over-stating the Arab State* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1995); Roger Owen, *Rise and Fall of Arab Presidents for Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012) and *State, Power and Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Oxon: Routledge, 2004); Lisa Anderson, "The State in the Middle East and North Africa", *Comparative Politics* 1987 20 no.1 1-18; Charles Tripp, "The State as an Always-Unfinished Performance Improvisation and Performativity in the Face of Crisis", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 2018, 50; Fred Halliday, *The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics and Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press); Philip S. Khoury and Joseph Kostiner (eds), *Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East* (Berkley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1990); Fouad Ajami, *The Arab Predicament: Arab Political Thought and Practice since 1967* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) Joel Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States* (Princeton, N/J.: Princeton University Press, 1988)

[6] Asad, *Margins of the State,* p281

found in individuals or offices, yet, as Anderson argues, such a position can have serious repercussions pertaining to the idea of sovereignty being "re-attached" to monarchs, princely families and firms.[7] Whilst normatively problematic, this understanding of sovereign power perhaps more accurately reflects the dynamics of Middle Eastern – and contemporary – politics, where sovereignty is found in the decision to suspend the law.[8] From this starting point, I suggest that sovereign power becomes biopolitical, allowing for the regulation of life within the context of (often violent) contestation, privileging and mobilizing sect-based identities as a form of self-preservation. [9]

In the years after the Arab Uprisings, sectarianism has "become a catchphrase in politics, media and academia" amidst efforts to understand regional politics.[10] Whilst the uprisings created conditions that allowed sectarian identities to become increasingly prominent – as a consequence of a number of reasons – the prominence of sectarianism within efforts to understand the region can also be found in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution in 1979.[11] Similar claims can be made about the aftermath of the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq and the emergence of what King Abdullah II of Jordan termed a "Shi'a Crescent".[12]

While many have sought to define the concept, it is generally accepted that sectarianism is "essentially contested",[13] "notoriously difficult" to define[14] and replete with "considerable ambiguity".[15] A great deal of work has been undertaken looking at a range of questions

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[7] Lisa Anderson, *Essential Readings: The Arab State* (Middle East Pedagogy Initiative, 19.06.18) http://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/37665/Essential-Readings-The-Arab-State

[8] This claim is initially found in the opening chapter of Carl Schmitt's *Political Theology*, but has since received a great deal of attention in the work of Giorgio Agamben and others. To consider its application in a Middle Eastern context, see Mabon, *Houses built on sand*.

[9] Toby Dodge, "Seeking to Explain the Rise of Sectarianism in the Middle East: The Case Study of Iraq" in POMEPS Studies 2014 No. 25 (Visions of Gulf Security). Washington, DC: POMEPS, pp. 30–35.) and Bassel F. Salloukh,., Rabie Barakat, Jinan S Al-Habbal, Lara. W Khattab, and Shoghig Mikaelian, *The Politics of Sectarianism in Postwar Lebanon* (London: Pluto Press, 2015)

[10] Toby Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis: Shiism, Dissent and Sectarianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[11] Nikki Keddie, *Religion and Politics in Iran: Shi'ism from Quietism to Revolution.* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1983) Martin Kramer (ed), *Shi'ism, Resistance, and Revolution.* (London: Mansell, 1987). Juan Cole, and Nikki Keddie, (eds.). *Shiism and Social Protest* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986.). Interestingly, Khomeini sought to frame the revolution as Islamic yet the Saudi response to events across the Gulf was to stress its Shi'a characteristics as a means of eroding its appeal across the Islamic world.

[12] Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: W.W. Norton 2007); Morten Valbjørn, and Andre Bank, "Signs of a New Arab Cold War: The 2006 Lebanon War and the Sunni-Shi'i Divide", *Middle East Report* 2007 242: 6-11.
F. Gregory Gause, "Saudi Arabia: Iraq, Iran, the Regional Power Balance, and the Sectarian Question", *Strategic Insights* 2007 6 no.2.

[13] Frederic Wehrey, "Introduction" in *Beyond Sunni and Shia: Sectarianism in a Changing Middle East.* ed F. Wehrey (London: Hurst Publishers, 2017); Christopher Phillips, "Sectarianism and Conflict in Syria", *Third World Quarterly* 2015 36 no.2 357-376; Toby Matthiesen, et al. "Sectarianism in the Middle East", *European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs*, 2017.

[14] Lawrence G. Potter, "Introduction", in *Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf*, ed. Lawrence G. Potter (London: Hurst & Company, 2013) p.2

[15] Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis* p14

pertaining to sectarianism and its role within contemporary political life. In the years after the Arab Uprisings, a number of scholars sought to engage with questions about the salience of sectarian politics within the region, and the way in which such identities are mobilized. More recently there have been moves towards other questions about the spatial, temporal and methodological aspects of sectarian politics.

To circumvent some of the definitional issues involved in the study of sectarian politics, Fanar Haddad suggests a typology that draws a distinction between different forms of sectarianisms, including 1) *every day* or *banal* sectarianism, 2) *instrumental* sectarianism and 3) *radical doctrinal* sectarianism.[16] These categorizations demonstrate the range of ways in which sectarian identities can manifest in contemporary political life. Building on this, literature seeking to understand the emergence of sectarian politics is typically grouped into three main areas. First, those advocating a primordialist account – albeit often modified[17] – that stresses the primacy of religious difference as a driver of behavior, such as positions held by Geneive Abdo, Naser Ghobadzdeh and Shahram Akbarzadeh, and Mark Tomass.[18] Second, the instrumentalist approach which perceives identities as fluid, malleable entities that can be molded by actors driven by material interest, such as Gause and Zubaida.[19] Third, is the emergence of a plurality of 'third ways' located between the primordialist and instrumentalist accounts, such as that proposed by Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel, and May Darwich and Tamirace Fakhoury.[20] Yet, as Morten Valbjorn and Raymond Hinnebusch acknowledge, a fourth area of study – the *instutionalist* approach – questions how "specific institutional arrangements can dilute or contribute to the reproduction of these identities" which becomes particularly salient amidst political contestation.[21]

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[16] Fanar Haddad, '"Sectarianism" and Its Discontents in the Study of the Middle East', *Middle East Journal* 2017 71 no.3 pp363-382.

[17] Morten Valbjørn, "Studying Sectarianism While Beating Dead Horses and Searching for Third Ways". *LSE Middle East Centre Blog*. September 17th 2018. Available at: http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/09/17/studying-sectarianism-while-beating-dead-horses-and-searching- for-third-ways/ (accessed 18 September 2018).

[18] Genevive Abdo, *The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Naser Ghobadzdeh, and Shahram Akbarzadeh. "Sectarianism and the Prevalence of 'Othering' in Islamic Thought", *Third World Quarterly* 2015 36 no.4 pp691–704; Mark Tomass, *The Religious Roots of the Syrian Conflict: The Remaking of the Fertile Crescent.* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

[19] Sami Zubaida, "Sectarian Dimensions", *Middle East Journal* 2014 68 no.2 pp318–322; F. Gregory Gause, F. *Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War* (Brookings Doha Center: Analysis Paper No. 11, 2014). Available at: https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/English-PDF-1.pdf (accessed 8 September 2014).

[20] Nader Hashemi, and Danny Postel. "Introduction: The Sectarianization Thesis", in *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*, ed. Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel (London: Hurst & Company, 2017) pp. 1–22; May Darwich, and Tamirace Fakhoury, "Casting the Other as an Existential Threat: The Securitisation of Sectarianism in the International Relations of the Syria Crisis', *Global Discourse* 2016 6 no.4 pp 712–732. For an overview of this see Morten Valbjorn's wonderfully titled piece in Nations and Nationalism, *Beyond the Beyond(s): On the (Many) Third Way(s) beyond Primordialism and Instrumentalism in the Study of Sectarianism*

[21] Morten Valbjorn and Raymond Hinnebusch, "Exploring the Nexus between Sectarianism and Regime Formation in a New Middle East: Theoretical Points of Departure", *Studies in Ethnicity and*

Beyond efforts to conceptualize and map the (re)emergence of sectarian identities across the Middle East, others have sought to reflect on the causes and consequences of this (re)emergence and evolution, locating sectarian identities within political projects. A recent special issue emerging from the SWAR project based at Aarhus University explored the inter-relationship between sectarianism and regime formation. Writing in a special issue of *Studies in Ethnicyt and Nationalism,* Valbjorn and Hinnebusch, sectarian difference is instrumentalized as leaders seek to build a "reliable core" that can maintain control.[22] Others including Justin Gengler, Courtney Freer and Laurence Louer argue similar points, albeit manifesting in different ways.[23] Yet this is not a fixed process at the formative stages of a political project, but is on-going, fluid, and driven by concerns about survival and sovereign power, rather than restricted to the formative years of state building.

Dominance

Much of the work on sectarianism in the Persian Gulf follows the instrumentalist/constructivist/rational choice approach. Yet as Staci Strobl pertinently notes, these approaches fail "to properly contextualize why perpetuating sectarian divisiveness even works in the first place".[24] Echoing Anthony Smith, Strobl argues that sectarianism is "a strong cultural force (after the first disruption); it is not a political artificiality, but a heartfelt anxiety that cannot easily be put aside or shoved under the rug".[25] Strobl's impressive tome facilitates greater awareness of the way in which sectarian identities have been located within the governance structures of the state, which are not neutral but rather propagate a particular vision of political organization that privileges Sunni over Shi'a.

Similar points are made by Toby Dodge who also rejects the instrumental line of argument when applied to Iraq, albeit shaped by different contingencies. Dodge argues that efforts to comprehensively understand sectarian mobilization in Iraq should draw on a range of different approaches to offer a more nuanced understanding of politics and religion across the *longue durée.*[26] Change in what Dodge – borrowing from Pierre Bourdieu – refers to as Iraq's *political field* facilitates the mobilization of sectarian difference. Such a view, much like Strobl, hints at the pre-existence of sectarian identities that pre-date their instrumental use by elites. It is the existence of identities with a degree of cultural force and societal stickiness

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Nationalism, 2019 19 no.1 pp2-22; see also Dodge, *Seeking to Explain*, and Salloukh et al*, The Politics of*.

[22] Valbjorn and Hinnebusch, *Exploring the Nexus,* p11.

[23] Justin Gengler, "Understanding Sectarianism in the Persian Gulf", in L. G. Potter (ed.) *Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf*. (London: Hurst and Company, 2013). Justin Gengler, "Electoral Rules (and Threats) Cure Bahrain's Sectarian Parliament", *Washington Post: The Monkey Cage*, 1 December 2014, Available at: http://www.washington post.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/12/01/electoral-rules-and-threats-cure-bahrains- sectarian-parliament/ (accessed 5 December 2014).
Laurence Louër, "Sectarianism and Coup-proofing Strategies in Bahrain", *Journal of Strategic Studies* 2013 no. 36:2 pp245–260; Courtney Freer, 2019. "The Symbiosis of Sectarianism, Authoritarianism, and Rentierism in the Saudi State", *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 2019 19 no.1 pp88–108.

[24] Staci Strobl, *Sectarian Order in Bahrain: The Social and Colonial Origins of Criminal Justice* (London: Lexington Books, 2018) p117

[25] Ibid.

[26] Toby Dodge, "'Bourdieu goes to Baghdad': Explaining hybrid political identities in Iraq", *Journal of Historical Sociology* 2018 31 pp25-38

that means sectarian groups are seen to pose a serious threat to regimes. This threat often emerges from competing visions of the ordering of political organization.

In the following sections I seek to explore the ways in which sectarian identities are located within efforts to regulate life. In a number of cases, sectarian identities have been built into the fabric of regulatory structures as a key component of sovereign power, whilst in others, the weakness of institutional structures has resulted in the empowerment of groups articulating sect-based loyalties. In recent years, the emergence of these groups has posed serious challenges to sovereign power. Although often contained within governance structures, as we shall see, sectarian identities also have the capacity to challenge regimes. To understand how such processes occur it is essential to go beyond considering the ways in which sectarian identities emerge and are mobilized to consider the location of sectarian identities within biopolitical structures that regulate life. Here, the work of Agamben offers important theoretical assistance to our task, moving examination beyond initial questions about the nature of identities to more detailed consideration of regulatory power. Although Agamben's approach appears to share similarities with the instrumentalist position, deeper reflection reveals that structural factors are more complex and cannot be reduced purely to elite interests. Instead, one must reflect on the regulation of life over the *longue durée* to trace the evolution of sovereign power.

Sovereign Power and Sectarian Difference

On December 23, 2016 Eman Salehi, a Bahraini journalist from a Shi'a family, was shot dead by a 34-year-old member of the ruling Al Khalifa family. The man later turned himself into police and an investigation was launched but ultimately there was no charge. The murder of Salehi took place within the context of a broader political struggle to regulate life across Bahrain, which had become violently contested in the years after the Arab Uprisings. Post 2011, life in Bahrain took on increasingly sectarian characteristics through the securitization – and sectarianization[27] – of Shi'a groups across the island, resulting in widespread repression and the evisceration of opposition movements.[28]

Amidst conditions of uncertainty and instability, securitization is a prominent feature of regime responses, creating conditions that allow for particular action. For Barry Buzan, one of the school's founding fathers, securitization requires the shifting of issues out of emergency mode and into the normal bargaining process of the political sphere.[29] The process of framing an event in such a way expresses "a need for and a right to treat it by extraordinary means".[30] A direct consequence of this, as Thierry Balzacq notes, is that "the enunciation of security *itself* creates a new social order wherein 'normal politics' is

[27] Toby Matthiesen, "Sectarianization as Securitization: Identity Politics and Counter Revolution in Bahrain" in *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*, ed. Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel (London: Hurst & Company, 2017) pp199-214

[28] Simon Mabon, 'The End of the Battle of Bahrain and the Securitization of Bahraini Shi'a', *The Middle East Journal* 73 no.1 (2019) 29-50.

[29] Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998) p4.

[30] Ibid., p26.

bracketed".[31] Securitizing moves take place within *space*, shaped by the interaction of domestic, regional and international actors,[32] and it is through this process that identities become securitized, framed as an *existential* threat. Yet we must move beyond securitization to look at broader responses to sectarian challenges, predominantly through consideration of the ordering of space.[33]

Efforts to regulate human life are a fundamental feature of contemporary political life, in a range of forms contingent upon context. Sovereigns seek to do this either through letting life live, casting life into bare life, or subjugating life to death, deploying a range of biopolitical governance mechanisms in pursuit of such aims.[34] For Michel Foucault, "biological existence was reflected in political existence [...] For millennia, man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with an additional capacity for a political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question".[35] This concept of biopolitics seeks to create power over life, to regulate it or let it live. Yet as Agamben has argued, there is more to Foucault's idea of biopolitics.[36]

Agamben's work on sovereign power provides a compelling account of the regulation of life. Stemming from the sovereign decision and the paradox of sovereignty – with the sovereign simultaneously situated within and beyond the law – for Agamben, sovereign power is located in the ability to suspend itself. Put another way,

> The sovereign, who can decide on the state of exception, guarantees its anchorage to the juridical order. But precisely because the decision here concerns the very annulment of the norm, that is, because the state of exception represents the inclusion and capture of a space that is neither outside nor inside (the space that corresponds to the annulled and suspended norm), "the sovereign stands outside [*steht außerhalb*] of the normally valid juridical order, and yet belongs [*gerhort*] to it for it is he who is responsible for deciding whether the constitution can be suspended in toto".[37]

This is the starting point of Agamben's *Homo Sacer* project, one that is fundamentally concerned with the organization and regulation of human life.

Central to ideas of the state of exception are processes through which people are rendered vulnerable and bare life is brought to the forefront of politics. *Bare life* is integral to Agamben's work, used to refer to the condition from which political meaning is stripped from life. Using the figure of *Homo Sacer*, an individual from ancient Rome who may be killed with

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[31] Thierry Balzacq, "The Three Faces of Securitization: Political Agency, Audience and Context", *European Journal of International Relations* 2005 11 no.2 p171.
[32] Ibid., p183.
[33] Simon Mabon, 'The World is a Garden: Nomos, sovereignty and the (Contested) Ordering of Life', *Review of International Studies,* forthcoming.
[34] Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge* (London: Penguin, 1976)*,* 136.
[35] Michel Foucault, Power/Knowledge (New York: Pantheon, 1980), pp. 142–143.
[36] As Nicholas Heron argues, Agamben's development of Foucault's work on biopolitics is driven by three "substantive corrections" concerning the state of exception, bare life and the emergence of the camp. See Nicholas Heron, 'Biopolitics', in *The Agamben Dictionary* Alex Murray and Jessica Whyte (eds) (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011) p38.
[37] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995)p 35

impunity beyond ritualistic sacrifice, Agamben illustrates the capacity of the sovereign to regulate life biopolitically through abandoning individuals within the law. In this condition of *bare life*, political meaning is eviscerated from individuals. The condition of *bare life* emerges in the link between violence and the law, as a consequence of the state of exception but it is also a consequence of sovereign violence. Agamben argues that

> the realm of bare life—which is originally situated at the margins of the political order—gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, bios and zoe, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction. At once excluding bare life from and capturing it within the political order, the state of exception actually constituted, in its very separateness, the hidden foundation on which the entire political system rested.[38]

The ability to strip meaning from life is central to Agamben's biopolitical understanding of sovereignty, where the mechanisms through which the sovereign can differentiate between *bios* and *zoe* is integral to the regulation of life. These views are later articulated in *The Kingdom and the Glory* where Agamben argues that *"the real problem, the central mystery of politics is not sovereignty, but government [...] it is not the law, but the police—that is to say, the governmental machine that they form and support"* [italics in original].[40]

Fundamental to Agamben's work is the concept of *the camp* which is "the hidden matrix of politics", capturing all political life.[41] The camp

> is produced at the point at which the political system of the modern nation-state, which was founded on the functional nexus between a determinate localization (land) and a determinate order (the State) and mediated by automatic rules for the inscription of life (birth or the nation), enters into a lasting crisis, and the State decides to assume directly the care of the nation's biological life as one of its proper tasks ... the camp is the new, hidden regulator of the inscription of life in the order […and] is the fourth, inseparable element that has now added itself—and so broken—the old trinity composed of the state, the nation (birth), and land.[42]

Parallels with physical camps are quickly drawn, yet Agamben's *camp* is also metaphysical, a site of possibility that reduces all – at any moment – into conditions of bare life. As Agamben suggests, derogation from the rule of law locates the state of exception as the dominant paradigm of government, with serious implications for human life. Those who are seen to challenge sovereign power are often abandoned – yet bound – by the regulatory power of the sovereign.

Agamben presents a complex theoretical approach that is philosophically rich, combining *state of exception*, *bare life*, and *the camp* which, taken together, help to demonstrate the ways in which sovereign power regulates life. Focusing on the biopolitical structures that operationalize sovereign power we can see how governance structures abandon individuals into bare life. Yet Agamben draws heavily on a Western – and Christian – canon of political

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[38] Ibid p18

[40] Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011) p276

[41] Agamben, *Mittel ohne Zweck,* 48.

[42] Agamben, *Homo Sacer* pp174-5

thought, which is potentially problematic when transferred to the Middle East. Yet as I have argued elsewhere, there are a number of reasons why this approach is appropriate, stemming from the claim that politics is always biopolitical, regardless of contextual factors.[43] Moreover, conditions of necessity, which are of paramount importance to political action and the release of particular cases "from the literal application of the norm" are subjective and thus can be transferred across contexts.[44]

As a consequence, Agamben's work aids efforts to understand the way in which sectarian identities are positioned within political organization across the Middle East, helping to move beyond what Haddad termed the "stultifying binaries that dominate the literature".[45] Those well versed in the literature on sectarian politics in the region may draw parallels with instrumentalist/constructivist positions at this point. Indeed, those scholars adopting instrumentalist/constructivist positions argue that regimes mobilize identities for specific reasons, embedding these identities within the governance structures of a state. Agamben's approach certainly is sympathetic to this idea, yet it goes a step further, facilitating greater understanding of the way in which sectarian identities have been mobilized by regimes as tools of sovereign power.

In a number of twentieth-century cases, political contexts and regime fears about survival meant that communities with different sectarian beliefs to regimes were viewed with trepidation by political elites amidst fears of seditious activity.[46] Processes of state formation sought to curb this influence through a careful process of negotiation,[47] yet generally positioning sectarian identities within the biopolitical machinery of sovereign power. There are, of course, a number of exceptions which can be found across the region, predominantly seen through the co-option of economic elites into the governance systems of the state.

In the aftermath of protesters taking to the streets in what became the Arab Uprisings, a number of regimes declared states of emergency, suspending the law in an attempt to ensure survival. Such a declaration creates a space of exception, a site of possibility where sovereign power can be exercised in a pure, unrestrained manner. Conditions of transformative possibility that rapidly emerged after the self-immolation of Mohammad Bouazizzi on the streets of Sidi Bouzid provoked existential concerns across the region regarding serious socio-economic, demographic and political problems which shaped increasingly fragile social contracts.[48] Similar fears can be traced across the history of political organization in the region. As we shall see, in Iraq and Bahrain the evolution of political organization is replete with efforts to circumvent fear of dissent and contestation from sectarian groupings, by

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[43] Simon Mabon "Sovereignty, bare life and the Arab Uprisings", *Third World Quarterly* 2017 38 no.8 pp1782-1799

[44] Lucia Ardovini and Simon Mabon, "Egypt's unbreakable curse: Tracing the *State of Exception* from Mubarak to Al Sisi", *Mediterranean Politics* 2019 online p5. See also Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005) pp24-31 and Balladore-Pallieri, G. *Diritto Costituzionale*. (Milan: Giuffrè 1965) p168.

[45] Taken from a review of Staci Strobl's book *Sectarian Order.*

[46] These fears can be traced back to the mandatory era, perhaps most obviously documented by Gertrude Bell in her concerns about the Shi'a of Iraq.

[47] Such as in Kuwait

[48] Mabon, *Houses built on sand*

subjecting sectarian groups to the full regulatory power of the state. Yet the fusion of domestic events with geopolitical context meant that the Arab Uprisings rapidly took on regional importance.

In the following sections, I argue that regimes have mobilized sectarian identities within the context of the regulation of life to ensure survival. Put another way, sectarian politics have been positioned within the biopolitical structures that regulate life across states in the Middle East. I do not seek to reject the 'stickiness' of sectarian identities, but rather stress that there is a great deal more involved in the (re)emergence of sect-based difference. These efforts involve recourse to a range of strategies including the cultivation of sect-based difference, the mobilization of networks of patronage, the regulation of life through biopolitical governance structures and the subjugation of life to death. Yet, amidst contestation and the fragmentation of political organization, I argue that sectarian identities possess a strong mobilization capacity that can challenge the ordering of space in the form of *war machines.*

Responding to Sovereign Power: The Rise of War Machines

The location of sectarian identities within the biopolitical machineries of sovereign power has had a dramatic impact on the regulation of life. According to Agamben, once an individual is rendered into bare life they are left with little agency, forced to accept the conditions they are in. Yet this rejection of agency is a serious concern that must be directed at Agamben's work, particularly in its application to the Middle East.[49] Indeed, even within conditions that emerge from states of exception, individuals have the capacity to exert agency in a number of forms.[50] The final section of this discussion looks at the way in which the location of sectarian identities within the biopolitical structures of sovereign power can result in mobilization at times of contestation. Put another way, the inclusion of sectarian identities within biopolitical projects and the ensuing desubjectification of particular identities creates conditions of possibility for the emergence of groups driven by sectarian identities.

Whilst sovereign power has the capacity to regulate all aspects of life, it is not necessarily without response. As particular identities are excluded from formal and informal institutions of the state – either through the process of state-building or institutional failure – there is a counteraction. Moreover, amongst those excluded, there are general calls for the re-ordering of political life, achieved in the presence of *war machines.* The idea of the war machine, developed by Deleuze and Guattari, sits in opposition to the state as an apparatus of power and enjoys a certain measure of autonomy.

In conditions of fragmentation akin to the Hobbessian idea of a state of nature, Deleuze and Guattari argue that a new form of war takes place which bares hallmarks of they type fought by nomads. This nomadic form of war sits in an antagonistic relationship to state structures, is counter hegemonic and applies to intellectual debate as much as conflict. Existing as the manifestation of disruption, war machines operate against states but can later be co-opted by states amidst the continued contestation of power. Fundamentally concerned with the ordering of space, unappropriated, the war machine

[49] Mabon, Sovereignty, Bare Life and the Arab Uprisings'

[50] Ibid.

has as its object not war but the drawing of a creative line of flight, the composition of smooth space and of the movement of people in that space. At this other pole, the machine does indeed encounter war, but as its supplementary or synthetic object, now directed against the State and against the worldwide axiomatic expressed by the States.[51]

The central aim of the war machine is to return to the 'empty space' of the primordial *tabula rasa*. Thus, for Deleuze and Guattari, the war machine is "a pure form of exteriority, whereas the State apparatus constitutes the form of interiority" and is responsible for coding space, making possible the "distinction between governors and governed".[52] Put another way, "the concern of the State is to conserve",[53] but, in contrast, the war machine seeks to deterritorialize, evoking parallels with the nomad who challenges "the rules and structures of the sedentarised form of political life, existing as a fundamental challenge to states, for whom a vital concern is to vanquish nomadism and to "establish a zone of rights over an entire "exterior".[54] We should not view war machines as purely violent entities, but rather the means through which social processes are challenged, often visible through conflict, but also expressed through survival. War machines challenge the ordering of space but also serve as a means of reinforcing state rule. In a number of cases, the sectarian nature of a number of these war machines complicated the ordering of space, allowing for the mobilization of identities across state borders and the contestation of traditionally dominant groups.

Capitalizing on the elasticity of political structures and the erosion of sovereign power in times of fragmentation, war machines are able to gain traction and support from local populations, particularly amidst the sectarianization of local and regional politics. As domestic politics became imbued with geopolitical agendas, the complexity of political life increased, facilitating both the fragmentation of political life and empowerment of war machines that contest sovereign power. In conditions of rampant sectarian difference, war machines reproduced communal identities, exacerbating such tensions amidst the sponsorship of particular agendas, creating conditions of bare life, often occurring along sectarian lines.

Across the Middle East, the fragmentation of political organization resulted in the emergence of myriad – often competing – war machines operating under the banner of sect-based identities, perhaps best seen in the case of Yemen.[55] The evolution of political organization in Yemen provides a powerful example of the potential repercussions of rendering sectarian identities into bare life alongside vociferous rejection of these identities. Moreover, Yemen serves as an example of how framing takes place within a particular context can have unintended repercussions. Indeed, efforts to regulate life across Yemen empowered latent sectarian identities, particularly after the fragmentation of political organization. The failure of the 2014 National Dialogue created space for myriad groups and factions – often with

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[51] Giles Deleuze and Feliz Guattari, *A Thousand Plateuas* (London: Continuum, 1987) pp422/526
[52] Deleuze and Guattari, Op. Cit., p13
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid., p59
[55] Yassin Al Haj Saleh, *The Impossible Revolution* (London: Hurst, 2017)

competing agendas – to operate within the territorial shell of the state[56] whilst the sectarianization of politics empowered particular groups able to derive legitimacy from claims to religious piety.

Underpinning the social fabric of the state was a complex and malleable tribal network that was shaped by the concerns of their respective leaders, leading to a range of transient alliances that cut across society. Groups possessed a range of different political aspirations that were driven by the contexts in which they were operating where poverty, corruption and civil war were rife. Although external borders of the state have proven durable, internally a number of "mini-states" emerged, held together by their own internal logic, economies and political ecosystem.[57] The failure of the National Dialogue appears to contradict such a view, particularly amidst the prevalence of secessionist demands.[58] In such conditions, war machines began to shape Yemeni politics, challenging the ordering of space and, in many cases, being funded by external actors, adding to the complexity and ferocity of the fighting with a devastating humanitarian impact.

The Houthi movement is the most obvious example of a war machine operating in Yemen. Between 2004 and 2010, the group fought a largely successful campaign of guerrilla warfare and, during this time, the group evolved from a small family cadre of fighters into an organization that posed an existential challenge to the Ali Abdullah Saleh regime. The Houthi movement is comprised of a range of fluid alliances, both overt and covert, but predicated on a "precise knowledge" of tribal dynamics, albeit supported by Iran and Hizballah.[59] The fluidity of its alliances is seen in its willingness to work with Saleh, which allowed the Houthis to co-opt forces loyal to the former President and capture Sana'a on September 21, 2014. Less than six months later, the Houthis also overran the Yemeni government's 'fallback' capital of Aden in the longest-range operation ever conducted by the group, reflecting its ability to draw upon local grievances and create alliances in an incredibly complex set of political dynamics.

In such conditions of fragmentation, the war machines took on more formal characteristics of state power, losing some of their fluidity in the process, whilst the regimes took on

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[56] One prominent example of this concerns the emergence of strong factions within the army which had been created by Saleh in an attempt to silo the institution and to maintain loyalty in times of crisis. As the uprisings escalated, factions in the military cultivated alliances with tribal groups in pursuit of their own economic interests. The interaction of military forces with tribal groups reveals both the complexity of civil-military relations, but also suggests that the very structure of the military that Saleh had created to ensure his survival would work against him. For a more detailed discussion see: Michael Knights, "The Military Role in Yemen's Protests: Civil- Military Relations in the Tribal Republic", *Journal of Strategic Studies* 2013 36 no.2, 261-288.

[57] Peter Salisbury, *Yemen: National Chaos, Local Order* (Chatham House, 20.12.17)

[58] Peter Salisbury, *Yemen: Stemming the Rise of a Chaos State*, (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2016) https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/yemen-stemming-rise-chaos-state.

[59] Michael Knights, *The Houthi War Machine: From Guerrilla War to State Capture* (CTC Sentinel, Washington Institute, September 2018), p17. See also:
Thomas Juneau, "Iran's Policy towards the Houthis in Yemen: A Limited Return on a Modest Investment", *International Affairs* 2016 92 no.3 and May Darwich, *The Yemen war: a proxy sectarian war?* In Simon Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: The Struggle to Shape the Middle East* (London: Foreign Policy Centre, 2018).

characteristics of war machines, leading to increased instability and the onset of a Saudi-led military campaign in 2015. In the years that followed, regional actors sought to co-opt war machines and mobilize them in pursuit of their own agendas, perhaps best seen in the case of the Emirati sponsored Southern Transitional Council. Amidst such complexity and the presence of competing war machines, political life and stability in Yemen became increasingly contested, resulting in an intractable conflict that left the state on the brink of a devastating humanitarian tragedy, as fighting across Hodeidah prevented aid from getting into the country.

Sectarian Spaces?

Following this discussion of sovereign power and the (potential) emergence of war machines, let us now consider two cases in more detail. As I shall endeavor to show, the emergence of sect-based violence across time and space is a consequence of the manifestation of particular forms of biopolitical power, albeit within the context of broader geopolitical struggles.[60] Here I argue that regimes have sought to cultivate sectarian violence through the emergence of a particular form of sovereign power, which takes place amidst increasing tensions across the Middle East. This context proves key in understanding the actions of particular regimes. For example, in Sunni majority states, regime efforts find a degree of traction amidst shared fears of the existence of what King Abdullah of Jordan termed a 'Shi'a Crescent,[61] framing Shi'a minorities as fifth columnists doing the bidding of Iran.[62] This idea was constructed in the immediate aftermath of the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq and amidst the increasingly hostile rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran which provided contextual justification for the regimes as they sought to derive popular support for their actions. Grounded in Iranian support for groups such as Hizballah and the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain,[63] the idea of a Shia Crescent increased tensions, facilitating the politicization and securitization of sectarian differences that give regimes the capacity to regulate life in accordance with these fears.[64]

The regulation of life amidst contestation and regime efforts to ensure survival has occurred in a range of guises, including political reform, the restriction of political space, securitization and the use of coercive infrastructures of the state. Competing visions of the ordering of space determine the capacity for action, construction and destruction, but contending visions, memories and experiences of the regulation of life challenge this ordering. The interaction of such memories with the range of identities and ideas of belonging can have a serious impact upon the political activity of a population.[65] With this in mind, token reform or, conversely, the violent repression of protests, may not erode the substantive dissatisfaction directed

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[60] Mabon, *Houses built on sand*, chapter 8.

[61] A term coined by King Abdullah of Jordan.

[62] Mabon, 2013. Examination of Arabic and Farsi sources reveals no such usage and interviews support such a conclusion. The literal translation of Shi'a crescent in Arabic, الهلال الشيعي, is rarely used, perhaps as a consequence of adding a Shi'a dimension to a broadly Islamic symbol. Instead, ideas of the Shi'a tide, expansion or permeation and penetration are common themes. In Persian, هلال شيعى is seen to be a means of increasing tensions with Iran.

[63] Hasan Tariq Alhasan, "The Role of Iran in the Failed Coiup of 1981: The IFLB in Bahrain", *The Middle East Journal* 2011 65 no.4 pp603-617

[64] Mabon, *Houses built on sand*

[65] Mabon, *The world is a garden*

towards regimes that remains latent across the region. In the years after the Arab Uprisings, these interactions were also shaped by broader geopolitical pressures and the sectarianization of politics, facilitating the colonization of political life 'from below'.

The following section looks at efforts to regulate life in Bahrain and Iraq and the position of sectarian identities within and across biopolitical machinery. It also feeds into the reflections on the emergence of war machines within each state, emerging as regimes seek to cast sectarian identities into bare life. Yet the cultural influence of sectarian identities means that there is scope for individuals to coalesce around those identities that offer an alternative political vision.

Bahrain

Bahrain has been viewed by many as the epicenter of the geopolitical and sectarian competition that emerged in the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings where a Sunni minority rules over a Shi'a majority that is estimated to form around 60-70 percent of the population.[66] Bahrain is typically viewed as a paradigmatic example of the mobilization of sectarian identities in pursuit of regime survival.[67] According to such a view, the Al Khalifa regime mobilized geo-politicized sectarian identities in an attempt to ensure its survival at a time when authoritarian rulers across the Middle East were falling. Coercive apparatuses were deployed as part of this strategy, where those who were loyal to the state were encouraged to identify and report others who participated in protests on social media. Protest against the regime was framed as treason and coercive measures were deployed to target not only those who took to the streets but also editors of opposition newspapers and medics who treated wounded protesters.

As Omar H AlShehabi notes, analysis of Bahrain is typically undertaken through the lens of an ethno-sectarian gaze, which views all events across the state's history as a consequence of either ethnic or sectarian difference. In *Contested Modernity: Sectarianism, Nationalism, and Colonialism in Bahrain*, AlShehabi argues against such a position, instead suggesting that this gaze has obscured other important ideas, movements and discourses across the archipelago's history. [68] AlShehabi positions the ethno-sectarian gaze as a primordialist account of political life in Bahrain that dismisses all other aspects of politics, reducing it to mere sectarian difference. In contrast, he suggests that sectarian difference in Bahrain was a consequence of the colonial experience and divide-and-rule strategies within the context of the emergence of an absolutist sovereign rule. Bearing many of the hallmarks of the constructivist or instrumentalist position, AlShehabi argues that, amidst widespread turmoil across the archipelago, British colonial forces facilitated the transformation of political organization under this ethno-sectarian gaze, which "viewed and ordered social relations of power based on reified categories of sect and ethnicities".[69]

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[66] Gengler, 2014, although this number fluctuates.
[67] Matthiesen, *Sectarianization as securitization,* and Mabon *The End of the Battle*
[68] Omar H AlShehabi, *Contested Modernity: Sectarianism, Nationalism and Colonialism in Bahrain* (London: Oneworld, 2019)
[69] Ibid. p235

The history of political organization across Bahrain is one characterized by contestation and efforts to exert sovereign power amidst a range of socio-economic and (geo)political challenges. Across this history, identity has routinely been used as a means of enacting sovereign power and ensuring regime survival. Such approaches are extensively documented by Strobl, with a particular focus on policing and criminal justice.[70] As Bahgat argued in 1999 – 12 years before the uprisings and securitization of sectarian difference – Shi'a Muslims have traditionally been marginalized socioeconomically and politically".[71]

In the early part of the twentieth century, Al Khalifa efforts to ensure dynastic survival, in concert with British officials, resulted in the establishment of a new biopolitical system of governance. This was exemplified by a criminal justice system that moved away from traditional, indigenous forms of governance – where legitimate violence was found in competing tribal entities – toward a single governmental body under the leadership of the Al Khalifa. This evolution sought to prevent intra-Sunni contestation in pursuit of the solidification of Al Khalifa power, alongside the creation of a system of governance that reinforced sectarian difference. As Strobl argues, this evolution is not purely a consequence of elite self-interest – although this is undeniably accurate – but it "reflects a deeper interplay of more socially and culturally embedded notions of sectarian identity that developed historically, and then were appropriated, modified and institutionalised during the colonial experience".[72]

State building in Bahrain was a complex process that required addressing tribal, religious and economic aspects manifesting in distinction between rural and urban populations. Seeking to stabilize their rule, Sunni tribal subjects were legitimized, enjoying socio-economic advantages over their Shi'a counterparts in what Sophia Pandya termed a "Sunni-normative environment" against the Shi'a, Persian other.[73] Amidst growing disenchantment with the political system in the 1930s, ethno-sectarian mobilization typically took place amongst Shi'a groups, emerging from socio-economic conditions that hit Shi'a communities hardest.[74] This domestic unrest amongst Shi'a Bahrainis was driven by socio-economic and class concerns, expressed in strikes, labour disputes and protests.[75]

The Shi'a festival of Maharram quickly became the space through which political dissent was expressed, albeit through nationalist and Arabist dimensions. Yet the use of Maharram as a platform led to sectarian clashes, most violently during the Ashura celebration of 1953 which descended into Arab-Persian and Sunni-Shi'a clashes.[76] Whilst easy to reduce to binary

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[70] Staci Strobl, "From colonial policing to community policing in Bahrain: The historical persistence of sectarianism, International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice", 2011 no. 35:1, 19-37

[71] Gawdat Baghat, "Peace in the Persian Gulf: The Shi'is Dimension", *Peace and Change* 1999 24 no.1 pp 76-90

[72] Staci Strobl, *Sectarian Order* pxiv

[73] Sophia Pandya, "Women's Shi'I Ma'atim in Bahrain", *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 2010 6 no.2 p40

[74] AlShehabi, *Contested Modernity*., pp206-7.

[75] Amy Austin Holmes (2016) "Working in the Revolution in Bahrain: From the Mass Strike to Everyday Forms of Medical Provision" *Social Movement Studies* Vol. 15, No. 1, pp. 105-114

[76] Ibid, pp105-114

distinctions of sectarian and ethnic difference, Fuad Khuri argues these "are not clear-cut social categories but are instead historical traditions" and thus must be considered in context.[77]

Although Bahrain is one of only two countries in the Gulf to possess an elected parliament, this experience is characterized by contestation. First opened in 1973, two years after independence, Bahrain's parliament was comprised of a range of political blocs based on a mélange of religious, social and political views that were generally co-operative, voting unanimously against a security proposal from the regime, which then dissolved parliament two years after its formation.

Unrest once again broke out in the early 1990s, as those marginalized from political processes took to the streets expressing widespread frustration in what Fred Wehrey termed a "decade of discontent". In light of such discontent, the regime mobilized its coercive apparatus, itself agents responsible for perpetuating socio-economic and sectarian difference. Indeed, the biopolitical machinery of government across Bahrain served to exacerbate sect-based difference through targeting members of the lower socio-economic classes – typically Shi'a – and casting them into bare life.

When Hamad Al Khalifa came to power in 2002, he re-opened parliament amidst a bouquet of reforms designed to appease those across the country. Yet, following a decade of discontent and protest, parliament was far more sectarian in its nature.[78] Wary of the political empowerment of Bahrain's Shi'a communities, a range of strategies were deployed to curtail their political influence. The 2006 Bandar Report for Bahrain's Ministry of Cabinet Affairs documented the severity of the threat posed by Shi'a groups, advocating for a strategy of election rigging, gerrymandering and naturalization.[79]

A great deal of contestation occurred within formal political spaces. By the 2006 elections, al Wefaq, the main opposition group, had reversed its electoral boycott and secured 17 seats. After the uprisings in 2011, al-Wefaq withdrew from parliament and was banned in 2016. Key figures in the party, including parliamentarians Jawad and Jalal Fairouz, had their nationalities revoked, along with hundreds of other Shi'a Bahrainis, including the top Shi'a cleric in Bahrain Sheikh Isa Qassem, amidst routine allegations that their loyalties lay with Iran in a widespread process of securitization directed against Shi'a communities.[80]

Seeking to justify these strategies and ensure the continued support of their Saudi sponsors, regime officials routinely framed protests as a consequence of perfidious Iranian activity. King Hamad articulated such fears in an address to the Peninsula Shield Force in 2011: "An external plot has been fomented for twenty to thirty years for the ground to be right for subversive

[77] Fuad Khuri, *Tribe and State in Bahrain* (Chicago: Chicago University Press 1980)

[78] Frederic Wehrey, "Bahrain's Decade of Discontent', *Journal of Democracy,* 24:3 (2013) 116-126.

[79] Justin J. Gengler (2013) Royal Factionalism, the Khawalid, and the Securitization of 'the Shīʿa Problem' in Bahrain, Journal of Arabian Studies, 3 no.1, 69–70 and Wehrey, *Bahrain's Decade* p120

[80] Mabon, *End of the Battle.*

designs […] I here[by] announce the failure of the fomented subversive plot".[81] Muhammad Abd al-Ghaffar, former Bahraini ambassador to the US, argued that "Bahrain has been suffering for a long time from the Iranian interference in its internal affairs."[82] In the years that followed, Shi'a groups across the island were decimated, hundreds were stripped of their nationality and excluded from public life. Moreover, Bahraini citizenship was given to Sunnis from the Middle East and Asia in a naturalization processes that sought to increase the number of Sunnis in Bahrain and reduce the Shi'a majority.

The regulation of Shi'a activity across Bahrain's history in myriad forms evokes parallels with Agamben's ideas of the destruction of identities through desubjectivication. From the anti-Shi'a violence and Sunni-dominated policing outlined by Strobl[83] to the stripping of nationality, the Bahraini state has sought to regulate Shi'a activity through eviscerating its political meaning, casting it into bare life. In the conclusion of Strobl's powerful account of criminal justice in Bahrain, she recalls a conversation with a police contact who asked her not to talk "about Shi'a and Sunni". The contact continued, arguing that Bahrainis must "see ourselves as one people and [academic] work that focus[es] on sectarian problems just makes everything worse for us".[84] Such comments demonstrate the power of both academic research but also the insidious nature of sectarian divisions across all aspects of Bahraini life.

In Bahrain, war machines emerged at a number of different points in the state's post-independence history. State building across the archipelago involved the mobilization – and marginalization – of particular ideas in an attempt to order space. Such processes occur within the context of geopolitical currents that situate Bahrain as the "epicentre" of a broader struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran, leaving Shi'a populations in Arab states framed as fifth columnists. Whilst the Al Khalifa regime has largely been successful in abandoning Shi'a communities to bare life, these moves have not been without response. Indeed, the recent history of the archipelago is replete with examples of resistance to sovereign power, in myriad forms. The most obvious example of resistance emerging along sectarian lines is in the actions of the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain which reveal the ways in which war machines can be curtailed by state structures.[85]

Thus, when protest broke out that derived support from Shi'a populations it posed a challenge to the ordering of space. In the 1980s, the emergence of the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain serves as an example of a counter-hegemonic group in an antagonistic relationship with state structures. The framing of Shi'a groups as Iranian agents, both in the 1980s and in the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings, creates conditions wherein protesters operate from the exterior, challenging the governance power of the state. Yet in spite of allegations of

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[81] Zoi Constantine, "King of Bahrain Says Subversive 'External Plot' Has Been Foiled," *The National*, March 22, 2011, www.thenational.ae/world/mena/king-of-bahrain-says-sub- versive-external-plot-has-been-foiled-1.600506.
[82] Yasser al-Chazli, "Adviser to Bahrain King: GCC Basis of Balance in Region," *Al- Monitor*, November 4, 2013, http://almon.co/2olf.
[83] See: Staci Strobl, "The Women's Police Directorate in Bahrain: An Ethnographic Exploration of Gender Segregation and the Likelihood of Future Integration", *International Criminal Justice Review* 2008 18 no.1 (2008) 39-58.
[84] Strobl, *Sectarian Order* p115
[85] Alhasan, *The Role of Iran*

perfidious Iranian manipulation, or of the duplicitous loyalty of Shi'a communities, there has been a vehement rejection of charges of loyalty to Iran. One senior Bahraini Shi'a cleric recounted his deep offence at the allegations of following the Islamic Republic.

Across the *longue durée* of the twentieth century, Bahraini society came to be viewed as the interaction of a range of ethnicities and sects, under an "ethnosectarian gaze".[86] Yet when particular groups contested the absolutist power of the Al Khalifa rule and its national image, movements would be reduced to their communal elements and dealt with by the biopolitical machinery of the state. Reflecting on the evolution of political organization across Bahrain, it is easy to see the prominence of sectarian identities within the fabric of the state. Yet whilst possessing a great deal of importance, sectarian identities are located within the context of broader political, social and economic grievances which appear to disproportionately affect Shi'a communities, stemming from the process of state building on the archipelago and Al Khalifa efforts to maintain power.

Iraq

The formative years of the Iraqi state were plagued by challenges to the state-building project from myriad forms of indigenous political organization. As Hana Batatu's magisterial study of twentieth century Iraq notes, the Arabs of Iraq were "a congeries of distinct, discordant, self-involved societies" that were undercut by class schisms, sectarian divisions and tribal tensions, most obviously seen in the distinction between urban and rural societies.[87] These tensions posed a serious challenge to the state-building project whilst also leaving the nascent Iraqi state open to the whims of other regional states. Gertrude Bell – a British analyst working in the Middle East in the 1920s – feared that the Shi'a presence across the south risked bringing the country "under Persian influences".[88] The British decision to install a Sunni monarch to rule over a Shi'a majority stemmed from desires to work with urban elites who possessed military training, yet this posed a serious challenge for ensuring political stability across Iraq.

As a consequence, Shi'a communities were largely viewed with a great deal of suspicion over the following decades amidst concern as to their loyalties. Iraqi rulers and their British advisors began a process of regulating life over Iraq that sought to co-opt disparate groups into the nascent state and to regulate sectarian difference. At this time, it was generally accepted that members of Shi'a communities were not accepted into military colleges or administrative bureaucracies whilst accessing high school was incredibly difficult, resulting in the cultivation of serious grievances amongst Shi'a groups.[89] Such processes continued across the formative decades of the Iraqi political project – and across different regimes – as Baghdad sought to impose governance structures that regulated life. Maintaining control

[86] AlShehabi, *Contested Modernity.*

[87] Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of its Communists, Ba'athists and Free Officers* (Princeton University Press, 1978) p13

[88] Gertrude Bell, *A Woman in Arabia: The Writings of the Queen of the Desert* (New York: Penguin, 2015) p169

[89] Adeeda Dawisha, *Iraq: A Political History from Independence to Occupation*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013) p72

over the larger Shi'a population was of paramount importance for the survival of the Sunni hegemony over Iraqi politics.[90]

These processes differed as the Iraqi state developed and sovereigns responsible for deciding the exception changed. Over a number of decades, coup-proofing strategies designed to ensure the survival of regimes exacerbated divisions, increasing the marginalization of Shi'a, Kurdish and other groups who opposed the regime. Under the leadership of Saddam Hussein, exclusionary processes of biopolitical governance increased as the Ba'athist ideology sought to expunge tribalism – other than that used by Saddam himself – and religion from the public sphere, initially eroding differences between Sunni and Shi'a, the latter of whom had enjoyed important improvements in economic, political and social realms since the 1950s. In spite of this, Sunni Iraqis remained better educated, more prosperous and with greater opportunities for progression. These continued structural grievances facilitated the emergence of Shi'a opposition movements, in many cases led by prominent clerics from the south, and a number of political parties emerged that expressed a desire to speak for the marginalized Shi'a groups of Iraq, perhaps most notably al-Dawa'a.

After the establishment of the Islamic Republic in neighboring Iran, fear about Iranian influence across southern Iraq featured prominently in Saddam's strategic calculations. Reflecting both geopolitical concerns and fears about domestic instability, Saddam embarked on a process of *coup proofing*, surrounding himself with family members, Tikritis and Sunnis in an attempt to ensure his survival. The ensuing war with Iran would have a dramatic impact on domestic dynamics, leaving the Ba'ath regime sensitive to the Shi'a 'threat', prompting Saddam to dramatically restrict the political space of those seen to be linked to al-Dawa'a.[91]

Amidst such precarious conditions, prominent Shi'a leaders were executed by the organs of state power. Clerics such as Ayatollah Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr and Sayed Abdul Majid al-Khoei – amongst others – were subjugated to death as Saddam sought to regulate life. Beyond al-Sadr and al-Khoei, other members of Shi'a communities were cast into bare life, abandoned by the state structures that had long discriminated against them.[92] Although applied broadly to Shi'a groups across Iraq, small numbers remained loyal to the Ba'athists, co-opted into a political structure that benefitted them economically, which became increasingly important as Sunni allies deserted the regime into the 2000s.[93]

Yet Shi'a groups were not passive actors amidst efforts to erode their political agency. Indeed, the 1991 uprisings across southern Iraq demonstrate the widespread anger and agency of Shi'a Iraqis frustrated at Saddam's rule. In the aftermath of these events, Shi'a communities faced even more draconian conditions. Somewhat surprisingly, a number of Shi'a volunteered for the infamous sacrifice operations ('*amaliyat fidaiyya*) as a way of signaling their loyalty to

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[90] See Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) for a detailed account of this persecution.

[91] Lisa Blaydes, *Compliance and Resistance in Iraq under Saddam Hussein: Evidence from the Files of the Ba'th Party* p16

[92] Adeed Dawisha, '"Identity" and Political Survival in Saddam's Iraq', *Middle East Journal* 53:4 (1999) 553-567 and Rodger Shanahan, 'Shi'a political development in Iraq: the Islamic Da'wa Party', *Third World Quarterly* 25:5 (2004) 943-954

[93] Blaydes, Op. Cit., p22

and compliance with the regime. Over time, this militia became institutionalized as *Saddam's Fedayeen* – once again populated by members of Shi'a communities – which developed a reputation as a militia controlled by Uday Hussein and responsible for extreme violence.[94]

The end of the Ba'ath regime brought with it an end to the marginalization of Shi'a communities. In post-2003 Iraq, the re-imagining of political organization created spaces of possibility for Shi'a groups to assert their role in the new Iraq. An internal document circulated in the United Iraqi Alliance outlined a vision for Iraqi Shi'a to serve as the governing class, asserting that "Iraq is the Shi'a […] And the Shi'a are Iraq".[95] Adding to this line of thought, Ali Allawi, a former Iraqi politician, argued that the document signalled the abandonment of traditional Western ideas of citizenship "in favour of a constellation of lesser sects and ethnicities revolving around a Shi'a sun".[96] Yet the spectre of Ba'athism loomed large.

Following the removal of Saddam Hussein, the ruling Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) sought to bring Shi'a and Kurdish groups into the development of a new Iraqi state.[97] In order to do this, both sets of groups called for the dismantling of the military which had long been a source of violent oppression. To ensure their participation, the CPA initially sought to prevent the resurgence of the Ba'ath Party[98] before disbanding Iraq's military apparatus.

Under Nouri Al Maliki, Iraqi politics took on increasingly sectarian characteristics, creating space for regional powers to become involved in day-to-day life, providing financial resources to their kin.[99] For Iran, Iraq was seen as a space of possibility, an arena to be shaped – much to the chagrin of Saudi Arabia who viewed increasing Iranian involvement with much trepidation.[100] Such concerns were regularly conveyed to US officials, including a plea to "cut off the head of the snake"[101], whilst Iraq was framed as a client state of Iran amidst suggestions that Prime Minister al Maliki was "an Iranian agent".[102] The intensity of conflict in Iraq resulted in the deaths of close to 200,000 civilians through fierce fighting between coalition forces, Al Qa'ida affiliates, government forces, tribes and Shi'a militias.[103] Beyond

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[94] Ala Bashir, *The Insider: Trapped in Saddam's Brutal Regime* (London: Abacus, 2005).
[95] Fanar Haddad, *Shi'a Centric State-Building and Sunni Rejection in Post 2003 Iraq*, (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 2015), https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP261_Haddad_Shia_Final.pdf p6
[96] Ali Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace* (London: Yale University Press, 2007), 438.
[97] See: Toby Dodge, *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism* (Oxon: Routledge, 2012) and Tripp, *A History of Iraq*
[98] *Coalition Provisional Authority Order Number 1: De-Ba'athification of Iraqi Society* (2003) Available from: http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB418/docs/9a%20-%20Coalition%20Provisional%20Authority%20Order%20No%201%20-%205-16-03.pdf
[99] Dodge, *Iraq: From War*
[100] Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran*
[101] 08RIYADH649_a SAUDI KING ABDULLAH AND SENIOR PRINCES ON SAUDI POLICY TOWARD IRAQ (20.04.08) Available from: https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08RIYADH649_a.html
[102] 09RIYADH447_aCOUNTERTERRORISM ADVISER BRENNAN'S MEETING WITH SAUDI KING ABDULLAH (22.03.14) Available from: https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09RIYADH447_a.html
[103] For an in-depth discussion of the human cost of the fragmentation of the Iraqi state see chapter 6 of Simon Mabon and Stephen Royle, *The Origins of ISIS: The Collapse of Nations and Revolution in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016)

feelings of abandonment, it also left Sunni Iraqis competing for resources as a community that had been closed off from others within a political context.[104]

As Haddad pertinently notes,

> There is no single factor—least of all the mere fact of sectarian plurality—that could account for the sectarianization of post-2003 Iraq. A cumulative web of perceptual and tangible drivers, spanning the better part of a century, gave birth to and still influence the defining feature of post-2003 Arab Iraq, namely, the tension between Shia-centric state building and Sunni rejection.[105]

This rejection quickly appeared after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, born out of deep feelings of alienation, loss and victimhood. Yet these feelings are firmly located within local contexts. As Haddad correctly asserts, "Most people are not ideological hardliners – they react to socioeconomic and political conditions and make their choices accordingly".[106] In spite of this, the mindset of politically empowered, Shi'a-centric state building meant that myriad actors across the state became invested in its future, whilst Sunni resentment continued. The mistrust that this cycle breeds was difficult to break, fuelling fear, insecurity and deeper sectarian entrenchment.

In these conditions, an estimated 50 militias emerged after the 2003 invasion, operating as war machines and drawing membership from an estimated 60,000-140,000.[107] Perhaps the most obvious example of a war machine rejecting the ordering of space was Da'ish, yet other war machines in the form of militias played a key role in the struggle against the group. Under the leadership of both al-Maliki and Hayder al-Abadi, war machines were co-opted by the regime, brought into formal institutions of the state, much to the chagrin of other Iraqis concerned at the violence of a number of the groups. Central to much of this violence were competing visions of national projects, notably those presented by Shi'a groups and rejected by Sunnis.

Amidst such conditions, Iraq appeared vulnerable to both the Arab Uprisings and the (re)emergence of sect-based violence that followed across the region, yet its recent history and the peculiarities of the previous decade resulted in a different outcome. Conflict fatigue and trauma exhaustion left few in Iraq desiring widespread protest at this time, demonstrating the role of other factors in not only shaping the biopolitical regulation of life but also the contingencies that shape local context. In the years that followed, particularly amidst the emergence of Da'ish and collective response against the group, the role of sectarianism in Iraq appears to have shifted. A number of scholars have heralded the "end of

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[104] See: Simon Mabon, 'The Apocalyptic and Sectarian: Identity, Bare Life and the Rise of Da'ish', in *Before Military Intervention* Rob Johnson and Tim Clack (eds) (Palgrave, 2018) and Simon Mabon and Ana Maria Kumarasamy, 'Da'ish, Stasis and Bare Life in Iraq', in *Iraq After ISIS: The Challenges of Post War Recovery* Jacob Erikson and Ahmed Khaleel (eds) (Palgrave, 2018).
[105] Haddad, *Shi'a Centric,* p5
[106] Ibid. p5.
[107] Renad Mansour, Faleh A. Jabar, *The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future* (Carnegie Middle East Center, 28.04.17) at http://carnegie-mec.org/2017/04/28/popular-mobilization-forces-and-iraq-s-future-pub-68810

sectarianism" across Iraq, amidst the emergence of a "post-sectarian" moment amidst the evolution of political dynamics in Iraq. Yet as Haddad notes, this is perhaps more a consequence of the "shifting social salience, political relevance, and utility of sectarian identities and relations".[108] By the May elections of 2018, Iraqis expressed frustration with the political status quo, as Muqtada al-Sadr's al-Sairoon party gained more seats than Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's bloc, supported by an Iranian coalition of Shi'a factions. Al-Sadr's victory was based on a platform advocating cross-sectarian action, facilitated by an umbrella party that included Iraq's Communist Party.

Of course, the elections also occurred amidst widespread frustration at the socio-economic and political situations, with thousands of protesters taking to the streets across Baghdad and southern cities to express anger at perceived economic mismanagement. What is pertinent to note is that, whilst unrest was common across Sunni areas in the preceding years, the protests that summer emerged from Shi'a communities who demanded services and jobs rather than sectarian rhetoric, which was later supported by Sunni Arab tribes. Here, we see the re-emergence of a form of Iraqi nationalism that has shaped the parameters of debate and political activity.[109] The protests empowered al-Sairoon, yet their inability to form a government beyond ethnic and sectarian coalitions demonstrates the continued prevalence of Iraq's *Muhassasa* system, enshrined by the quota system.[110]

Reflecting on Iraqi politics over the longue durée, sectarian identities were positioned within existential political crises over loyalty to the Arab notation or the Iraqi state. Yet amidst geopolitical pressures, these questions became increasingly defined by sectarian identities which were shaped by historical processes. Agamben's approach suggests that all individuals can be cast aside into *bare life* through desubjectivication, yet this process is shaped by the contingencies of local context.

Conclusions

Whilst the literature on sectarianism has provided rich insight into the ways in which identities are mobilized, more work is required to understand the position of sectarian identities within the *longue durée* of political organization. In this article I have sought to show that sectarian identities are embedded within sovereign efforts to regulate life. These biopolitical efforts are not necessarily always directed at sectarian groups, but rather, sectarian identities often map onto socio-economic contestations. Moreover, regimes have long viewed the sectarian other with a great deal of trepidation amidst the conflation of domestic and regional fears.

The combination of sovereign power and the ability to regulate life through manipulation of sect-based identities has had a devastating impact on the organization of life across the contemporary Middle East. In Iraq and Bahrain, amidst long-standing fears about loyalty and

[108] Fanar Haddad, *The Waning Relevance of the Sunni-Shia Divide* (The Century Foundation, 10.04.19) https://tcf.org/content/report/waning-relevance-sunni-shia-divide/?agreed=1
[109] Thanassis Cambanis, *Social Engineering in Samarra* (The Century Foundation, 02.05.19) https://tcf.org/content/report/social-engineering-samarra/
[110] Zeidon Alkinani, *After all, Iraq's ethno-sectarian quota remains* (openDemocracy, 22.10.18) https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/after-all-iraq-s-ethno-sectarian-quota-remains/

competing visions of ordering, co-opting and marginalizing sectarian identities has been a key component of state-building processes and regime efforts to ensure survival amidst a range of different challenges within and between states. Somewhat counter intuitively, state-building processes and institutional failings both had a serious impact on the actions of sectarian groups' identities and the ability of groups to exert political agency. Whilst state building processes restricted the capacity of particular individuals and groups amidst regime efforts to ensure their survival, institutional failings eroded possible avenues of political expression.

As Agamben demonstrates, the sovereign's ability to regulate life means that all can potentially be cast into the conditions of bare life. Political organization in Bahrain and Iraq was beset by myriad socio-economic and political challenges that posed serious challenges to sovereign power. Although not necessarily driven by sectarian identities, socio-economic marginalization was typically mapped onto sectarian communities, whose position in political projects was already a source of perennial concern amidst the perception of competing visions of order and sovereign power. Yet unrest across the *longue durée* wasdriven by socio-economic concerns that hit particular communities hardest.

In times of crisis, especially amidst the conflation of geopolitical and domestic issues, regimes have targeted sectarian groups, exacerbating feelings of discontent and marginalization. The stickiness and cultural force of sectarian identities has meant that, whilst under the governance power of the state, sectarian groups have banded together, feeling persecuted and abandoned by the state, and began to operate as war machines against biopolitical organization.

Sectarian identities are simultaneously contained within the biopolitical structures of sovereign power, whilst the stickiness and cultural force of these identities also demonstrates the capacity of sectarian leaders to mobilize groups against ruling elites. Thus, whilst sectarian identities are important, we must situate them within the biopolitical structures that enforce sovereign power and reflect on this over the *longue durée.* Reflecting on the evolution of these structures in detail – a task beyond the scope of this article – will better locate sectarian identities within the biopolitical structures of sovereign power

The emergence of the war machine in a number of contexts challenges the very spatial ordering of states in the Middle East. Driven by sectarian identities, a number of these war machines possess stronger relationships with co-sectarian kin in other states which can challenge the ordering of regional politics, particularly when geopolitical factors play into the domestic fears, as we saw in Iraq and Bahrain. Here, traditional borders and forms of sovereign order appear less important than the blurred distinctions between sect and nation, war and peace, withdrawal and presence, sectarianism and sovereignty, leading to serious implications for the ordering of life.

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