Desectarianization: Looking beyond the sectarianization of Middle Eastern Politics

In recent years, the Middle East has been the site of contestation amidst the often violent fragmentation of political organisation. Myriad efforts have been undertaken to understand the reasons for this fragmentation which has often been reduced to a consequence of "ancient hatreds" that pits Sunni against Shi'a. One of the more compelling arguments to understand the emergence of sectarian violence was proposed by Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel who suggest that the politics of the Middle East has undergone a process of *sectarianization*. This article builds upon the work of Hashemi and Postel to consider potential mechanisms to challenge this process of sectarianization, to work towards *desectarianization*. With this in mind, I propose an approach that borrows from a number of different disciplines to create for a four-stage framework to facilitate desectarianization. In support of this, I draw upon interviews conducted with clerics, policy makers and journalists across the Middle East, along with interviews from my time as specialist advisor to the House of Lords Committee Inquiry into British relations with the Middle East.

In recent years, the Middle East has been the site of contestation amidst the often violent fragmentation of political organisation. Myriad efforts have been undertaken to understand the reasons for this fragmentation which has often been reduced to a consequence of "ancient hatreds" that pits Sunni against Shi'a. Advocates of such a position hold that as the sovereign order becomes contested, actors become bearers of sectarian identities over all others. It is hardly surprising that this position has come in for a great deal of criticism from scholars who view it as Orientalist, simplistic and fundamentally inaccurate. Other positions hold that sectarian difference has been used instrumentally as a mechanism of control (See: Wehrey, 2014; Potter, 2014; Matthiesen, 2013; Haddad, 2013). An increasingly prominent feature of these calculations, however, is the location of sectarianism within the context of a broader geopolitical struggle (Mabon, 2013).

One of the more compelling arguments to understand the emergence of sectarian violence was proposed by Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel who suggest that the politics of the Middle East has undergone a process of *sectarianization* (2017). The *sectarianization* thesis has gained a great deal of traction in discussions of the region, given its capacity to explain the rise of sect-based violence in particular times and spaces. In spite of its popularity, very little work has been undertaken that seeks to move towards a *desectarianization* of regional politics. A key component of the *sectarianization* thesis is that sect-based enmity is moulded and mobilized as a consequence of political factors which, if we accept this premise, suggests that strategies can be put in place to reduce tensions. A range of approaches have been deployed in an attempt to bring peace to divided societies, predominantly either through cultivating political systems with representation from all sides, or through reconciliation efforts. Yet what becomes increasingly problematic for our inquiry is the regional nature of sectarianization.

The *desectarianization* of politics across the region is certainly a long-term project, possibly requiring generations. Yet it is a process that must be draw upon and learn lessons from other peace building projects. This article builds upon the work of Hashemi and Postel to consider

potential mechanisms to challenge this process of sectarianization, to work towards *desectarianization*. With this in mind, I propose an approach that creates a four-stage framework to facilitate desectarianization. First, I offer an account of the sectarianization thesis put forward by Hashemi and Postel. Second, I consider the importance of geopolitical factors in facilitating sectarianization, focussing upon the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Third, I explore the sectarianization of regional politics. Fourth, I look at peace building approaches that seek to end conflict in divided societies before articulating a process of desectarianization. In support of this, I draw upon interviews conducted with clerics, policy makers and journalists across the Middle East, along with interviews from my time as specialist advisor to the House of Lords Committee Inquiry into British relations with the Middle East.

The Sectarianization Thesis

Central to the sectarianization project is an attempt to understand why, at this particular moment in time, did conflict between sectarian groups break out. The very idea of sectarianism suggests a static, trans-historical force that is both enduring and immutable, a characteristic found in the Arab and Islamic world from the 7th century until today. To answer this question, Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel suggest that we should consider the sectarianization of regional politics. For Hashemi and Postel, sectarianization is "an active process shaped by political actors operating within specific contexts, pursuing political goals that involve the mobilization of popular sentiments around particular identity markers. Class dynamic, fragile states, and geopolitical rivalries also shape the sectarianization" (2017, 3). In recent decades, it is this sect based difference rather than regime type has become the central cleavage of regional politics.

This thesis is supported by Vali Nasr, who argues that the nature of politics changed in the aftermath of the US led invasion of Iraq, meaning that modernity, fundamentalism, nationalism and democracy failed to explain the complexities of the region. Instead, "the old feud" between Sunni and Shi'a was the defining feature of political, social and economic life (Nasr, 2007). Acknowledging Nasr's claim, Hashemi and Postel raise three questions: why now? How can we understand the upsurge in sect-based conflict in particular times and places? And how can the phenomena be understood? It is in attempt to answer these questions that the concept of *sectarianization* is proposed. To understand sectarianization we must explore political life and the spatial dynamics that create the conditions to allow for such processes. And as Hashemi and Postel acknowledge in *The New York Times*, to stop the spike in tensions between Sunni and Shi'a and prevent sectarian difference becoming a self-perpetuating reality, we must understand the forces driving the conflict internally along with the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran which occupies a central role (Hashemi and Postel, 2018).

A prominent part of the *sectarianization* thesis is the cultivation of group identities, an 'in-group' closed off against an 'out-group' (Mabon, 2020). From this closing off, identities are mobilized by actors seeking to propagate particular agendas. Hashemi and Postel draw parallels with ethnic and religious mobiliziation, correctly asserting that "most mainstream forms of political Islam are in effect religious forms of nationalism: their proponents have accepted the borders of the post-colonial state and are fundamentally concerned with

changing the internal politics of their home countries" (Hashemi and Postel, 2017: 3). Such a thesis is supported by Madawi Al Rasheed and others who refer to "sectarian entrepreneurs", those who seek to manipulate identities for their own ends. It is not "an inherent historical quality of the Arab masses" (Al Rasheed, 2017: 158; Matthiesen, 2017). As Geneive Abdo argues, sectarian entrepreneurs engage in a rewriting of the "history of the present", where memory and tradition are shaped by the context and contingency of local and regional factors, with implications for the ordering of space (Abdo, 2017: 10).

Within traditional approaches to understanding the mobilization of identities, three schools of thought are dominant. The first, primordialism, holds that identities are deeply embedded within human relations and psychology, based on a set of intangible elements grounded in biology, history and tradition. The second is the instrumentalist view, which holds that identity is malleable, a key part of political processes. The malleable nature of identity leaves it open to manipulation, a tool in the arsenal of actors seeking to advance their own political, social and economic interests as entrepreneurs. The third approach is constructivism, a middle-ground view between the two that suggests identity is not fixed but is a construct from social relationships stemming from modernity. The constructivist shares the sense of immutable features of identity, yet reject that it has to lead to conflict, whilst agreeing with the instrumentalists that entrepreneurs play a key role in mobilizing.

Holding a constructivist view, Hashemi and Postel argue that sectarianization occurs as a consequence of the manipulation of social and political dynamics by authoritarian regimes and sectarian entrepreneurs. Authoritarianism occupies a central role in the thesis, with a corrosive legacy that has "deeply sullied" the political organisation and social construction of the region. As Hashemi and Postel suggest, it is authoritarianism and not theology that is a critical factor in the emergence of sectarian difference. This view suggests that sect-based identities are manipulated by in an attempt to increase legitimacy and maintain power amidst serious demands for political change. As a consequence, understanding the political and socio-economic context is central to understanding how – and why – sectarianization has found traction. States and the regimes that run them thus play a key role within securitization processes.

This idea evokes the work of Joel Migdal, whose *strong societies, weak states* thesis certainly adds value to this position. For Migdal, the idea of a weak state is one unable to enforce key governance structures, to "*penetrate* society, *regulate* social relationships, *extract* resources, and *appropriate* or use resources in determined ways", where social forces stymie efforts at exerting authority (1998 :4).[1] Central to Migdal's argument is the idea that regimes and societies compete over social control and the practices and norms that regulate life, shaping each other in the process. Amidst serious challenges to political stability and competition over myriad resources, political life becomes contested, open to the manipulation of identity groups in pursuit of political or economic goals by sectarian entrepreneurs.

Processes of sectarianization refer to the cultivation and manipulation of seemingly violent divisions between – and within – groups by individuals with a vested interest in communal

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[1] Whilst some may draw parallels with ideas of hybrid sovereignty, such a concept struggles to adequately take into account the interaction of formal and informal structures, particularly the implications of such a struggle for space and the regulation of life.

supremacy. Through such approaches, sectarian difference becomes a vehicle through which subjectivity, prejudice and politics gain traction; it is when sectarian language gains or becomes loaded with political meaning, allowing difference takes on an antagonistic form. With this added meaning, grievances develop, and as political structures are put in place to regulate life, such sentiments become both institutionalised and generational. As we have seen in Lebanon, Iraq, Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iran (amongst others), processes of state formation have regularly created antagonistic grievances between sectarian groups as a means of maintaining control and ultimately, survival (Hashemi and Postel, 2017).

The prominence of religion within the fabric of states across the region serves as a means of increasing legitimacy and also of locating actions within broader narratives, both theological and geopolitical. In times of uncertainty, identities also serve as a means of ensuring survival. As one observer suggested, "it is a way of saying I am less likely to be killed by this person than if I align with that person".[2] The prominence of Islam within political organisation provides means for elites to use religious discourse in pursuit of their own ends, a means to "to mobilise and manipulate their people".[3] Yet with religion occupying a central role within the fabric of political organisation, regional events have the capacity to shape local contexts and vice versa. Whilst the motivations of local and regional actors who adhere to the same sect may coalesce, they may not always have the same objectives.[4] In conflict zones, some suggest that local groups capitalize on the involvement of regional powers, moulding their identities according to the perceived wishes of external actors in search of funding, although this suggests a transient and instrumentalised view of identity. (Phillips and Valbjørn, 2018).

In divided societies where sectarian divisions have taken on political, social and economic meaning, sectarian identities risk becoming all encompassing, providing elites with the means of maintaining control and increasing legitimacy amidst increasing contestation, both domestically and regionally. Sect-based identities offer a form of protection amidst an increasingly precarious situations. As sectarian difference takes on additional meaning, it risks becoming all encompassing, a self-fulfilling prophecy that consumes all in its way.[5] As Hashemi and Postel have demonstrated, this process takes place within the context of rampant authoritarianism and a crisis of legitimacy. At such a time, the designation of an out group as an existential threat, capitalizing upon broader geopolitical trends and speaking to an audience comprised of both domestic and regional constituents comprises the sectarianization process.

The Geopolitics of Sectarianism

As Michael Barnett argued, at times of crisis regimes have opportunities to reshape regional politics (1998). Using the power of the Pan Arab frame, regimes sought to increase their influence across the region through demonstrating their adherence to the norms of the movement. In later years, similar performances would occur using Islamic rhetoric. More

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[2] Testimony, Danahar
[3] Testimony, Al Khoei.
[4] Testimony, Haid.
[5] This point was made by several interviewees from Lebanon. Similar issues also appear in Syria and Iraq.

recently, sectarian narratives, predominantly couched in anti-Iranian terms, have become increasingly common as a means of demonstrating and securing a regime's position in the regional order (Malmvig, 2014: 146). In the context of recent events – and sectarianization - the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran provides the conditions for speech acts to take root across the Middle East and beyond, capitalizing on immutably different identities which derive legitimacy from religion.

Geopolitical tensions have long had a domestic impact, historically seen in the Arab nationalist cause but more recently seen in the sectarianization of regional politics. From this, it is easy to see how distinct events lead to an increase in tensions, such as after the Iran-Iraq war, the 2003 Iraq war, and the 2011 Arab Uprisings. In the aftermath of each of these events there was a spike in sect-based violence, underpinned by the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Although couched in sectarian terms, the rivalry is essentially geopolitical and one that uses Islam as a means of mobilizing support across the region (Mabon, 2013; Rubin, 2014). Closer exploration of the rivalry supports the view, as the period between 1990 and 2003 was one marked by a burgeoning rapprochement. In the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings, the rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran has continued to play a dominant role in regional politics, manifesting in the domestic actions of a number of actors through the securitization of Shi'a groups and, fundamentally, the sectarianization of regional politics. As Hashemi and Postel opine, "Saudi accusations of Iran orchestrating a serpentine Shiite takeover of the Arab world are self-serving exaggerations that conveniently cloak Riyadh's own malfeasance, yet Iran's policies in Syria make these claims sound perfectly plausible to many Sunnis" (2018).

Whilst sectarian difference underpinned by geopolitical intent has seemingly created intractable conflict between Riyadh and Tehran, it was not always thus. In the early aftermath of the 1979 revolution in Iran, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the architect of the Islamic Republic, stressed that

> There is no difference between Muslims who speak different languages, for instance the Arabs and the Persians. It is very probable that such problems have been created by those who do not wish the Muslim countries to be united [. . .] They create the issues of nationalism, of pan-Iranianism, pan-Turkism, and such isms, which are contrary to Islamic doctrines. (Cited in Amirahmadi and Entessar, 1993:3).

Yet shortly after, as relations with Saudi Arabia became increasingly fractious, the rhetoric from Tehran took on a more hostile dimension, as Khomeini expressed a desire to

> export our experiences to the whole world and present the outcome of our struggles against tyrants to those who are struggling along the path of God, without expecting the slightest reward. The result of this exportation will certainly result in the blooming of the buds of victory and independence and in the implementation of Islamic teachings among the enslaved nations (Cited in New York Times, 1987).

In response, the Saudi leadership condemned the "hypocrites and pretenders who are using Islam to undermine and destabalise other countries" (Goldberg, 1987: 589). Following this, a number of events fuelled the fears of a number of regional players as Iran sought to export the revolution. In particular, the establishment of Hizballah, the Lebanese Party of God and

the failed 1981 *coup d'etat* in Bahrain undertaken by the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain provoked a great deal of consternation as Iranian forces directly supported the establishment of anti-status quo groups across the region.

Following the end of the Iran-Iraq war, relations across the Gulf entered a new phase. The death of Khomeini and emergence of seemingly more reform minded politicians in Iran were matched by like-minded individuals in Saudi Arabia who appeared open to rapprochement. Central to these moves was a devastating earthquake in Iran, to which Saudi Arabia sent aid. In the following years, a burgeoning rapprochement took hold, driven by high level delegations visiting both states, yet broader geopolitical considerations would ultimately put paid to these diplomatic initiatives (Mabon, 2018).

The 2003 invasion of Iraq occupies a central role within the escalation of geopolitical tensions. Whilst both Saudi Arabia and Iran expressed grave fears about the behaviour of the Ba'ath regime in Iraq, the toppling of Saddam Hussein created a new arena of regional competition and a bi-polar region. For the former Iraqi Prime Minister, Nouri Al Maliki, the idea of decentralisation was a "hidden plot", part of an agenda to divide the country. For others, appealing to divisions within divided societies would "open Pandora's box", creating "a race to the bottom in each individual canton [over] who is more Sunni, who is more Shia who is more Kurdish".[6] Yet for Saudi King Abdullah, Nori Al Maliki was "an Iranian agent" who had opened the door for Iranian influence in Iraq" since taking power (09RIYADH447_a 2009).

In recent years, the concept of the *Shi'a Crescent* has created an image of a region increasingly divided along sectarian lines, albeit a concept that is seemingly only used in the English language. Speaking with *The Washington Post,* King Abdullah of Jordan argued that

> If pro-Iran parties or politicians dominate the new Iraqi government […] a new "crescent" of dominant Shiite movements or governments stretching from Iran into Iraq, Syria and Lebanon could emerge, alter the traditional balance of power between the two main Islamic sects and pose new challenges to U.S. interests and allies […]. It would be a major problem. And then that would propel the possibility of a Shiite-Sunni conflict even more, as you're taking it out of the borders of Iraq (Wright and Baker, 2004).

Abdullah's remarks were echoed by regimes across the region, particularly in the Gulf, driven by fears about pernicious Iranian behaviour and the loyalties of their own Shi'a populations.

Speech acts from prominent officials across the Gulf reflect such concerns. In US diplomatic cables released by Wikileaks, Saudi fears about Iranian actions in Iraq are well documented. In one cable, US officials were urged not to "leave Iraq until its sovereignty has been restored, otherwise it will be vulnerable to the Iranians'" (06RIYADH9175_a, 2006). Abdullah also called on the US to "cut off the head of the snake", citing a desire to work with the US to "roll back Iranian influence in Iraq" (08RIYADH649_a, 2008). Similar views were held by key Saudi allies across the region. In neighbouring Bahrain, many in the Al Khalifa believe that "as long as Khamenei has the title of Commander-in-Chief, Bahrain must worry about the loyalty of Shia who maintain ties and allegiance to Iran" (06MANAMA409_a, 2006).

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[6] Testimony, Haid

For the Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Al Jubeir, Iran sought to "obscure its dangerous sectarian and expansionist policies, as well as its support for terrorism, by leveling unsubstantiated charges against the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia" (2016). Al Jubeir also argued that Iran is "the single-most-belligerent-actor in the region, and its actions display both a commitment to regional hegemony and a deeply held view that conciliatory gestures signal weakness either on Iran's part or on the part of its adversaries" (2016). These views were echoed by Saudi allies across the region. A prominent Bahraini official, Fawaz bin Mohammad Al Khalifa, condemned the "expansionist ambitions of the Persian Shia establishment", blaming Iran for continued unrest divided societies (Al Khalifa, 2016), documented in diplomatic cables released by the Wikileaks organization.

The Sectarianization of Regional Politics

The events of the Arab Uprisings fuelled the concerns of regimes across the region. As protesters took to the streets demanding greater political rights and an improvement in socio-economic conditions, authoritarian regimes struggled to assert control and maintain legitimacy. Myriad strategies were used by regimes to ensure their survival. One such approach was to cultivate a narrative that suggested protest and expression of political aspirations was a path to civil war akin to that seen in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. Thus, when combined with the sectarianization of political life, democratic and normative desires were renounced by many in favour of stability and security.[7]

In a struggle for power, competing historiographies and interpretations of culture emerged. Nationalist narratives became contested, taking on new meaning as entrepreneurs and protesters gave new meaning to poetry, narratives and music that had previously been by regimes as mechanisms of control. [8] One immediate consequence was that all events took on a sectarian slant, perhaps best summed up by an elderly businessman in Bahrain who asserted that "the Persians are everywhere".[9] The impact of regional fears on domestic politics is perhaps best seen in Bahrain which, for Toby Matthiesen, is the "most salient" example of the sectarianization process, as domestic political issues fall within broader geopolitical struggles (2017).

Acknowledging the potential challenges stemming from divisions, regimes deployed a range of strategies in an attempt to ensure their survival. Political fragmentation created space for a range of groups and factions to act in pursuit of their – often competing – agendas, existing within the territorial shell of the sovereign state.[10] A key part of this was the mobilization of often violent identities to justify repression of opposition groups, as seen in Syria where Assad framed his actions as part of a broader 'war on terror' against Al Qa'ida affiliated

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[7] Roundtable, common view

[8] Interview with Syrian academic

[9] Interview with British embassy official, Manama, 2014.

[10] One 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. Amidst rapid escalation factions in the military cultivated alliances with tribal groups in pursuit of their own economic interests. This interaction 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 Knights: 2013)

organisations. [11] Similar events have taken place across the region. In Bahrain, the Al Khalifa capitalized on sectarian difference to solidify their rule in the face of popular protests in 2011. In Yemen, tribal leaders sought to capitalise on this contestation as a means of challenging and circumventing the legacy and influence of the *sayyid*, feeding into the fracturing of the Shi'a community (Philbrick Yadav, 2017: 188).

As political life became imbued with sectarian characteristics through sectarianization it also took on geopolitical importance. When groups were framed along sectarian lines, they became seen as the existential other. In doing this, regimes strengthened their support bases internally and externally, locating their struggle within the context of broader geopolitical struggles.[12] Amidst uncertainty, local groups are often located as passive actors within regional currents, shaping their identities according to the perceived wishes of external groups in support of financial reward or ideological vision, albeit evoking somewhat instrumentalised and transient view of identity (Phillips and Valbjørn, 2018).

For a large number of Sunni Arabs across the Gulf, Iranian activity is the source of instability as a consequence of the increasing politicisation and securitization of the region.[13] Such a view is a direct consequence of the actions of a number of regimes, not least of all Saudi Arabia, whose response to the Arab Uprisings has been to marginalize Shi'a groups and, by extension Iran, facilitating the broader sectarianization of regional politics (Matthiesen, 2014; Al Rasheed, 2017). The new Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammad bin Salman, accused Iran of "direct military aggression", suggesting that these actions "may be considered an act of war against the Kingdom" (Dehghan, 2017).

Fears of Iranian intervention were a source of great consternation. As Adel Al Jubeir argued, "Iranian interventions in the region are detrimental to the security of neighbouring countries and affect international peace and security. We will not allow any infringement of our national security" (Wahab, 2017). Moreover, for Al Jubeir, "Iran's role and its direct command of its Houthi proxy in this matter constitute a clear act of aggression that targets neighbouring countries, and threatens peace and security in the region and globally" (Wahab, 2017). Rejecting such claims, Javad Zarif – Al Jubeir's Iranian counterpart – claimed that "Iranian 'aggression' is a myth, easily perpetuated by those willing to spend their dollars on American military equipment and public-relations firms, and by those promising to protect American interest rather than those of their own people" (2017). A direct consequence of this increase in geopolitical tensions is change in the way in which Shi'a groups are viewed and framed. As Fanar Haddad argues, "Shiites who used to be accused of ethnic otherness are now being cast as outside the Muslim community itself. Exclusion on doctrinal grounds was a mostly Saudi exception in the framing of Shiism. It is now increasingly becoming the regional rule" (Haddad, 2013).

In places such as Lebanon, as sect-based identities became embedded within the political fabric of the state's power sharing agreement, religious difference risks becoming all encompassing. The neopatrimonial political system means that political elites maintained

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[11] Testimony, Al Khoei.
[12] Interview with Syria analyst, Skype, 2017.
[13] Testimony, Hamli

strong relationships with their business counterparts. As a consequence, sectarian identities provide business elites – both legitimate and mafias – with the mechanisms to increase their profit margins and political elites with mechanisms of control. This quickly became an existential issue, not because of sectarian difference itself, but because of the political and economic manifestations of this difference within the state. Groups swiftly positioned themselves along sectarian lines, benefitting from division and capitalising on societal differences. As conflict escalated in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, groups in conflict zones began to frame themselves along sectarian lines, mobilizing others as a consequence and transforming societal identities.

Yet sect-based difference need not necessarily lead to violence and consideration of political life across the region is testament to such a claim. Whilst we must not ignore the tensions between sectarian identities which often erupt in violence, there are a number of examples of how this is not a necessary outcome. In Kuwait, strong communal identities have existed and operated alongside one another, albeit within the context of political contestation that has occurred in other forms. Across political life in Kuwait, Shi'a political groups occupied a prominent role in the political system alongside their Sunni counterparts, serving as a bulwark against other opposition groups, embedding the spirit of compromise at the heart of Kuwaiti politics, albeit conspicuously absent in the treatment of the country's *bidoon* population (Wells, 2017). Cross-sectarian unity has been a prominent feature of Kuwaiti society, perhaps best seen in response to an attack on Shi'a worshipers at the al-Imam as-Sadiq Mosque. Claims to unity were echoed by a group of *diwaniyahs* - the Kuwaiti traditional 'gathering lounges – who stressed the Kuwaiti spirit of devotion and togetherness (KUNA, 2015), whilst the Emir also expressed unison, demonstrating that sectarian difference need not necessarily lead to violence. From this it is easy to see how the sectarianization thesis offers a convincing account of the descent into what appears to be protracted social conflicts. Yet accepting the constructed nature of events suggests that they can also be deconstructed, that the sectarianized can be desectarianized.

Desectarianization

As we have seen, sectarianization is a consequence of entrepreneurial actions that facilitate the politicized *construction* of communal difference. Precisely because of the social construction of sectarianization, it can be *deconstructed.* The final part of this paper proposes an approach that will facilitate a desectarianization of the contemporary Middle East. Desectarianization seeks to reverse the process of sectarianization and reducing geopolitical tensions that have played such a damaging role in shaping the politics of the region. The complexity of the challenge requires a multifaceted approach that engages with challenges locally, nationally and internationally. As sectarianization is comprised of moves that capitalize upon domestic and regional political conditions and empower communities, desectarianization must address political conditions that facilitate sectarianization and prevent the framing of identity groups as existential threats. Building on recommendations from in a *European Parliament* report, four areas are deemed essential to the desectarianization of regional politics (Matthiesen [ed], 2016).

Facilitate conflict transformation

The first step in desectarianization efforts is to expedite conflict resolution and transformation (where necessary), deploying peace-building approaches amongst those communities beset by violence. Whilst this should occur at elite level, it must also include grassroots transformation and peace-building efforts. It should be underpinned by an effort to foster inclusion and to eradicate social inequality, working towards more responsible resource and asset management, discussed in more detail below.

The success of peace processes in Northern Ireland, Cyprus and the Balkans reveal a number of lessons for those wishing to work towards a desectarianization of the Middle East. Northern Ireland provides an example of a negotiated form of power sharing, underpinned by de-commissioning processes, structural economic changes, measures to address social inequality and reform to the police service (Cochrane, 2013). A key component of such approaches is the involvement of regional actors who supported the process, along with the monitoring of events by international organisations such as the United Nations. Central to this is the (re)building of infrastructure necessary to ending humanitarian crises. This should be done in a politically neutral way and ensure the provision of physical and mental healthcare.

Support the rule of law and good governance

Political fragmentation and transition have creation conditions of socio-economic instability which has had a devastating impact upon political life. Displacement stemming from conflict comes with its own issues for those directly affected, but beyond this, the prevalence of authoritarianism and ensuing crisis of legitimacy has created conditions that facilitate the proliferation of sectarianization. Fundamental to the process is a move away from authoritarian politics that requires regimes to undertake *coup* proofing strategies and to frame sect-based identities as a threat to maintain their power. If we accept the premise put forward by Hashemi and Postel that sectarianization occurs within the context of authoritarian political structures, then we must consider how political structures have facilitated the emergence of sectarianization within the public sphere.

The emergence of conflict and instability across the Middle East typically is a consequence of the weakness of state institutions and the erosion of claims to sovereign power more broadly (Mabon, 2017). The 2016 Arab Human Development report stated that "the events of 2011 and their ramifications are the outcome of public policies over many decades that gradually led to the exclusion of large sectors of the population from economic, political and social life" (UN, 2016: 17). According to the Doha Institute's *Arab Opinion Index,* by 2011 and the time of the Arab Uprisings, 41% of people in the region were living in need whilst 53% required financial assistance from beyond the state. Such conditions continued over the following years, creating conditions rife for the existence of clientelist systems. Whilst economic, political and security conditions have improved, by 2018 55% of respondents had negative views of their home country's political situation (Arab Opinion Index, 2017). Corruption is seen to be rife, with 91% of respondents of a 2018 survey believing that corruption was "widespread" in their home country (Arab Opinion Index, 2017). A UN report suggested that in the past 50 years, endemic corruption has been estimated in the region of USD 1 trillion (United Nations, 2016: 19).

Population increases of around 53% between 1991 and 2010 have increased this instability (International Labour Organization, 2012: 47), whilst economic inefficiency means that public sectors are unable to provide jobs. Amidst precarious socio-economic conditions, the sectarianization of political life comes at a devastating cost, deepening schisms between and within societies. The manipulation of socio-economic factors are fundamental in the cultivation of division, as prominent business leaders nurture difference as a mechanism of ensuring support from their constituencies, whilst also benefitting from divisions financially.[14] Thus, to reduce political divisions to a theological base wilfully ignores how divisions are being manipulated to suit the needs of a wealthy few.

Build trust in political systems and recognising individual rights

Political systems serve as a key tool in efforts to facilitate peace and building trust. As John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary acknowledge, the regulation or management of conflict in divided societies is deeply problematic, but political systems can provide an answer, albeit contingent upon having the trust of the body politic (1993:4). For many, the best approach to building peace in a divided society is consociationalism, a power sharing system of government that seeks to accommodate the plurality of society by guaranteeing political representation to adversarial ethnic groups (Lijphart, 1998). Initially proposed by Arend Lijphart, it is an approach designed to facilitate resolution through accommodating elites from salient segments of society which are then encouraged to build coalitions, protected by constitutional vetoes (1977).

Central to the idea of conscociationalism is the thought that a zero-sum game will be transformed into one characterised by co-operation and compromise, ultimately translating into the softening of communal differences (Kerr, 2005; McGarry and O'Leary, 2007). A vibrant scholarly debate exists as to whether "consociational institutions offer a viable strategy to build peace, states and democracy" (Wolff, 2011: 1796) or if such an approach aggravates "the malady it is allegedly designed to treat" (Shapiro, 1996: 102). Whilst power sharing is a common feature of post conflict reconciliation processes, those who reject its value label it as inept, a process that divides rather than encourages and develops a common civic identity (Horowitz, 1985).

Two examples of consociational systems in operation across the Middle East can be seen in Lebanon and Iraq. Power sharing agreements in Lebanon have been subject of serious criticism for creating institutions operating in a dysfunctional manner (Salloukh et al, 2015), which entrench antagonistic divisions whilst also facilitating corruption and neopatrimonialism (Haddad, 2009). Lijphart himself argued that Lebanon is fundamentally discriminatory against "individuals or groups who reject the premise that society should be organized on an ethnic or communal basis" (1998: 147). Moreover, minority groups are often missed out of power sharing agreements (Nagle, 2018).

In contrast with Lebanon, Iraq's power sharing agreement became a defining feature of political life with the emergence of a new leadership elite in 2004 (Dodge, 2006; Tripp, 2004). Sectarian politics in Iraq became institutionalised through a quota system – known as

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[14] This point was made in interviews across Lebanon, Bahrain, and Iraq.

muhassasa – that provided space and representation for all of the state's ethnic-sectarian identities. Amidst political uncertainty and instability, *muhassasa* divided resources and ministries along communal lines, embedding clientelism within the system, allowing elites from all communities to amass opulent wealth. Whilst *muhassasa* was designed in the spirit of power sharing, it embedded ethno-sectarian identities within the fabric of the state with myriad political, economic and security challenges. As a consequence, sectarian narratives became increasingly prominent, supported by the emergence of paramilitaries and other armed groups also falling along ethno-sectarian lines.

In such conditions, it is hardly surprising that there is little confidence in formal institutions and a lack of support for legislatures across the region. Beyond this, there is a general lack of confidence in state institutions. In 2015 only 25% believed that the rule of law was applied universally whilst 50% of people viewed political situations and economic circumstances negatively (Doha Institute, 2014 and 2015). By 2018, 48% of Arab publics evaluate the performance of legislatures negatively, whilst in contrast, the army and security sectors were viewed favourably. Addressing such concerns is paramount if trust in political structures is to be cultivated.

Power-sharing agreements enshrine difference within the fabric of the state, serving to reinforce identities formally but also through clientelism and the provision of security amidst a lack of trust in political structures. As a consequence, it is imperative that policy makers work towards building trust in political systems along with recognising individual rights instead of communal rights as a way of circumventing the descent into ethno-sectarian violence. This move, a key part of political reform, will ensure that individuals receive protection under the rule of law instead of along communal lines. It can also go some way into restoring faith in the institutions of state.

In spite of the prominence of sect-based violence and the sectarianization of regional politics, there are reasons to be optimistic. Whilst many have been – and continue to be - critical of the consociation system of government in Lebanon, this has maintained peace in a country previously beset by civil war. In Iraq, the summer of 2018 suggested that cross-sectarian unity can be reached, albeit contingent upon favourable conditions and trust in political elites. The move from confessional to non-confessional outcomes is one that cannot and should not be hurried. Although the latter is almost certainly the desirable end goal in preventing a future outbreak of communal violence, the transition from one to the other is complex and requires a period of consolidation. Although sectarianization processes risk consuming all in their way, there remains scope for agency (Mabon, 2017). During the uprisings in Bahrain, a number of people attempted to refuse sect-based labels, claiming that they were "just Bahraini".[15] One Bahraini Shi'a cleric told me that "it is an insult to accuse me of following an Iranian agenda or being part of an Iranian vision of the region just for being from a Shi'a background".[16]

Acknowledge and address the impact of exogenous factors on local dynamics

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[15] Interview with Bahraini student, Manchester (UK), 2014.
[16] Interview with Bahraini Shi'a cleric, Geneva, 2015.

Perhaps the most dangerous aspect of the sectarianization process is the coming together of local agendas with geopolitical rivalries. Here, regional rivalries interact with local actors, mobilizing and manipulating difference for their own interests. Whilst we must not deny agency to local actors, we should not ignore the power and influence of exogenous forces, most prominently seen in the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. With both Riyadh and Tehran laying claim to Islamic legitimacy which is increasingly seen in 'zero-sum terms', the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has a prominent role in the sectarianization of the region and thus, conversely, a reduction in tensions will play a key role in the desectarianization of regional politics and conflict in Yemen, Syria and beyond (Mabon, 2013 and 2018).

Whilst social projects aimed at creating social cohesion are desirable, these can often only occur once a broader peace agreement has been reached. With that in mind, reducing tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran is essential. Although improbable at present, as Banafsheh Keynoush has articulated, this is not impossible, seen in the period after the Iran-Iraq War before the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Whilst many in Saudi Arabia – and beyond – have been critical of Iranian actions across the region, Javad Zarif expressed the possibility of regional co-operation:

> The co-operative relationships forged in this fight can usher in a new era. We need new approaches and new terminology to make sense of a world which is transitioning to a post-western global order. Here are two concepts to shape the emerging paradigm in west Asia: the idea of a strong region, and security networking, whereby small and large countries — even those with historical rivalries — contribute to stability (2018).

Trust building between the two long-standing rivals is essential but as Keynoush rightly points out, there are many similarities between the two, which suggests that there is the possibility of a more positive relationship between the two states (Keynoush, 2016).

Conclusion

History has shown that peace building is a long, arduous and difficult process, often beset by spoilers and a hostage to fortune. There is no quick fix to the problem of sectarianization in the contemporary Middle East; to assume otherwise is dangerous. Although rejecting the "ancient hatreds" thesis, the desectarianization of political life may take generations. Indeed, in Lebanon, peace building processes have required – and continue to require – time to facilitate lasting change. Whilst the civil war is long over, the process of building a lasting peace is far more complex, manifesting in socio-economic inequality and a seemingly stagnant political system. There is no one size fits all approach to peace building. Whilst a framework for desectarianizing the Middle East may appear to do this, the contingency of different spaces requires a nuanced approach that appreciates the complexities of local problems and is able to adapt accordingly.

it is clear that sectarianization efforts are fabricated as an existential threat, increasingly built into the fabric of political organisation across the Middle East as a tool of repression and ultimately survival. Yet the complexity of sectarianization processes that has embedded local struggles within broader geopolitical rivalries challenges the utility of traditional power sharing and peace building approaches. Whilst certainly difficult, the stakes are high and the

potential benefits of such an approach are easy to see. Working towards a decrease in geopolitical tensions, particularly within the context of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Once again, this is not a rivalry based on intractable hatred of the other, but contingent upon political context. As the period between the Gulf War and the 2003 invasion of Iraq shows, there is scope for building peace between the two states. Rejecting myths at a local level requires working with grassroots organisations to transform perceptions of the other.

Although relations between Riyadh and Tehran appear obdurate, consideration of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran shows periods of apparent rapprochement which challenges the argument that the two are embroiled in an intractable conflict. As Keynoush argues, there is scope for dialogue and reform (2016), yet this will require resolving tensions at both a regional and domestic level, moving beyond sectarian identities and engaging with people through respecting the rule of law.

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