Four Questions about De-Sectarianization

On 22nd October 2019, protesters took to the streets of Lebanon calling for the end of sectarian politics and proclaiming the "end of the civil war". The same day, the Ta'if Accords - viewed by many as ending Lebanon's civil war - celebrated their 30th anniversary. While seen as a key step in peace building across Lebanon, the Accords are also accused of embedding the sectarian ordering of life onto Lebanese politics. Such calls hinted at the existential transformation of political, social, economic and cultural life across Lebanon away from the sectarian identities that had dominated all aspects of life. Almost eight years earlier, on 14th February 2011, Bahrainis took to the streets of Manama as a local manifestation of the Arab Uprisings in frustration at political inertia and socio-economic challenges affecting their lives. Congregating in Pearl Roundabout, the protesters chanted "not Sunni, not Shi'a, just Bahraini". This fleeting expression of unity quickly targeted by the security forces as the Al Khalifa sought to frame the protests through a sectarian lens, as a consequence of unrest amongst Shi'a populations doing the nefarious bidding of Iran, while similar expressions of unity was later seen in Iraq – albeit with an explicitly anti-Iranian agenda – and also crushed with violence.

In the years that followed, politicised differences between Sunni and Shi'a have played a prominent – yet not exclusive - role in the ordering of life across the Middle East. This difference has played out not only within the context of geopolitical struggles such as the rivalry between Saudi Arabia against Iran, but also has shaped the domestic affairs of divided societies across the region within the regulation of political, social and economic life. Here, the cultivation of sectarian difference has served as a means of regimes operating to ensure their survival, with religious identities mapping onto socio-economic contexts, creating a complex web of forces regulating life.

Across the Middle East, similar patterns of sectarian framing took place, with religion taking on increasingly important roles as actors sought to regulate life. The manipulation of sectarian difference has routinely been used by regimes seeking to ensure their survival in the face of widespread contestation, in what Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel termed *sectarianization* (2017). The thesis presented by Hashemi and Postel is instrumentalist, arguing that whilst sectarian identities have a long and complex history and resonate across society, there is nothing fundamentally violent about this difference. Instead, animosity between Sunni and Shi'a is constructed amidst efforts to ensure the survival of authoritarian rule. A similar point is made by Ussama Makdisi who argues that sectarianism is "a process – not an object, not an event, and certainly not a primordial trait" (2008: 559-560). Of course, these processes are situated within broader structural processes of marginalisation in what a SEPAD report previously understood as the *longue duree* of sectarianism (2019).

If one accepts the premise of the sectarianization thesis then there is scope for an antithesis, concerning the reworking of this process, of *de-sectarianization,* a concept that shares characteristics with the actions of protesters across Lebanon and Iraq. A fundamental theme of *de-sectarianization* is the premise that *if sectarian difference is constructed in an effort to ensure regime survival then is can be de-constructed,* leading to a *re-imagining of political life* and the *role of religion* in it. While a great deal of work has been produced on sectarianism and its discontents, the topic of de-sectarianization and the ways in which sect based identities have been contested has been largely overlooked until now. As protesters take to the streets in Lebanon and Iraq, a series of opinion pieces has sought to understand what has taken place, privileging particular issues in the process, be it sectarianism, corruption, power

sharing, class, or other factors. In reality, however, the protests have brought these complex forces together in the re-imagining of political life and, with it, the contestation of sectarian identities and their resonance in contemporary life. Reflecting on this, a number of questions emerge:

1. How do we understand de-sectarianization?
2. Where does de-sectarianization occur and how?
3. Who is involved in de-sectarianization and why?
4. What are the aims of de-sectarianization?

In pursuit of a more subtle awareness of the ways in which sectarian difference can be contested, I structure the following article around these 4 questions which, in turn, provoke others. This article serves as an introduction to debates around de-sectarianization and the re-imagining of political life – along with the special issue – while demonstrating the complexity of such forces when they manifest within – and across – political projects.

1. How do we understand de-sectarianization?

In recent years, a great deal of academic work has been undertaken reflecting on sectarianism and the dominance of sect-based identities across the Middle East. In spite of this, much remains up for grabs when reflecting on the topic, perhaps best reflected in Toby Matthiesen's remarks that sectarianism is "imbued with considerable ambiguity" (2015, 14). A number of scholars view sectarianism as an "essentially contested concept" (Haddad, 2016; Wehrey, 2017; Phillips, 2015; Matthiesen et al, 2017; Valbjorn), while Laurence Potter suggests that it is "notoriously difficult" to define (2013: 2). While a great deal of academic debate focuses upon the ways in which sect-based identities are mobilized – spanning *primordialism, instrumentalism, constructivism* or the myriad *third ways*, (Valbjorn, 2018) other debates circle around the scope of inquiry, raising questions about what is involved in the *study* of sectarianism.

Unsurprisingly, similar ambiguities plague the nascent study of de-sectarianization. Aside from similar questions of focus that concern sectarianism, across a number of different instances, the contestation of sectarian identities has been described as "post-sectarianism", "anti-sectarianism", "trans-sectarianism" and while there are similar characteristics involved in these concepts, there are also important analytical differences concerning group membership.

Trans-sectarianism is taken as cross communal mobilisation along rights or issue-based lines. It may occur within the sectarian system and may not necessarily involve calls for radical reform, but rather the engagement of actors within the context of the current system. It may also, however, occur beyond the political system, with sectarian groups operating together to contest the role of sects within political life. A more vociferous re-imagining of the role of sects within contemporary life is articulated by anti-sectarianism, the explicit rejection of sectarian politics amidst moving towards a culture of tolerance, effectively seeking to erode communal difference found across daily life. It is set in direct opposition to the dominance of sectarian identities in political life and the socio-economic resonance that such identities often possess.

Post-sectarianism implies a temporal move beyond the current system of organising political life, one that is dominated by sect-based identities. Suggestions that politics takes on more interest-based agendas hints at such a move but does little to articulate the composition of organisations operating in a post-sectarian manner. Individual groups may be described as post-sectarian, while the same term can be applied to political projects more broadly. Yet

while hinting at something important, there is a great deal more that is left unsaid, concerning the role of sect-based identities within political, social, economic and cultural life.

While these movements differ in a range of ways, each hint at the re-imagining of the role of sectarian identities within contemporary life, which we refer to as de-sectarianization. Trans-sectarianism, anti-sectarian and post-sectarianism all call on individuals and groups to perform their identities within the context of political projects in different ways, driven by a number of different forces and without a shared vision of the future. Whilst there are clear distinctions at play here, I use de-sectarianization as an umbrella term to refer to the contestation of sectarian identities and the re-imagining of the role of sects in political life.

These de-sectarianizing processes may be comprised of trans-sectarian movements, drawing from a range of different constituencies, or may be understood as anti-sectarian in their rejection of the sectarian organisation of contemporary life. Following this logic, anti-sectarianism, trans-sectarianism and post-sectarianism are all examples of de-sectarianization, albeit organised in different ways. This re-imagining takes place through both a bottom up, people-centred, approach to the role of sect-based identities, but also in a top down process, as regimes seek to re-organise the position of sectarian identities within political projects. This top down process is predominantly driven by regimes, yet it also occurs through through elite manipulation, in what is commonly referred to as the behaviour of "sectarian entrepreneurs". These figures engage in a process of rewriting the "history of the present", albeit shaped by the rhythms, contingencies and context of everyday life (Abdo, 2017: 10). While acts of resistance and protest across the Middle East can be viewed as a rejection of the salience of religious identities in political projects, there is more at play. Indeed, reflecting on recent protests across Iraq and Lebanon, it quickly becomes apparent that while there is widespread frustration at the sectarian ordering of political life, social and economic factors are equally important.

Closer examination of events across the region sheds light on some of these processes. In the summer of 2018 protesters took to the streets of Basra expressing their frustration at the lack of public goods and services and protesting against high unemployment. These frustrations quickly spread to Baghdad, resonating across the Shi'a community, in spite of their dominance in southern governorates and in Baghdad broadly. Central to the protests were frustrations at government inability to address socio-economic challenges including the economy, public services, health care, water and electricity, along with the organisation of politics more broadly.

The Muhassassa quota system of political organisation which enshrined ethno-sectarian elites in positions of power had long been seen as a vehicle through which external powers could influence Iraqi politics, whilst also operating as a means for communal mobilization with serious implications for political life across the state. Indeed, this political structure embedded identity politics at the heart of the Iraqi state, creating a structure that allowed for the cultivation and organisation of politics along communal lines, serving as a means through which elites could maintain their position through neopatrimonialism, nepotism, and flagrant corruption.

Unsurprisingly, when coupled with broader socio-economic frustrations, this seemingly endemic corruption resulted in widespread anger at political elites. Such sentiments had been previously expressed earlier in the year during the country's elections, hinting at the transformation of Iraqi politics from being driven by identity politics to issues. Whilst initially Shi'a, the protesters gained cross-communal support as Sunni and Kurdish groups expressed

support for the protesters, demonstrating widespread frustration at socio-economic conditions across the state and the seemingly endemic corruption that pervaded Iraqi politics. While targeted at political elites – which in Iraq and Lebanon are mapped onto confessional politics – the cross-communal expression of frustrations articulated without recourse to sectarian language offers a good example of the process of re-imagining political life.

Three years earlier, in the summer of 2015, protesters from a range of Lebanon's 'sectarian communities' gathered in Beirut's Martyr's Square protesting against a political class that was seen to be corrupt, had failed to address serious economic issues, and routinely failed to provide basic needs including water, electricity, and trash collection. In what became known as the YouStink protests, Sunni and Shi'a chanted together, expressing frustration at political elites from all major parties including Hizballah, the Future Movement and Amal (Geha, 2019). Beyond this grassroots movement, a number of civil society movements sought to articulate an alternative to the confessional system ruling Lebanon, such as *Beirut Madinati* and *Sabaa*, whilst other groups sought dramatic reform from outside the system, leading to questions about the spaces in which de-sectarianization occurs.

Whilst the power sharing agreement is largely credited with ending Lebanon's civil war, it enshrined communal difference in political life, maintaining a clientelist network of patronage that entrenched difference across socio-economic aspects of society (Leenders). As a consequence, key governance roles were delegated to private sector companies through patronage networks, leaving them vulnerable to political deadlock as rival blocs seek to curtail the influence of networks across the state. By 2015, this deadlock and political inertia affected refuse collection, resulting in 20,000 tons of uncollected rubbish amassing on the streets of Beirut as a consequence of a contract not being extended to a company affiliated with the Future Movement. The protests that followed coalesced around the issue of refuse collection but were also an opportunity to express collective frustration with the sectarian nature of the political system.

Events across Iraq and Lebanon demonstrate that these events are fundamentally political, concerned with the ordering of life. With this in mind, while religious identities – and others – are important, they must be contextualized within spatial factors, socio-economic forces, political environments, and geopolitical currents which all facilitate more nuanced understanding and conceptualization of processes of de-sectarianization. Beyond this, other types of approaches have the capacity to shed light on a range of other factors, including the Political Science (Hashemi and Postel, 2017), Political Theory (Mabon, 2019; Dodge), Historical (Makdisi, 2019; AlShehabi, 2019), data-driven (Gengler), ethnographic (Nucho, Fibiger) or perhaps even more discursive approaches (Haddad, Mabon, Valbjorn). Reflecting on what is involved in this process also raises important questions about how we study de-sectarianization or make claims to knowledge about such issues.

2. Where does de-sectarianization occur and how?

In a lively debate over the nature of "the urban" with Peter Saunders, the Urban Geographer David Harvey argued for the "necessary spatialization of politics" (1985: 760). This point is a fundamental feature of contemporary political life, going beyond urban politics to include lived space and, for our line of inquiry, de-sectarianization. The spatialization of de-sectarianization allows for a fluid, unbounded analysis which, although shaped by local context, allows for different claims about knowledge and the impact of faith, including about the lived experience, but also the relationships that underpin the rhythms, chaos and disorder of everyday life (Merrifield, 2012). The following section does not offer a traditional mapping

of instances of de-sectarianization – which it leaves to others in this special issue – but reflects on *spaces* of protest and resistance. Such an approach allows for interrogation of the interaction of parabolic forces, bringing together politics, economics, social factors, culture, identities, geopolitics, religion, creating myriad possibilities and contingencies for protest amongst people which takes place in a range of forms.

Space is not neutral, but shaped through power relations which surround, enter and regulate the area at play. This is quickly seen in the power sharing agreements which regulate life in Lebanon and Iraq. The creation of consociational power sharing agreements designed to provide political space to actors has routinely been deployed as a way of addressing violent conflict through the provision of political space. Whilst this reproduction of communal identities has long been criticized by scholars for preventing the transcendence of these identities – colloquially described as "putting up fences" – the cultivation of such systems is inherently conservative: designed to replicate and reproduce sectarian identities, only permitting engagement through the cultivation of a compliant communal identity (Nagle, 2018).

The concept of space is bound up in questions about sovereign power and the regulation of life, in what Henri Lefebvre (1991: 26) refers to as a "social project… a means of production…a means of control, and hence of domination, of power". As Doreen Massey (2005) argues, space should be viewed a site of heterogeneity, constantly in flux and is shaped through the interaction of the global with the intimately tiny, composed of a collection of different places. Whilst this may appear peripheral to a discussion of de-sectarianization, such reflections are important in understanding the structural forces that shape local politics as geopolitical forces exert pressure on the intimately tiny dimensions of local politics. This plays out across networks with their own patrons, imbued with power dynamics and constrained by structural forces. To facilitate better awareness of these interactions, we should reflect on the spaces in which such re-imagining occurs. A spatial approach, drawing on the work of Massey, Lefebvre or others, facilitates such analysis, bringing together geopolitical forces with the intimately tiny aspects of local politics. This approach demonstrates that whilst space is fundamentally geographical, it is also juridico-political and concerned with the ordering of life. Indeed, as political, social and economic systems operate and unfold across space, they (re)shape space and with the presence of power-sharing systems of governance that reinforce sectarian identities, the re-imagining of political life includes reflecting on the dominance /of sectarian identities in political projects. Across the following special issue, we explore how these processes play out across Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon and regional politics.

A range of forces interact within and across space that have serious repercussions for the ordering of life. Fundamental to this ordering is what Mark Wigley (1993) refers to as the "subterranean rhythms" which organize spaces, underpinned by violence which serves as the structure of space. The interaction of these rhythms with prominent tensions within political life – public and private, rich and poor, urban and rural, rulers and ruled – helps condition the capacity for political activity. In these interactions, religion has traditionally played a dominant role given its position in the fabric of political projects. Yet the re-imagining of the role of religion takes place in these spaces which are also sites of heterogeneity, both metaphysically and physically, and conditioned by a range of other forces.

Protesters have often sought to occupy prominent spaces across urban landscapes which can provide both visibility and legitimacy for particular causes. Typically, this is within the context of an urban landscape replete with demonstrations of regime vitality and power, which have long conditioned the capacity of actors to operate. As a consequence, the re-imagining of

public space has become a key tool of processes of de-sectarianization. As Byron Miller and Walter Nicholls suggest, laying claim to urban spaces allows protesters "to challenge the dominant symbolic order, mobilize and concentrate their own symbolic, social and material power, and make the case for alternative possible worlds" (2013). In these spaces, micro responses to macro processes can result in the production of new spatial imaginaries, shaped by the issues that shape their worlds. (Agnew, 1987: 28). More questions quickly emerge when reflecting on how protest movements operate across state borders, evoking memories of Lefebvre's reframing of the city as "urban society", one which rejects the idea of a "bounded city" and focuses on structural forces which shape the social relations within and across cities (1970/2003), perhaps best seen in the transformation of public spaces such as Tahrir Square in Egypt (2011) and Iraq (2019), or Pearl Roundabout in Bahrain during the Arab Uprisings.

Yet the transformation of space is often a violent process, a disjunctive set of processes that alter the rhythms of life and the organizational structures, disrupting the networks and traditions that had previously operated within and across space. Culture, tradition and religion serve as regulatory forces within space, providing both the capacity for action and the means through which elites seek to restrict action. Imagery offers a prominent example of the way in which power and aspiration operate across space, through security infrastructure or manipulating the urban landscape as a canvas. Controlling public space becomes a key aspect of both de-sectarianization and power more broadly, facilitated by the interplay between subaltern rhythms and the socio-political manifestations of communal organization. Yet the act of protesting across urban spaces is not an end in itself, but rather part of a broader process of re-imagining the political order. As a consequence, this also requires more existential reflection on contemporary life. Such reflections facilitate new areas of de-sectarianization, through political projects, in communal organisation, and the socio-economic ordering of life more broadly.

3. Who is involved in de-sectarianization and why?

The process of de-sectarianization is fundamentally concerned with the re-imagining of the role of religion in political life. This process can occur in myriad ways, contingent upon the context within which the re-imagining takes place, with contrasting repercussions for political projects. Regardless of the constituency of such movements, these processes are driven by people. Yet the contestation or rejection of sectarianization can be undertaken in both 'top down' and 'bottom up' ways, demonstrating both demographic and spatial factors. Reflecting on actors involved in processes of de-sectarianization requires consideration of the situation and performance of identities within political projects and the capacity of these actors to achieve their ends.

For social movement theorists, in particular Sydney Tarrow, four basic elements structure the political opportunity of social movements: relative openness – or closure – of a political system; stability of elite alignments; the availability of elite allies within the system; and the level of repression (1998: 77). Exploring these basic elements sheds light on the capacity for de-sectarianization, while also hinting at the type of actions that may follow. When groups are able to mobilize sufficiently around particular themes, targets tend to be the policies and practices which are key to their restrictions (Miller and Nicholls, 2013: 458). Across societies where sectarian identities are rife, this tends to involve reflecting on and engaging with the structures that regulate all aspects of life.

While there may be widespread dissatisfaction with socio-economic and political contexts, these grievances do not automatically translate into political action. Instead, there is a

complex set of processes through which such movements occur, contingent upon time and space. The spatial aspects of de-sectarianziation allow for particular actors to become involved, from the bottom up social movements, to the elite manipulation of structural forces. Yet what events across Iraq and Lebanon have shown, much like their predecessors in the formative stages of the Arab Uprisings, is that protest movements are complex entities, comprised of relationships that cut across cleavages within political projects. Here, as Diani (2000: 391) suggests, protesters create "intersecting" networks that forge new imaginaries that transcend existing schisms which, in the case of divided societies, is of paramount importance.

In the formative instances of protests, loose connections facilitate the coming together of individuals who share particular grievances while also buying into shared discourses and framing (Diani and Bison, 2004). The social capital of the protesters will determine the extent to which their actions will resonate across space, allowing for the emergence of coordinated activity. Here, the ability to appeal to social collectives – even if the goal is broader – can establish networks of organisations and individuals operating in pursuit of a particular goal, albeit beyond the traditional route of political expression. What follows may be the cultivation of stronger bonds that unite protesters, yet institutions in which actions occur can also serve to reinforce power relations, given their own sets of distinct rules which can serve to reinforce social hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1985). As Walter Nicholls argues, within these discussions, geography and mobility play a prominent role in shaping the performance of actors. Spatial aspects create context specific characteristics, alongside the cultivation of shared ideas, norms and emotions which pass across movements through particular "contact points". This, in turn, may facilitate the cultivation of networks that bring together different groups, all of whom are shaped by their own spatial contexts (Nicholls, 2009: 79).

The most prominent examples of de-sectarianization have been undertaken by actors engaged in mass mobilization in an expression of anger and frustration at political, social, or economic factors. These grievances have seen large groups taking to the streets across the Middle East, articulating frustration at a range of conditions. In many cases, the decision to protest is a key step in the process of de-sectarianization, revealing the increasing prominence and articulation of issues over identities. In a departure from literature on social movements, de-sectarianization can also occur as a top down process, where those in positions of power seek to manipulate structural forces in an attempt to maintain their position of influence. Across the Middle East this has played out in a range of different forms, contingent upon the ways in which the political, social and economic forces have *unfolded* across political projects. Political reform in this context can be designed to recondition the ways in which particular identities situate themselves within state projects. This has played out in a range of different ways, from gerrymandering electoral districts such as that seen in Bahrain and Lebanon, allowing elites to retain power and excluding others from political life, to strategies bearing the hallmarks of authoritarian rule designed to prohibit the performance of particular identities within political life.

Paul Routledge, reflecting on similar events in India, advocated a context-based analysis of protest, where the complexities and contingencies of space and place facilitate particular "terrains of resistance" (Routledge, 1993). One immediate consequence of this is the creation of "entanglements of power" which move beyond the domination/resistance binary that has traditionally facilitated accounts of power. Central to this is the cultivation of networks where information, ideas and practices are shared, often contributing to common discourses. Here, the work of James C. Scott (1987) and Asef Bayat ()is useful in demonstrating that resistance plays out in a range of different, highly subtle forms, facilitating the negotiation and manoeuvring between contending forces. Once again, this is a complex set of processes,

contingent upon time and place and while the goals of protesters in different states may be the same – for example, desiring an end of the sectarian organisation of political life – the ways in which this plays out differs. Processes thus reflect not only the structural conditions that regulate space, but also the agency of particular groups and their members.

These communal identities are siloed in a range of ways, from the organisation of political life to the distribution of welfare and education (Cammett, 2014). In reasserting communal identities through the organisation and regulation of life, engagement with the day to day affairs of the other is seen as a negative force. The privacy of communal entities further prohibits dialogue and engagement across these segments of society.

Dialogue between members of different communities is therefore restricted to rights based or issue-based agendas, yet these operate within the contours of a political system designed to prevent such inter-communal collaboration. Moreover, this is reinforced by the informal – or invisible – structures that order life (Mabon, 2019). This plays out within the formal power-sharing mechanisms but also the elite bargaining that characterises consociational systems, reinforces communal identities, empowering elites in the process (Nucho, 2016; Cammet, 2014).

4. What are the aims of de-sectarianization?

The longevity of protests across Lebanon and Iraq – continuing to surprise many – demonstrates the resonance and salience of the anger shared by the protesters. Capturing the essence of this has proved difficult, given the complexity of the protest movements. One analyst, Walid El Houri, framed it as a "revolution against icons" where the "sanctity of the untouchable political leader has been broken" (2019). Part of the complexity stems from the de-centralised nature of the movement, perhaps better understood as a collective of movements coalescing in their anger at the status quo. Yet, perhaps more important, is the creation of a collective narrative of hope, allowing the Lebanese identity to take on a positive essence through moving away from sectarianism or its definition viz a viz Palestinians or Syrians. While de-sectarianization is predominantly focussed upon agency and how actors re-imagine their positions in contemporary life, this is conditioned by an array of structural forces that regulate and organise political life. De-sectarianization efforts require groups to operate within and across structural orderings which are not necessarily restricted to state borders (Mabon, 2019), yet there are very clear domestic demands which may differ, depending upon the context.

The structural organisation of society – in many cases privileging sects and the political economy of sectarianism that follows – has long made it difficult to re-imagine the role of religious identities within political projects, given the ways in which communal identities have played out across other aspects of life. In divided societies, particularly those with a recent history of conflict, these challenges are exacerbated, as ideas of victimhood, memory, and the legacy of conflict all feed into – and shape – the nature of interactions (Nagle, 2019). To understand the goals of de-sectarianization, it is imperative to listen to those engaged in the process, whilst also reflecting on the ways in which these goals interact with political structures.

As John Nagle has explored across a rich body of work, protest movements in societies divided along communal lines seek to facilitate change in different ways, using contrasting strategies contingent upon the context in which the movement operates. From this, two initial types of movement can be viewed as *transformationist* and *pluralist*. The former seeks to "completely

transform identities by undermining what they view as a sectarian form of politics that exacerbates ethnic cleavages", the latter seeks to encourage a broader range of identities and interests (Nagle, 2017: 186).

Moreover, there are a number of different types of engagement with political systems. These include *hegemonic* – the ways in which dominant groups reproduce their way of seeing the world – and results in the reproduction of sectarian politics by groups. The second is *constructive engagement*, which suggests that groups seek to operate within the political system in pursuit of reform or policy change. The third is *active resistance*, wherein protest is explicitly seeking to overthrow the communal organisation of political life (Nagle, 2018). While the performance of protest occurs within and across the fabric of political projects, acts of protest can also have unintended consequences through shaking the foundations of the state, creating opportunities and possibilities for further action.

Political structures do not only curtail agency but also serve to reinforce identities. The capacity of particular groups to operate within political contexts conditions their ability to perform their identities and the methodologies that they are able to deploy. For example, as other contributors to the volume attest, the political structures that shape life are increasingly called into question through this re-imagining of the role of religion – and other identities – across political projects which had increasingly become a *fig leaf* that was camouflaging other divisions that spanned economic, social and ideological battles.

While leaders of the main groups across Lebanon have all urged for calm and gradual reform, this has taken place within the context of efforts to maintain the status quo. Even Hizballah, whose legitimacy has long been based on narratives of resistance, expressed a desire to see the current system be maintained. Reflecting on the protests, the Party of God's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, stressed that the organization does not accept 'the fall of the presidency nor do we accept the government's resignation" (cited in Gadzo, 2019). Whilst viewed by some as a pragmatic approach, Nasrallah's words reveal a great deal about the extent to which Hizballah is embedded within the communal system across Lebanon.

While initially triggered by efforts to impose a $0.20 tax on VOIP calls, demands quickly escalated to include an overhaul of the political system and the corrupt economy that the sectarian system supports. Reflecting the widespread anger at the elites, the popular chant "all of them means all of them" rang out across Lebanon amid calls for dramatic political and economic reform. In both Lebanon and Iraq, this requires the untangling of the role of religion from life, given the prominent role sects play in the ordering of life.

Similar events have occurred in Iraq, where the muhassasa system has created conditions of endemic corruption and nepotism at the expense of most Iraqis. While Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mahdi came to power with promises to tackle corruption and economic frustrations, his inability to do this, reflects both the extent to which he is beholden to those political elites who brought about his rise to power, and the strength of the muhassasa system and the political-economic power that it provides to elites. Ultimately, the aims of de-sectarianization are contingent upon the scope for re-imagination which, itself, is conditioned by time and space. As a consequence, the aspirations of de-sectarianization differ in different political projects, much like the spaces, actors and processes.

Conclusions

As we have seen, the process of re-imagining political projects and the role of religious identities within these collectives is a complex process, bringing together myriad often competing agendas and operating at the intersection of academic disciplines, meaning that a multi-disciplinary approach to understanding de-sectarianization is required which gives appropriate weight to the multifarious agendas at play. In both Lebanon and Iraq, widespread frustration at the corruption of political elites and the ways in which sectarian quotas have impacted on the ordering of life has pushed protesters to the streets amid calls that "all of them means all of them". Protests have coalesced around common frustrations which circumvent the communal identities which have allowed elites from each sectarian community to gain vast wealth and power. In calling for existential transformation away from communal identities – a process of *de-sectarianization* – protesters have sought to re-imagine the role of religion in political structures which, given the way in which sectarian identities operate across Iraq and Lebanon, also has serious implications for the economies of each state.

Closer examination of existing examples of the contestation of sectarian identities and structures across Iraq and Lebanon suggest that desectarianization is fundamentally a political process that seeks both the reimagining of the role of identities within political life and a reflection on the ways in which sovereign power regulates life. In order to facilitate desectarianization, better awareness is needed of the structures that regulate life and ultimately the conditions that may (not) permit the contestation of sectarian identities. From this, it is possible to offer a deeper understanding of the areas in which desectarianization occurs which differs depending on the complexities of local context.

As time passes, the complexity of these issues will increase. Generational dimensions will certainly add to this, as second and third generations bring their own political, social, and economic contexts into dialogue with such factors, all whilst (potentially) shaped by geopolitical forces. As sectarian difference becomes embedded within the fabric of a state, it becomes increasing difficult to untangle the complex web of power relations. When coupled with the legacy of violence and the apparent lifting of sectarian taboos, there appears to be scope for de-sectarianization, drawing on trans, post and anti movements, yet to proclaim the death knell of sectarianism is certainly premature.

As Bassel Salloukh observes – in perhaps an optimistic reading of recent events – what we are witnessing "is the birth of a new "imagined community" […] one that travels across regions, classes, genders, and sects. That is the greatest and undeniable achievement of this movement, one that no matter the short-term outcome, can never be reversed" (2019). Moreover, as Salloukh suggests, the protests have allowed for the re-imagining of what it means to be Lebanese, moving beyond the imposition of sectarian identities and all that follows. Although speaking about Lebanon, Salloukh's remarks apply to Iraq, where rulers and ruled clash on the streets, with the very future of the state at stake. Both Lebanon and Iraq are engaged in a process of re-imagining the nature of political life reflecting, in particular, on the role of communal identities, yet the ways in which this plays out is contingent upon the peculiarities of time and space.

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