

## COVID-19, PROTESTS, AND SECTARIANISM: HOW GLOBAL CRISES AFFECT THE MENA REGION

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الشعب يريد إسقاط النظام

*'The people want to bring down the regime'*

- The Arab Uprisings 2011

“كلن يعني كلن”

*'All of them means all of them'*

- Lebanon 2019

## **Introduction**

In the spring of 2011, the world watched as throughout the Middle East and North Africa protests and uprisings electrified the region. Bringing attention to the voices of dissent that were amplified then and have carried on crying out injustice, till this day. The Arab Uprisings irrevocably transformed the social and political climate of the region. Yet, with so much has changed, the original causes for protest — inequality, division, corruption — have stayed constant almost a decade later. In the face of this, the protesting landscape has adapted in both methods and goals. This report has dual aims: firstly, to summarise the literature on the political background and characteristics of protesting in the Middle East/North Africa (MENA) region and secondly, to analyse the interviews conducted in Iraq and Lebanon, provided by Sectarianism, Proxies and De-sectarianisation (SEPAD), to analyse trends based on these responses to form our case studies of Iraq and Lebanon. The case studies presented then will be used to reflect on how sectarianism has advanced in the MENA region due to the global crisis of COVID-19, and how protesting has changed to reflect this.

To address our aims, the method used will be to review and summarise the literature previously written on the topic to then compare and contrast this with the trends found in the primary data the research has produced. This report draws on the former literature produced in order to do as follows; the first section of the report is to summarise the characteristics of MENA region protesting, which will then be revisited through our case studies to demonstrate continuities and departures of these characteristics during and post COVID-19. The thrust of this work, however, is to posit a new hypothesis, this being that there is a significant gap in the research in terms of a global crisis, such as COVID-19, holding a specific position in its potential to exacerbate sectarian divides within the MENA region. Most particularly, a global crisis can be used by the elites within a divided society, to then further their own sectarian-aligned interests. The arguments address the lack of formal representation of the people by the government and the ability to have the right to political participation in any real sense. These secular, state policy failings affect all citizens and have become the underpinning of civil discontent, which has overtaken the conflicts formed solely from ethno-religious divisions.

This report will begin by introducing the methodology used when conducting, gathering, analysing the data and writing this report. This details the process of beginning by creating a temporary hypothesis and background from a literature review, through to utilising the expansive dataset provided by the interviews. This allowed the creation of statistics and data trends to analyse and correct our previous conclusions, which directed the final arguments and conclusions of this work. Focusing on the background of the MENA region protests, beginning with the Arab Uprisings protests and tracking a decade's worth of protests, in order to establish trends to create a comparative norm. Following this, the literature review gives a brief overview of the most seminal pieces that influenced the direction of the report and informed the hypothesis held going into the data analysis. The depth of the report comes in the form of the exploration of the case studies of Lebanon and then Iraq, examining the unique backgrounds, the impact of COVID-19, and the specific analysis derived from the interview data. Whilst their unique details and situations are explored, the report draws on similarities that allow for comparison between the two nations, particularly on lack of government support. It then rounds off with an analysis of the post COVID-19 landscape and the impact of the pandemic on the populations, in a way that aims to give true representation to the people by being backed by the statistics offered by the datasets.

Definitions and concepts that will be used across this report are as follows: Sectarianism; communal societal differences, generally linked to faith, culture, language, ethnicity, or ideology, with deep entrenched attachments that can lead to social divides. It is implicitly theological and interlinked with one's identity and worldview. De-sectarianism; Any and all work to overcome the communal sectarian differences in a society/state/organisation, a reimagining of societal structures and identities and considering the capacity agents (i.e. citizens) must overcome differences. Protests; Mass physical or non-physical attempts and actions by a section of society to enact short-term and long-term changes to a pre-existing status quo. The objective is legitimacy within a cause through accrediting or licencing certain types of behaviour. Divided societies; A society formulated around sectarian identities in comparison to a unifying national one. These sectarian identities can vary from ethnic divides to religious divides. Global Crisis; An event with the potential to cause significant social changes that hold consequences on both a large scale and spanning a long duration.

With regards to sectarianism, we will follow the conceptual framework formed by a consensus in prior literature, specifically from Adham Saouli, (2019) who views sectarianism as its 'potential political function'. Sectarian communities can be both 'contexts of' and 'vehicles to' the desires and movements in the political order, whether it is to revise or preserve the existing one. State actors, to generally a greater extent than social ones, can enable or constrain the continuation of sectarianism in society.

The aim of this report is to demonstrate how, with the catalyst being the COVID-19 crisis, the sectarian divides in Iraq and Lebanon have shifted from what has been previously presented in contemporary literature. This report finds that, combined with the previous circumstances of each state, COVID-19 has pushed the societal divides to be more in terms of wealth and access to government support, compared to the previously believed religious tensions. The population's focus has shifted towards more 'secular' problems, such as the economy, unemployment, and widespread government dissatisfaction. This stands in contrast to the traditional view put forward by the bulk of the literature, but our data leads/highlights instead that there are widespread issues that span across sects and the majority of the public, creating a unifying sentiment. This unified sentiment is one of anger and resignation that has appeared to redirect itself towards their government's malmanagement rather than fellow citizens. Our report also serves as a reminder that the sentiments shown through policy action, in our case studies being sectarian-aligned self-interest, cannot be assumed to be representative of common social sentiment. Thus, this report argues that the COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally shifted the contemporary problems, and forms of protesting, that the populations of Iraq and Lebanon tackle, replacing the formerly heavy sectarian divides with the populations of the nations feeling almost unilaterally unrepresented and abandoned by their states.

## **Methodology**

Our research first began by analyzing the pre-existing literature on protests and divided societies in the MENA region. There is at present, a wealth of literature on these two subjects about the MENA region, more so after the Arab Uprisings of the 2010s. While there are several reports on the effects of COVID-19 in the region on health, political and economic fronts, there is a significant lack of information on the intersections of COVID-19,

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sectarianism, and COVID-19 and the evolution of protests. We surmise that this is because COVID-19 is a relatively new global phenomenon, and that the existing literature has yet to catch up.

The literature analysis portion of this research focused on a wide range of fields, namely politics, religion, and culture, to gain a foundation of understanding the subjects referred to in this report, MENA region, sectarianism, and protests. Significant time has been spent to create an agreed consensus on literature and background knowledge to correctly interpret the data. It was highly significant for our analysis to be accurate by being informed by any specific cultural context that might need to be understood and held with sensitivity. It was pertinent that we recognised and actively worked against the shadow of Western cultural biases influencing perception, through a thorough consideration of nuanced and balanced literature. We were then able to pinpoint potential significant factors in the data, concluding religious and political alliances, state satisfaction, trust and presence, and sources of tensions, could be key foci in the literature on protests in the MENA region.

The following phase of the research was on the analysis of the data provided by the interviews as conducted by Sectarianism, Proxies & De-sectarianism (SEPAD) in Iraq and Lebanon. SEPAD has prepared several questions related to the aforementioned foci and interviewed several participants from these two countries. The questions/questionnaire/survey also contained demographic questions; however, demographic-focused trends were not majorly included in the report as it became clear that many of the trends were not dependent on the person. Many of these trends seemed to apply to a range of people across society, implying that many of the issues noted reflect widescale problems rather than sectarian divides. These questions are useful for gauging the popular sentiments and dissatisfaction of the Iraqi and Lebanese people; both of which have experienced the turmoil of the Arab Uprisings, the political upheavals of the post-uprisings era, economic crises, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Throughout this study, the desire was to make the true feelings of the citizens of these countries accurately reflected. There are multiple barriers when pursuing an accurate gauge of the population's sentiment, examples being, people's fear of speaking out, a lack of

recent studies, and a lack of consensus. To protect the privacy and safety of the interviewees, the questionnaire provided by SEPAD was conducted under a 'trojan horse' premise of being a solely focused COVID-19 survey. Both Lebanon and Iraq provided unique challenges in the research stages, Lebanon's government's official statements are not necessarily representative, and backlash from the citizens was exceedingly evident (Bobseine, 2020). In the case of Iraq, gaps in verified information and data are highly common. Thus, whilst the background research has already been conducted through the literature review, the report held an understanding that trends that had been identified early might shift or be incorrect.

We attempted to approach this data utilising the concept of grounding theory, in which the data and our research held an ongoing relationship of influence with each other. The project began with very few set hypotheses to allow the research to be as representative as possible, thus throughout our study, the research continued to be reviewed and updated. Grounding theory also allowed wider flexibility in incorporating our literature reading with the necessity of adapting to the realistic underrepresentation of the everyday person within the mainstream academic approach (Bowen, 2006). This meant that several of our hypotheses were changed to represent what we believed to be most reflective of the populations, rather than any predetermined notions that we began with.

The data from these interviews are then coded via NVivo and physical analysis in order to identify common responses and links. Consequently, several key trends were determined and have been highlighted. As mentioned previously, these issues were predominately focused on society as a whole, rather than along sectarian lines. The data from the interviews have provided us with invaluable information on how protests and sectarianism in Iraq and Lebanon have changed following COVID-19. These trends and critical insights from the literature and quantitative data provided by researchers at SEPAD help to reinforce and refocus the hypotheses which were established in the earlier stages of the research.

We hypothesize that a social crisis, such as COVID-19, can exacerbate societal divisions and inequalities, particularly due to the consociationalist political model and mismanagement found within it, which in part has caused a change to the temporal-spatial aspect of

traditional protests and the perception of sectarianism in the divided societies of Lebanon and Iraq. This research hypothesizes that COVID-19 has affected these divided societies to the point where issues for the population have focused on widespread aspects such as economic problems, political apathy, and employment unavailability. Thus, matters that were previously believed to be part of divided societies are no longer at the forefront of the population and have instead shifted to all-round problems of the countries.

### **Literature Review**

The literature review represents a fraction of the influential works on this research, which were utilised to aid in being as fully representative of the region as possible. Several themes were identified in the research portion of the study, these were then used against our data trends, created from the interviews, to reach our conclusions. The literature review shaped the report to investigate the themes of corruption and abandonment by the state as well as the effect COVID-19 has had on sectarian tensions.

One of the most prominent ideas in the wealth of the literature on the topic is that state corruption is rife. This research has supported the narrative that state corruption is a serious issue in this region, if not the most prominent issue facing the population (Huber and Woertz, 2021). This was one of the agreed-upon hypotheses at the beginning of the report, as it felt one of the most established issues facing the region. Whilst the report naturally touches upon that subject in multitudes, some of the most influential pieces of literature were those which exposed trends which were not necessarily expected or had more significance than expected.

A more unexpected key theme explored in the research was the idea of non-traditional sectarianism and its influence in the region. Whilst much of the previous literature was enforcing continuity, our hypothesis focused on the new-found rejection of this conventional view. This sentiment is supported by Taif Alkhudary's *We Want A Country*. The Iraqi people have increasingly rejected the religious divides and consociationalism in their country and have called and protested for a new and national-based Iraqi identity. This shift in sentiment suggested the research examine the pattern that there is now a more unified

sentiment, rather than focused on religious sectarianism. Sectarianism as a political feature and tool which is more significant to the government than the people was also shown through Adham Saouli's *Sectarianism and Political Order in Iraq and Lebanon*. These pieces of literature together directed the research to examine more unconventional themes of sectarianism, especially political sectarianism, rather than the expected religious and cultural traditions.

Further, the literature on protests and the MENA region also shows us the impacts of COVID-19. COVID-19 can be considered a form of a global crisis, as we have surmised that it is a genuine, unpredictable, regime-existential threat. Zeina Hobaika, Lena-Maire Möller and Jan Claudius Völkel explored the effects of COVID-19 in their work *The MENA Region and Covid-19: Impact, Implications and Prospects*. This introduced and heavily influenced one of the primary aims that would be one of the most unique perspectives that has been underexplored, which this report aimed to correct. The report studies the failures of both governments towards the pandemic and how this has affected its citizens. From this idea, this research posits that COVID-19 then became a form of a leap-board for political dissent; the structural weaknesses and the unsolved problems of the state soon snowballed because of the pandemic.

To conclude, the literature influenced this report by highlighting the issues to explore when examining the dataset and areas of focus, these being the decline of religious sectarianism, government failure and the role of COVID-19. Whilst some of these conclusions may have seemed apparent as an initial hypothesis, the distinct idea of the roles of the absence of the government, COVID-19 and its influence on traditional sectarian divides has been heavily influenced by the literature studied.

## **MENA Region and Protesting**

### MENA Region Background

The MENA region (the Middle East and North Africa) encompasses several countries; the exact specificities are continuously contested. For this report, a compilation of different lists



will be used to define the MENA region, provided by the UN, UNICEF and World Bank concluding that the countries of the region are: Algeria; Bahrain; Djibouti; Egypt; Iran; Iraq; Israel; Jordan; Kuwait; Lebanon; Libya; Morocco; Oman; Occupied Palestinian Territory; Qatar; Saudi Arabia; Syria; Sudan; Tunisia; United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

The social crisis used as a point of reference in this report, COVID-19, exacerbated pre-existing social and structural problems to beyond breaking point. Within Iraq and Libya, violence increased due to weakened state institutions, continuing 'dynamics of conflict' with both state and non-state actors in competition for resources (Hilhorst and Mena, 2021). On a larger scale, Rabah Arezki, Rachel Yuting Fan, and Ha Nguyen (2020) surmised that the region suffered a 'dual shock' - due to the pandemic primarily, then a subsequent collapse in oil prices. What occurred was both a negative supply shock and negative demand shock, where a reduction in labour, due to sickness and quarantine efforts, then equated to a reduction in materials, capital, and immediate inputs. The demand shock, both regional and global, reduced demand particularly for oil and tourism, both of which are extremely valuable goods and services to the MENA region's prosperity (Baldwin and Weder di Mauro, 2020). The World Bank expected a tenuous and uneven recovery of the region's economies, with large differences in circumstances across the region, masking the severity and difficulty of financial recovery in certain countries when compared to others. People's standard of living, which declined by an estimated 5.4% in 2020, had only a 1.1% estimate of increase in 2021, expressing a lack of confidence in a swift financial turnaround with the region (Gatti *et al.*, The World Bank Group 2021).

Societal division has potentially been found to be exacerbated by a social crisis within the region. In Morocco, King Mohammad VI, through socially divisive strategies, was able to successfully redirect public outrage and blame from the government to fellow citizens. In 2020 only 9% were found to blame the government for the spread of COVID-19 compared to 41% who blamed fellow citizens (Hobaika, Möller and Völkel, 2022). Amnesty has found that security and state forces have used lethal to less-lethal force, detention, and torture, on those who levelled legitimate criticism of government response to COVID-19 in violation of human rights (Amnesty, 2021). Within a quasi-permanent state of political turbulence and instability, recent conflicts in countries such as Iraq, Yemen, Syria, and Sudan have

resulted in the internal displacement of 15 million people (Hassan, Rabbani and Abdulla, 2021). Due to the continued turbulence, civil mobilisation and protests have become a characteristic feature of the region.

Within this report, the nature of the Arab Uprisings will be used as a descriptive model to consider the generic features of MENA region protestation, and in what manner COVID-19 has affected these features. In contextualising the protest model, a timeline of the Arab Uprisings will be briefly mentioned. Considered one of the largest and most continuous protest movements of the modern world, the Arab Uprisings irrevocably changed the political and social landscape of the MENA region and the Arab world. Its inception began in December of 2011, in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, where the death by self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi became a cause célèbre for the Arab Uprisings, sparking protests across the MENA region. His death, popularised online within the Tunisian web space, became a symbol of the economic stagnation, mass unemployment and instability from authoritarian regimes that led to the region's population's overwhelming suffering and discontent. In Sidi Bouzid, following the impetus of the Uprisings, the citizens suffered an unemployment rate of 41% (Gabsi, 2019). At the time of the Arab Uprisings, similar rates existed across the region, with the MENA region holding at the time the largest youth unemployment in the world yet, even still, Tunisia suffered with the largest increase by far of unemployment within 2011 at 7% (Ahmed, 2012) Concurrently, the youth were found to be increasingly withdrawn from civil life (Gabsi, 2019). While in Tunisia the results of the revolution led to the fall of Zine El Abidin Ben Ali on January 24, 2011, across the region rebellions were found on similar or smaller scales with varying levels of success in revolution than Tunisia. Algeria, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Kuwait, Iraq, Sudan, and Lebanon were all found to have protests of varying degrees and in return counterrevolutions, state-mandated violence, and subsequent instabilities in states (Phillips, 2016).

#### MENA Region Protesting and The Arab Uprisings Model

The Arab Uprisings has not only changed the dynamics of the region in politics, economics, and social life but also in how protesting and civil mobilisation are conducted within the MENA region. The mass mobilisation witnessed within the region has sparked global debate and literature since. When considering the features of the Arab Uprisings revolution as a

model of generic MENA region protesting, we will be consulting previous literature's conclusions to form a distinct point of comparison to both during and post-COVID-19 protesting.

A Key MENA region characteristic is street protests, found to be "the main avenue" for people to express discontent (O'Driscoll *et al.*, 2020). After the Arab Uprisings, a second wave of protests in 2018-2019 began. It has been found that protest actors intentionally take back public space through protests being held within them, an example being Tahrir Square, Cairo, in 2011. The significance of this created inclusivity to subaltern groups out of the previous exclusivity, and empowerment through the vision of a common space for the public (Abenante, 2014). Moreover, the recently created concept of "apolitical activism" has formed, with MENA youth focusing on community-based action, aiding those without governmental support. The term 'apolitical' was particularly used in creating a clear distinction between governmental (in)action and their own, to form cultural and community connections (Boutros, 2023).

Post-Arab Uprisings, political movements within the MENA region have been found to not be topically separated but instead as quasi-permanent, years-long and interrelated topics. The drivers of the protests are continued large-scale issues, triggered in its resurgence by local uproar to a recent event, originally as found in the case of Mohamed Bouazizi but has later been replicated after government decisions or national disasters. Chants and slogans from other, older uprisings are often used, expressing the stagnation of political and social change within the MENA region. "The people want to bring down the regime" was chanted both at the Arab uprisings and later protests with variations to better suit the particular protesters' grievances (Ayoub, 2019).

Literature has found that social media held an integral role in the MENA region's protesting and was a particular and salient feature in the success of the Arab Uprisings revolutions (Sturm and Amer, 2013). 'Diffused communication', a combination of online and in-person protesting has been found throughout the region (Lovotti and Proserpio, 2021). The proliferation of independent knowledge, the organisation of protests and the formation of a place to share political sentiments. The existence of this platform in turn connects fellow

citizens in their shared disadvantaged state and empowers them to mobilise. Social media is exempt from traditional state borders and is instantaneous in its broadcasting — those who share the Arab identity and language across nations could connect and find the similarities of and solidarity in their countries' economic and political situations in an “imagined community” (Koh, 2016).

Therefore, social media can act as a substitute for the public sphere, which was defined by Jurgen Habermas as “people gathered together as a public, articulating the needs of society with the state.” Social media can only act as “counterpublics” with different circles overlapping and interacting. It is also used to gain the attention of more powerful nations' states and their citizens to promote external pressure (Habermas, 1989, as cited in Tufekci, 2017). However, the effectiveness of social media as a site for protest is limited. While knowledge can be easily disseminated, and less likely to be censored by a state, the accuracy is contested with fake news having the ability to be swiftly disseminated. Another aspect is how social media, a low-risk mobilisation, cannot replace potentially high-risk actions such as physical protesting. There is little guarantee that the fervour found on social media of a political issue will translate to coordinated collective action (Tufekci, 2017).

In the age of globalisation, protests have become not just directed towards the society they are a part of, but also the focus of the outer world. Space and the issue of best using space to garner the most attention towards the protests has increasingly become a focus of a post-globalisation space (Routledge, 2017). This is especially the case in countries in the MENA region due to issues surrounding the ability to freely protest and restrictions around protest methods, an aspect that will be considered within our case studies. Due to this, the appearance of protest designed to be symbolic for not just the immediate audience has risen. This can be seen in the use of other languages such as English and universal icons such as social media references have been increasingly utilised (McGarry *et al.*, 2020).

The boomerang model explains this appeal to the outer audience rather than just the immediate country. The boomerang model was created to explain protests that were specifically designed to appeal to or directly reach those outside of one's country. The idea behind the boomerang model is that international audiences will view these protests and

put external pressure on the home governing authorities to comply with the demands of the protests (Keck and Sikkink, 1998). This model became particularly common in societies where there has been a limitation on either the ability to protest or the effectiveness of protests due to the home government. This model was particularly developed as a term to describe the period of the Soviet Union and the dissidents and activists who were trying to reach beyond their totalitarian government.

Whilst the MENA region governments cannot all be described with this terminology, the boomerang model can be applied to many MENA region protesting, being those seeking international audiences (Gheyntanhi and Moghadam, 2014). This model is being applied because these protests have been aimed specifically towards an international audience in order to bring them more attention. The frustration with the lack of action by their governments in response to MENA region protests is clear (Belhaj, 2021). The MENA area protestors, in particular those in Iraq and Lebanon, our case studies, have lost faith in their governing bodies and these protests are aiming for international attention and aid. The boomerang model is a culmination of this frustration and the protestors being able to adapt to modern, globalised technology, such as the internet, in order to amplify their protests (Gromping, 2023).

## **Lebanon Case Study**

### Lebanon background

Before the pandemic reached the republic of Lebanon, its existence as a state was precariously holding on. Since gaining independence in 1943, Lebanon has enjoyed little peacetime — between 1975 to 1990 a civil war, incited by the sectarian divisions, embroiled the country. Various conflicts continued, particularly the 2015 Beirut bombings, the 2019 civil demonstrations and most recently devastating, the 2020 Beirut explosion. Lebanon's governance has, while characterising itself as a democracy, been found to fundamentally fail in allowing Lebanese citizens the freedom of choice. The political system can be classed as consociationalist, however, due to the lines of division existing on religious differences, it can be more accurately referred to as a confessional system (Dell, 2020). Political representation is equated to religious representation, with six different branches of

Christianity and major and minor branches of Islam, most principally Sunni and Shia sects and Maronite Christians. Each position of political power is permanently held by a specific religious identity. As a result, Lebanon is characterised by multiple sectarian divides; a Christian-Muslim divide and a Sunni-Shia divide. This allows the Shia identity to be unprecedentedly powerful in the political arena due to the political movements of Hezbollah, backed by Syria (Saouli, 2019). Although the confessional system in Lebanon was originally instated to overcome both vertical and horizontal inequality, it has cemented and widened social inequality and political conflict (Makdisi and Marktanner, 2009).

It is difficult to be clear about the demographic distribution in Lebanon, as 1932 was when the last nationwide census was conducted (Dell, 2020). The inability to accurately determine whether the demographic distribution of Lebanon is in line with the representation found in the political system is only one example of the severe disconnect and lack of transparency between the citizens and the political elite of Lebanon. The systemic failing of democracy within Lebanon was also most strongly observed through the thrice postponed general election. The succeeding election from the 2009 election was ultimately held in 2018, after almost a decade of voter frustration. Currently, the continued vacancy of the presidential position holds the state within a political deadlock to the continued detriment of Lebanese citizens (Al-Jazeera, 2023).

It is argued that, within Lebanon, sectarianism has been formed as a historical institution, a 'socially-constructed objective reality' (Luckmann and Berger, 1991). The political actors of Lebanon, as a practice spanning from when the confessional system was instated, utilise sectarianism as a political tool to expand and consolidate elite power. This has allowed them to 'camouflage' the economic and political disparity within the country. Economically, Lebanon is in one of the most severe financial crises since the mid-nineteenth century (World Bank Group, 2021). State institutions, rather than being impartial, foster sectarian identities, clientelism and corruption. Mechanisms of repression are used to maintain the regime's survival in the face of the weak, but central, nature of the state (Huber and Woertz, 2021).

### Covid-19 and Lebanon

The first recorded case of COVID-19 in Lebanon was on the 21<sup>st</sup> of February 2020 (Asmar and Yeretian, 2022). Government response during the first three months of COVID-19 can be described as ‘a lucky start’ (AbiGhanem, 2022). Enforcement of a full national lockdown, curfew, and closure of borders by mid-March and tracking apps helped to limit and trace infections. By May 31, 2020, only 27 COVID-19-related deaths were recorded in Lebanon — less than half of the global average at the time (Asmar and Yeretian, 2022). The WHO set an objective of a minimum of 45 skilled health workers per 10,000 population to deliver system objectives. While Lebanon, along with only two other developing MENA region countries, did meet this target, this data only reveals quantity, not quality of service. (Gatti *et al.*, 2021)

However, between the phases of the lockdown and the pre-emptive re-opening of the airport in July 2020, the death rate rose, and more than 50% of the population fell below the poverty line (Fleifel and Abi Farraj, 2022). It became increasingly clear to businesses that the government would be unable to provide financial assistance after they were previously forcibly closed during lockdowns (Asmar and Yeretian, 2022). In the same fashion, hospitals began to suffer from insufficient PPE and resources. The lack of communication between the largely absent government and its people led to distrust and a psychological burden on Lebanese citizens (Lewis, 2020). The Beirut blast that occurred on August 4, 2020, acted as a turning point in the deterioration of Lebanon’s welfare. 200 deaths occurred, with 300,000 people displaced. Three major hospitals experienced damages which led to a loss of 500 hospital beds. Consequently, transport, access to healthcare, and medication plummeted as infection rates rose (Asmar and Yeretian, 2022).

Lebanese citizens have a long-standing history of having little alternative but to use private and/or informal suppliers for basic services and care. The World Bank found in 2008 households spent \$330m in total on privately generated electricity and almost \$230m on private water (World Bank, 2009). The healthcare system is similar, with a traditional dominance of private healthcare with the public healthcare system having a mixture of public and private components (Asmar and Yeretian, 2022). With the deterioration of the containment of COVID-19, both the public and private healthcare sectors were needed for

an organised and holistic response. However, due to mounting pressure, government responses became reactive and incoherent (Abi-Rached *et al.*, 2020). Non-health matters such as economic, social, and political pressures began to take precedence, with the government performing a balancing act of attempting to please all with short-term fixtures, displaying the weaknesses of Lebanon's "political clientelism" (Asmar and Yeretian, 2022).

This political clientelism is incredibly apparent in Hezbollah's decisions to act in line with Iranian interests to the detriment of domestic citizens (Huslman, 2020). The public service of healthcare was strategically used to foster sectarian identities and further the political goals of Hezbollah, forcing Lebanon to become a proxy state for Iranian interests (AbiGanem, 2022). Hezbollah kept Beirut's international airport open for flights from Iran far longer than was advisable, putting the population in the region at higher risk, and causing an acceleration in the infection rate (Hobaika, Möller and Völkel, 2022). Hezbollah has held a monopoly on the Ministry of Public Health since 2018 (AbiGhanem, 2022) and has been funnelling foreign money into Iran as an opportunity borne out of the US sanctions (AbiGanem 2022). Covid-19 saw an increase in questionable transactions framed as 'donations'. Funding designated for domestic investment was instead used to fund the ruling elites of another nation, further disintegrating the trust between the Lebanese public and government, as well as overseas organisations considering lending aid.

As a devastating result of this malmanagement, 10,906 COVID-19-related deaths have been recorded in Lebanon from March 2020 to May 2023 (World Health Organisation, 2023b). With the Lebanese state seemingly "disappearing" from the lives of the Lebanese people in all meaningful ways, grassroots communities have proven their solidarity in aid and amenities. Grassroots organisations, such as the Lebanese Democratic Women's Gathering (RDFL) and Nusaned, worked closely with neighbourhoods to provide aid, food, water, and general solace during times of adversity. However, non-state aid is limited in its ability to tackle more structural weaknesses such as unemployment, inequality, and poverty (Mirshad, 2020). Nevertheless, it showcases that on the grassroots level maintaining sectarianism is secondary in importance and the prioritisation of human wellbeing. All this highlights the autocratic and authoritarian nature of consociationalism and its reliance on



elitism and repression, and the repercussions this has in times of crisis. (Huber and Woertz, 2021).

### Lebanon Data Analysis

The pattern of everyday needs of the population being neglected, and continuous desertion of the people is a theme that was echoed throughout the sum of the interview responses. The data and subsequent data analysis conducted reflect the sentiment that there are more urgent state-level matters that are the top priority for the population, such as the unemployment rates. The mismanagement of the everyday lives of citizens was the resounding theme that was emphasised in the answers gathered through the surveys, particularly in the past few years during the COVID-19 crisis. For example, 80.6% of the participants have indicated that they were not satisfied at all with their government's performance, and a large minority, around 31%, claimed that none of their elected officials did a good job at handling the COVID-19 pandemic (SEPAD, 2023). This crisis has had a knock-on effect, leading to even higher levels of frustration with the state than was observed in the literature. This dissatisfaction and distrust in the state then led to most of the participants turning to non-state actors for aid, especially during COVID-19, like their families. Thus, the state has failed to bring about stability and security for most, if not all of its people, and demonstrated that in crisis the Lebanese government has been not just oppressive but absent and unreliable, hence the reliance on other channels.

This data supports the theme in the literature on sectarianism that there is an increase in indifference in the populations of the nations of the Middle East like Lebanon. Decades of crises, coups and broken promises have rendered most MENA countries, like in the case of Lebanon, to be desensitized to politics. Further apathy and dejection in the state have led to a shift away from political institutions in all forms, as shown by aid and support being sought from elsewhere. In the data, the respondents gave a broadly negative response to the issue of democratic regimes being able to bring about order. A total of 29.7% of participants either agreed or strongly agreed with the idea that democratic regimes are ineffective at sustaining order. (SEPAD, 2023) These numbers have shown a breakdown in the trust of institutions and the process of democracy, as further shown by the majority of the participants claiming that they were either not very interested or not interested at all in

politics (30.2% and 29% respectively). The accelerant captured in the research appears to be the mismanagement of COVID-19, which seems to have cemented many of the population's thoughts towards government capabilities. Therefore, the sentiments towards the political standing of the country have continued to deteriorate with the influence of COVID-19, ranging from apathy to distrust to anger.

The highly dysfunctional and corrupt state of the Lebanese administration, before COVID-19, led to the lack of any organized state amenities/services to control crises and an increased sense of peril. Whilst no government could have prepared for the crisis, the already precarious position of everyday life in Lebanon meant that the effects were felt on an even greater magnitude. This crisis then necessitated the diligence and goodwill of the local actors to step up in areas where the state has failed tremendously (Andersen, 2022). Unfortunately, COVID-19 might have over-stretched the capabilities of these actors, and any pre-existing would be worsened by the pandemic and its consequences. The economy of Lebanon, which before the pandemic was already jeopardized by its own corruption and internal instabilities, is now on the verge of collapse due to COVID-19, as mass unemployment and absolute destitution occurred in Lebanon (UN News, 2020). Further examples of the inability of the government to handle a pandemic under the already fragile circumstances came in the form of food scarcity that forced the population to change their eating habits (Corriero *et al.*, 2022). It has become clear through data and literature that the country was disproportionately already failing and woefully unequipped. This sentiment has become felt by citizens who asymmetrically suffered during COVID-19 when compared to others' handling of the pandemic and prior circumstances.

Lebanese citizens appear to have turned away from the state to other forms of support, including international backing. A majority of the respondents support foreign intervention in the financial, military, and medical aspects. As an example, an overwhelming percentage of the respondents agreed that it was acceptable for foreign actors to provide financial aid to pay salaries (61.3%), to provide military assistance for security (54.9%), and to supply medical aid (72.0%) (SEPAD, 2023). Positive opinions can also be found in the view of citizens when asked about other countries during the survey, showing a stark contrast in opinion from that shown to their home country. The contemporary feeling in Lebanon has

become one of a need for support from anywhere but their own government, the COVID-19 failure becoming one of the last and most clear demonstrations of their ineptitude.

It must also be noted that Lebanon has defied some expectations on COVID-19 and sectarian differences in the state. Throughout much of the literature on divided societies in the region, the consensus is that there are sharp sectarian lines. One of the most drastic conflicts commonly pointed to is the religious divides occurring. However, the data set showed that most of the participants did not think that religious differences (Sunni & Shia, Islamists & Secularists, Muslims & Christians) were a major source of contention in the country, even during and after COVID-19. Despite the Sunni-Shia divide being pointed to as one of the biggest conflicts in the region, the data noted that a large number (53.1%) of respondents answered that there was no problem at all in the Sunni-Shia split. However, it seems like a major source of sectarian tension in Lebanon, perhaps more so due to COVID-19, would be the conflicts between government and opposition supporters, with 45% of respondents labelling it a big problem (SEPAD, 2023). Another example of this is that more than religion, one of the biggest tensions reported came between the rich and the poor. Whilst this did not originate with the pandemic, to see this type of tension overtake the traditionally viewed tension of religion suggests a shift in the mindset of the population. Alongside the tensions with the government and opposition supporters, these trends suggest that the most prominent problems in the region have become the all-encompassing, issues of everyday life. The data supports the analysis that economic and political matters have shifted the priorities in the region for the population, and existing literature emphasising the religious tensions is misrepresentative. The majority of the data leans towards problems with the government and the quality of life and support given to the people, which has shifted the nation into a new era of tensions. There appears to be a more unified problem for Lebanon in the present, and the weight of traditional sectarian divides no longer seems to be the most pressing issue in the era and aftermath of COVID-19.

## Iraq Case Study

### Iraq Background

Iraq, one of the most heterogeneous societies in the MENA region, has had a long history of both sectarianism and marginalisation. From the Ottoman Empire until the fall of Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime in 2003, Arab Muslim Sunnis, who only constitute 20-25% of the Iraqi population, dominated the religious and political culture of the state (Saouli, 2019). In Iraq, there exists a phenomenon of reactionary 'primordial' sectarianism, where an 'ineffable significance' is attributed to blood ties, to a possible point of irrationality (Shils, 1957). In response to their traumatic history, sectarian hierarchies and exclusionary politics with sectarian identities have been enforced to gain political and economic advantages. (Osman, 2015). In the wake of the 2003 intervention, along with a political order reinforcing a top-down political system, an informal version of consociationalism, sectarian apportionment (Muhasasa Ta'ifa), was instated by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), and ethnic and sectarian quotas were established (O'Driscoll *et al.*, 2020; Dodge, 2018). While claiming to be representative Shias, Sunnis and Kurds were privileged at the expense of Iraq's minorities, such as the Turkmen, Syriacs and Assyrians. An example of this can be seen in the inability of the veto power to be used by minorities in the grand coalition (Ltaif, 2015). Thus, whilst this system was created to effectively share the power in a divided society, it is not without flaws.

Consequently, grievances have been mainly concerned with the lack of representation, the over-centralisation of wealth and political control centred around hegemonic identities and their allies. Opposing parties were and are excluded from participating in state-building, thus weakening their positionality, and impacting their capabilities for effecting change (Salem 2022). This exclusionary political system is not only encouraged by domestic actors but also by external actors like the US, Saudi Arabia, and Iran to keep those external actors happy and to ensure the inflow of aid and revenue. The US in particular has a significant role in the creation and survival of the Iraqi political structure after the collapse of the Hussein regime. The US coalition supported the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) which consolidated the ethno-sectarian political structure. This ensured Ba'athist and Hussein's support was silenced and prevented a new ideological hegemony from emerging (Haddad,

2016; Saouli, 2019) As a result, states that uphold the consociationalism model like Iraq and Lebanon are politically in stasis and must intentionally avoid reform. This continues a quasi-permanent cycle of crisis as both government dissatisfaction grows and the legitimacy of power weakens, leading to civil disobedience and civil violence (Huber and Woertz, 2021). Therefore, whilst it has been presented as the representative option, like Lebanon, it has been implemented in a way that satisfies many actors involved but not the majority of the Iraqi public.

Corruption has then deprived the Iraqi state and its people; funds for state infrastructure and amenities are siphoned to the political and economic elites within the state (Al-Ali, 2014). Iraqi citizen retaliation, as mirrored in other MENA states, was found in uprisings and protests for both economic reforms and changes to the political system. A demand for a de-sectarian, inclusive, and democratic political and economic system continues to reverberate in current Iraqi political discourse (National Democratic Institute, 2020). State corruption withholds the ability of reformers or democratic-leaning ministers within Iraq to pursue policies that would improve the Iraqi political scene. Threats to their careers and well-being from political parties, vested civil servants and corporations in politics, have left ministers at a political impasse for change. (Dodge and Mansour, 2021). Hence, systemic corruption continues to remain pertinent and paralysing in the Iraqi administration.

### COVID-19 and Iraq

Inevitably, prevalent and systemic corruption significantly hampered the state's ability to manage crises. The data for Iraq during COVID-19 is not as extensive as that for Lebanon, due to concerns over safety and lack of access for data to be broadcast to the outer world. Representation of the people's sentiment in the information currently is currently lacking, the data available is predominately quantitative. Challenges covered by the data and literature for Iraq pertain to the healthcare and economic situation, both of which became increasingly dire. This stems from both internal and external issues, originating in the unique, major structural problems of Iraq devolved from government missteps and corruption.

In the case of Iraq, COVID-19 exposed the underfunded medical system and shone a light on the woeful state of Iraqi public services. Years of corruption, embezzlement by health officials, and the flight of disillusioned youths led to the collapse of the Iraqi health sector during the pandemic (Muller, 2020). Even before the pandemic, there was huge frustration from the public towards the healthcare sector. The figures put satisfaction with the healthcare system by the population at less than 1 in 5 in 2017 (Al Janabi and Chung, 2022). Similar to the primary and secondary shocks in Lebanon, while COVID primarily resulted in deaths and sickness, Iraq's oil-dependent economy suffered as it shrank by roughly 10% during the pandemic, restricting the funding for the healthcare sector (Dodge and Mansour, 2021). Employment, and unemployment, were some of the biggest impacts of COVID-19 on Iraq. Pre-Covid-19 unemployment was already a significant concern, however, the employment sector collapsed even further. Beyond just the oil sector, Iraq is composed of a large service sector which was also impacted significantly by lockdowns and restrictions on travel; the United Nations Development Programme estimates put around 25% of those employed pre-COVID as now redundant (UNDP, 2020b). Areas such as the economy and healthcare showed an emphasis on issues that were non-sectarian, this reveals that already fragile major 'secular' issues suffered due to the impact of COVID-19.

Due to the mismanagement, there was a public reluctance to adhere to government advice, a direct result of government corruption. Iraq was ranked the second highest case and death rate in the MENA region after Iran (Lami *et al.*, 2021). This was likely worsened by the fact that this mistrust also spread to the medical sector. There were cases of the public refusing to go to hospitals due to knowledge of the lack of supplies and refusal to turn over sick family members to quarantine (UNDP, 2020a). As of January 2023, 25,375 COVID-related deaths have been recorded in Iraq (World Health Organisation, 2023a). Distrust of the population towards the government can also be seen in the social response to the pandemic. Iraq suffered issues in combatting the virus due to the belief that the government had some hand in the virus and that COVID-19 had a political angle (Lami *et al.*, 2021). Whilst this type of conspiracy was not exclusive to Iraq, the sheer volume of the population who believed this demonstrates the little faith the population has in the government. Not only does this exemplify a lack of trust, but it also shows a belief that the government would actively try to control or harm the population using the virus. This lack of

cooperation illustrates how the previous conditions of distrust and mismanagement by the government have caused the pandemic to lead to further tensions between state and nation.

### Iraq Data Analysis

Iraq's data outcomes were found to be surprisingly similar in distribution in responses to Lebanon. Firstly, a vast majority of the respondents from Iraq believe that the state should focus more on more nation-wide and "secular" issues. This includes controlling unemployment, controlling COVID-19, and maintaining state stability and security. When asked about the national priority, only 1.3% of respondents chose sectarian tensions, the rest were relatively evenly split between poverty, security, and the spread of COVID-19. There is an emphasis of concern due to the tensions between the rich and the poor of society, and particularly less emphasis on tensions between the different Islamic sects (Sunni and Shia), and between Muslims and non-Muslims in Iraq. 57.2% of those asked about the Sunni-Shi'a tensions answered that the tensions were not an issue at all, similarly, the same response for Muslim-Christian tensions sat at 80.3%. For a region with such a contentious religious history, making up the biggest sectarian divide previously, this has been significantly reduced. This is not due to a lack of religiosity either, the majority (57%) still identify religion as their most important identity, it is simply no longer such a point of contention due to more prevalent issues. While previous literature has spoken on the emphasis of sectarian divisions, possibly due to the recency of COVID-19, the population may have changed priorities and source of discontent and resentment, drawing away from fellow citizens, and towards the government policies and inaction.

The Government, in presence, trust, and actions, in both Lebanon and Iraq, has been strikingly found as a clear source of resignation, dissatisfaction, and disillusionment. While data has not been taken before COVID-19 to confirm the contrast, it is unsurprising that post-COVID-19 a large proportion of Iraqi participants were 'not at all interested in politics' as a whole and did not participate in any form of political protest. While over half (57.9%) did vote in the pre-COVID-19 2018 elections, this suggests that COVID-19 has pushed the population even further away from the belief that political action can be effective or representative (SEPAD, 2023). This has been demonstrated in the electoral turnout in 2021,

the lowest voter turnout since the 2003 invasion. The 2021 elections saw only 31% of the population vote, making this a 21.9% drop in turnout in just three years (Mansour and Stewart-Jolley, 2021). This represents a population that is withdrawing from interaction with the state, whether it's due to apathy or anger, because of a lack of change from their political representatives.

COVID-19 has also allowed non-state actors to infiltrate the political arena and increase their social presence. Shiite militias started branding themselves as alternatives to formal authorities. The PMF, a diverse and decentralised Shia militia, started increasing their social presence by advertising campaigns, engaging in communal volunteering, and building temporary and mobile hospitals as well as providing food packages for a wide range of Iraqi communities (Costantini, 2020; Alaaldin, 2020). This seemingly non-discriminatory action showcases that in times of adversity upholding sectarian divides is not prioritised at the grassroots level. However, the true intentions of these groups in assisting can be questioned because these hybrid security groups want to consolidate their place in electoral politics by appealing to the masses (Alaaldin, 2020). Nevertheless, their actions place sectarian divides as secondary in importance compared to the quality and standard of living of citizens. This is supported by quantitative data. Around 42% of survey respondents agree with the sentiment that politicians from different sects can support and help various sectarian communities with their problems highlighting the fact that sectarian divides are not majorly being upheld by the public (SEPAD, 2023). Thus, as also noted in the Lebanon trends found in the data analysis, Iraq is also seen to be moving away from the traditional sectarian divides. This resulted from the period of such heavy mismanagement and misrepresentation from the government, and the turning to external actors instead. Whilst it is expected that the ethno-religious tensions have not disappeared indefinitely due to the storied history of the nation, it has become clear through our data analysis that it is no longer at the forefront of the public.

Within the SEPAD data, it was found that for those who felt represented by a political party, which was only around 25% of respondents, the largest reasons for being attracted to the party were; being provided social services, ethics, and political values (specifically with corruption), and being matched with views. In comparison only 2% of respondents listed



religious and sectarian interests as important, a stark contrast to Lebanon's mixed opinions. Moreover, overwhelmingly at 75%, respondents reported that a politician from a different sect to theirs can represent the concerns of a community. What is striking to consider, is that while a continued decrease in voter turnout at each election has been observed, only 2.5% of respondents did not answer the latter question of representation. It is evident that, in contrast to voter turnout, Iraqi citizens still have a desire for a desectarianised and involved political system (SEPAD, 2023).

### **Protesting in Lebanon and Iraq**

Within this report, the events and consequences of the Arab Uprisings are considered in the form of a descriptive model, representative of MENA region protestation when in juxtaposition to other regions' protesting characteristics, specifically the West. The goal of this is to consider how a global crisis, in this example COVID-19, may have led to a transformation in protesting to adapt to new circumstances. Features of MENA region protesting we found as generic was; diffused communication through physical and online protesting; quasi-permanent and interrelated topics; and the appearance of the boomerang model to attract external audiences.

In regard to the quasi-permanent topics of protest, both Iraq and Lebanon, shared topics that are mirrored across the MENA region. The recurring root causes that spark protests are economic crises and instability throughout the region, along with corruption within the government — the cause of 30% of the protests (Press and Carothers, 2022). The success of the Arab Uprisings in addressing these systemic problems varies across the region but, in the cases of Lebanon and Iraq, both nations continue to protest the same topics that originated the Arab Uprisings. Iraq, for a decade, has been concerned with employment, public services, and endemic corruption regarding identity-based politics (Deutsche Welle, 2019 cited in O'Driscoll *et al.* p. 8). Similarly, in Lebanon, when the state attempted to garner more revenue by imposing the infamous 20% tax on Whatsapp calls in 2019 the protest against such a specific legislation eventually grew to be a protest against state corruption and sectarianism as a whole (Constable, 2019).

Chants being replicated across the MENA region are an evident example of the continuation of current regimes being upheld. Both in Iraq and Lebanon, “The people want the downfall of the regime” has been used. Chants hold the ability to express movement aims and with catchiness garner attention, such as in Iraq, the slogans “Not America, not Iran, Baghdad is the address” (la America, la Iran, Baghdad hiya al-‘unwan) and “We want a homeland” (nurid watan) were frequently used, showcasing public frustration with Iraq being used as a geopolitical pawn (Lovotti and Proserpio, 2021; Costantini, 2020). Social media has aided in the dissemination of chants along with expressing the boomerang model as street signs, chants and slogans, and information being in English was shared across social media. MENA region protests display a multilingualism that is not mirrored in Western protests. With signs created in mind to be viewed both in-person and shared across the web, to garner a larger audience's attention (Khorsravinik and Unger 2016). This was found in Lebanon in the ‘you stink’ movement where signs were found written in English (Ekdawi, 2021)

Suppression of protests is an issue that spans across the MENA region to varying degrees of intensity. In 2019, both Iraq and Lebanon were found to be countries that had mass protests before being disrupted by COVID-19 (O’Driscoll et al). Within the MENA region, in-person protests were found in spite of lockdowns and COVID-19 limitations, such as in al-Tahrir Square, Baghdad, 2019 (Michaelson, 2019). Protests kept camp in al-Tahrir Square and created small-scale, law-abiding sit-ins. Protestors relied on donations to buy disinfectants, masks, and gloves, reflecting the solidarity that protest movements and moments of adversity can create. Security forces still harassed protestors violently (Amnesty International, 2020). In Lebanon, the public viewed COVID-19 restrictions with suspicion and, with the lack of financial support when dealing with lockdowns. Some began to protest these restrictions and were met with state violence (Aljazeera, 2021). Political figures may not be directly addressed for the protesters' own safety. “All of them means all of them” (kellon ya`ani kellon), referring to Lebanon’s members of their sectarian government (Majed and Salman, 2019). The ability to protest freely and safely, in the West’s context, can serve as an additional channel for representation along with formal democratic processes and institutions. In the MENA region, the function of protest is different, as it can act as one of the few, if only, channels to express grievances (Press and Carothers, 2022).

Protesting in the public space is particularly significant in Iraq. The 2015 movement that demanded the removal of religion from politics, peaking in 2019 with the October Protest Movement, found Al-Tahrir Square as its point of congregation with demonstrations, marches, and sit-ins. Al-Tahrir Square, with the Nasb al-Hurriyya as the focal point, became a symbol of unity irrespective of ethno-sectarian identity and the complete rejection of religious exclusionary politics by protestors (Alkhudary, 2022). At the same time, the religiously symbolic al-Nur square in Lebanon became a site for profanation (the act of deactivation of the apparatuses of power and returning to common use of space previously seized) of the sectarian regime, while continuing to preserve the religious element of the space. Providing a juxtaposition, protesters held a non-sectarian celebration, chanting, and dancing within a community which brought together sects and religions and rejected sectarianism itself (Ghanem, 2021).

Apolitical activism was heavily utilised during and post-COVID-19. During the pandemic, civil society organisations (CSOs) stepped up to fill the vacuum left by the state government in the welfare sector (Cherif *et al.*, 2020). In countries like Iraq, Egypt and Lebanon, CSOs helped to distribute meals, medical supplies, and more crucially, vaccines (Cherif *et al.*, 2020, p.22). These CSOs even acted as voices of dissent against their respective regimes in the MENA region (Cherif *et al.*, 2020, pp.23-4). We have found in our data that around 90% of respondents in both Iraq and Lebanon are in favour of external medical support and vaccines, further highlighting the lack of trust in the face of government incompetence and inaction. However, in regard to internal non-government actors providing assistance, it appears their reach is limited. In Lebanon, 4.8% of respondents state they would turn to a neighbourhood group or religious group, while the vast majority struggle alone or ask family for help. 5.2% responded with the government and interestingly 1.2% stated their tribe, showing a lack of reliance on both. Iraq shows a different picture, with neighbourhood groups or religious groups at 12.7%. Government was in fact higher, at 14.9%, but the majority also chose to manage alone and or ask family. Tribe assistance was also higher at 9.6%. Possibly, Iraq has less reservations about searching for help than Lebanon, which has been forced to be an extremely self-reliant nation (SEPAD, 2023).

Headlines and literature demonstrate the extent of the continued protests in Lebanon and Iraq, seemingly appearing to be the majority of the public. However, our data states that only 1 in 5 people in both countries have ever protested. While mass mobilisations have occurred in both Iraq and Lebanon, the everyday person's priority is stability over the risk to their physical health and other repercussions from protesting for true change. Moreover, with the Arab Uprisings' contentious claim to success in regime upheavals, the faith in the ability protests have to appeal and move the government may have become severely weakened (SEPAD, 2023).

### **Conclusion**

Demonstrated in our analysis of our case studies, Lebanon and Iraq, this report has achieved its aim of reflecting upon the realities of life across the MENA region, during a global crisis. The vast inequalities exist on political, economic and social scales, and how conflict and external influences can interweave and have such a major effect on the mindset of the populations in the region.

A global crisis can have its primary effect, with COVID-19 leading to death and sickness to millions across the world. However, the secondary implications of COVID-19 are affected by political, social, and economic circumstances; the crisis does not affect the population of the world equally. As we have seen in the case studies of Lebanon and Iraq, state mismanagement, or even more severely, malmanagement for self-interest, has led to the populations of both states being hit doubly as hard. The fact the self-interested political actions by state actors are across sectarian lines, whilst both nations were already in such a precarious position for the fortune of their citizens, shows the complete lack of concern.

Within the SEPAD data, on the other hand, has displayed a different light on the political manoeuvres of state actors. The average citizen of Iraq or Lebanon is strikingly unconcerned with wins gained in sectarian elite political scrambles but is concerned with their immediate and severe problems; mass unemployment, grave poverty and vast inequality are all far larger issues to both countries' citizens. The consociationalist model in both countries, while stating to represent the wishes of each sect — represents none but those who are

representing themselves and their elite's interests. Our analysis of political events and primary data also serves as a reminder to not consider the acts of a government as representative of the people's wishes. The voices of the citizens reflected in the data have suggested a much more unified picture of the nations, in which the biggest issue facing everyday life is the state that is abandoning them. The anger which has been traditionally attributed in the literature to the sectarian, predominately religious, divides, has been redirected in recent years. The most echoed form of sectarianism is anti-government, anti-wealth gap and anti-government supporters, whereas there appears to be a much higher level of tolerance for ethno-sectarian divides.

COVID-19 has changed, to a smaller extent, how protests have been conducted in these divided societies. Whilst the methodology remains untouched, there is a greater limit on the movement of protests, forcing a completely online approach. Previously, protests were conducted in the form of 'diffused communication' (Lovotti and Proserpio, 2021), however, Covid-19 became an opportunity to suppress physical protesting. The protest numbers vary by country, but the dedicated faction of protesters remained vocal and active despite the added barriers. However, this is not to say that whilst the anger is high, the level of protest matches this. The data revealed a very low turnout of those who claimed to have protested, particularly in Iraq, and whilst this can be attributed to security factors, apathy also plays a role. Both case studies demonstrated a level of apathy and despair amongst the anger, a sign that the situation has become so desperate that many feel that change is impossible due to the state.

This report is significant for the field as it provides a clear insight into the real opinions of real citizens living through these conditions. It has become clear in this research that the current field of literature has not been updated in a way that has accurately reflected the struggles which are most important to these communities, particularly in a possible shift of views post-COVID-19. Therefore, it has not provided an accurate basis for how to best aid those living in Iraq and Lebanon, due to the continued imposition of the traditional notion of sectarian divides in the region. Based on this research, the recommendations for future research and data collection would be to focus more on state-wide issues, and to recognise the insistence of sectarianism may not be from a bottom-up sentiment, but a top-down

enforcement. It would be illuminating if prior reports in the field concerning interviewees and sectarianism pre-Covid-19 returned to respondents to ask their views now, to further validate our hypothesis that Covid-19 has created a paradigm shift in priorities. This report has shown the population's disinterest in and the significance of sectarian issues for the two nations' development. While the population may hold their sect and religion dearly to themselves, as the Lebanon data can suggest, it does not impact their belief of being able to be represented by actors outside their sect. Sectarian research in the future should focus on the realignment of the idea of sectarianism to examine the government support-opposition and the rich-poor divisions. These topics being further investigated would yield a more representative depiction of the problems facing the populations, which are the biggest concerns for those living through them and fully represent the sectarian issues of these deeply divided societies.

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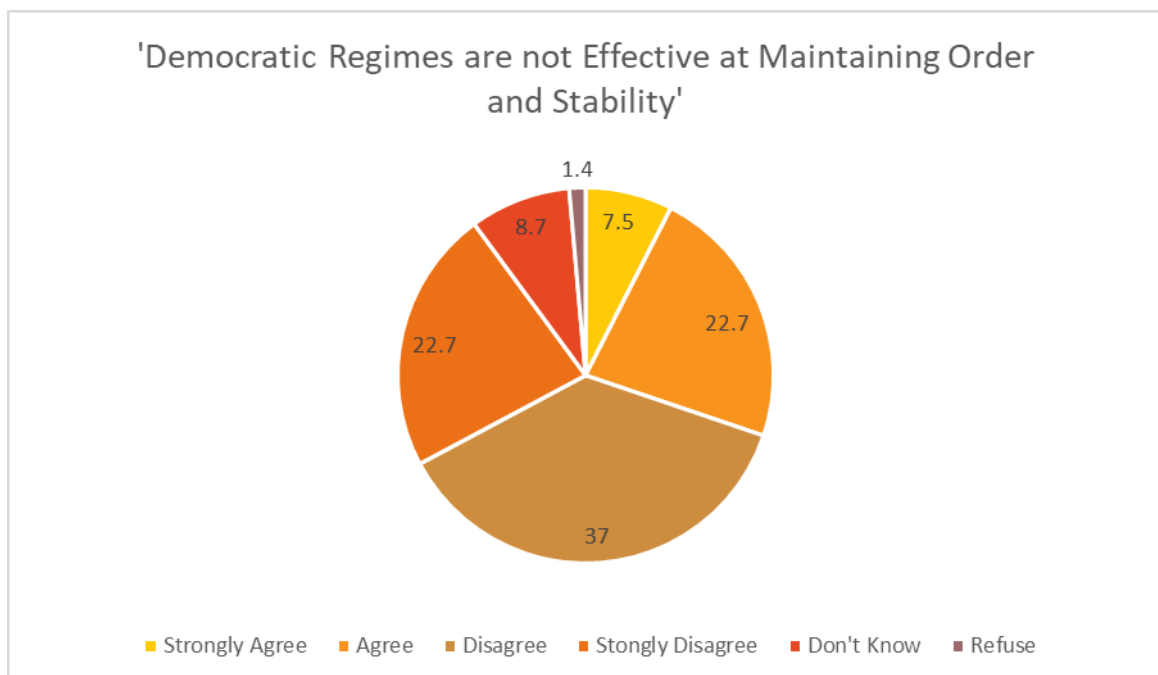
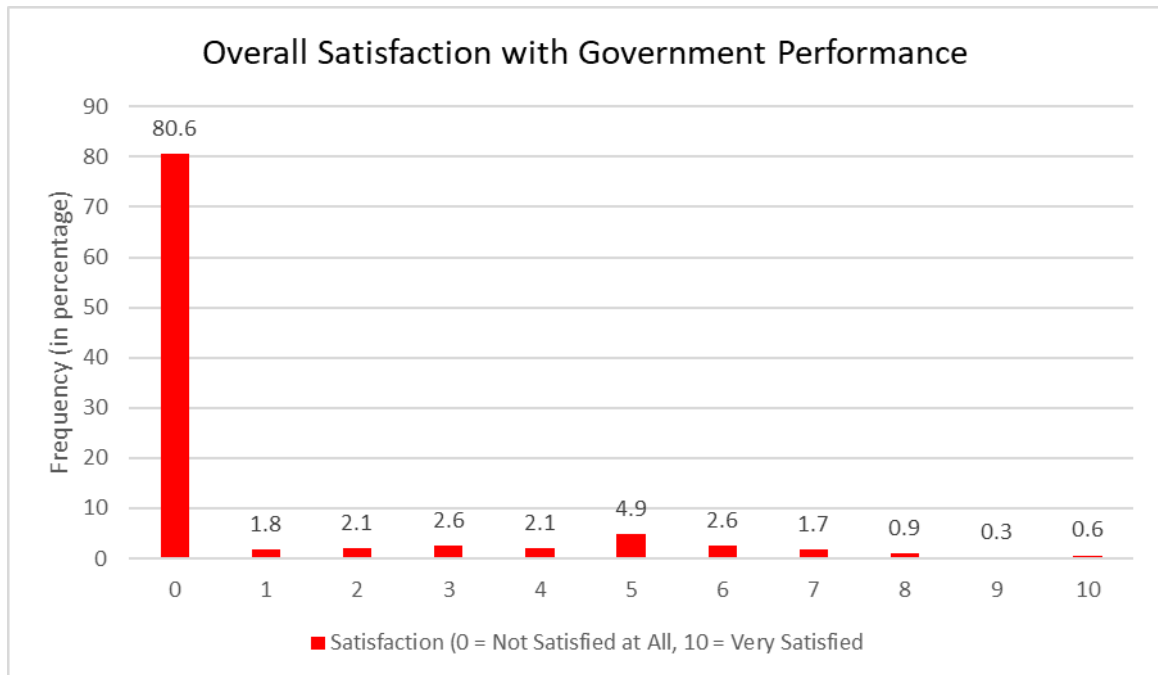
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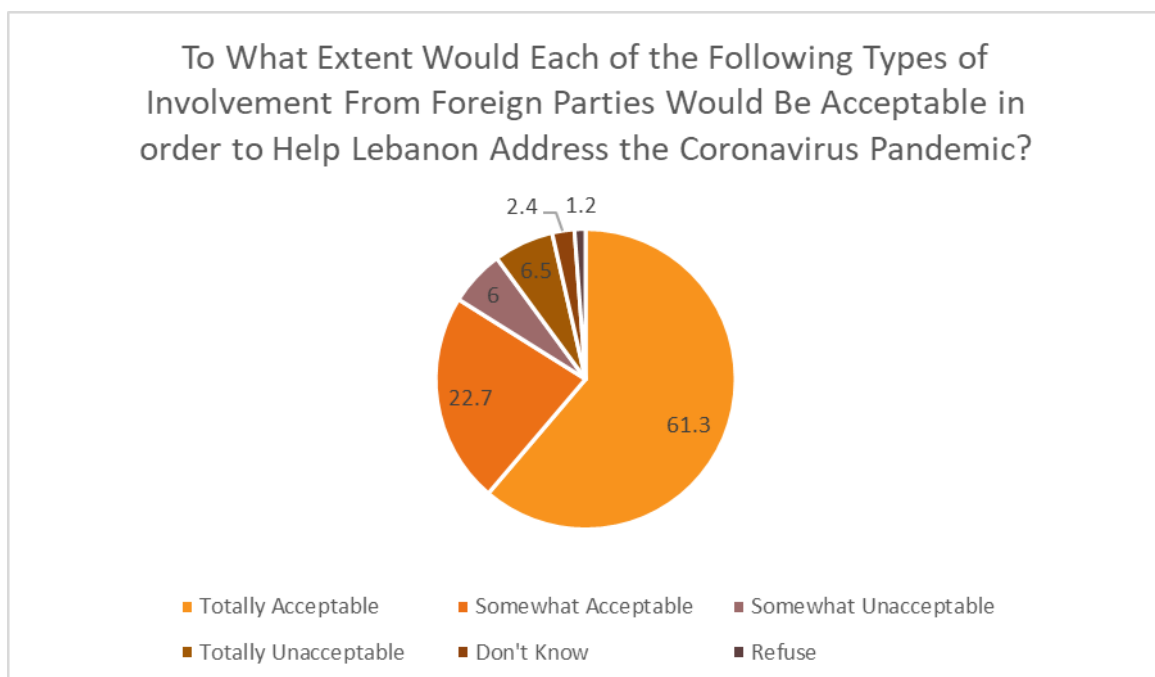
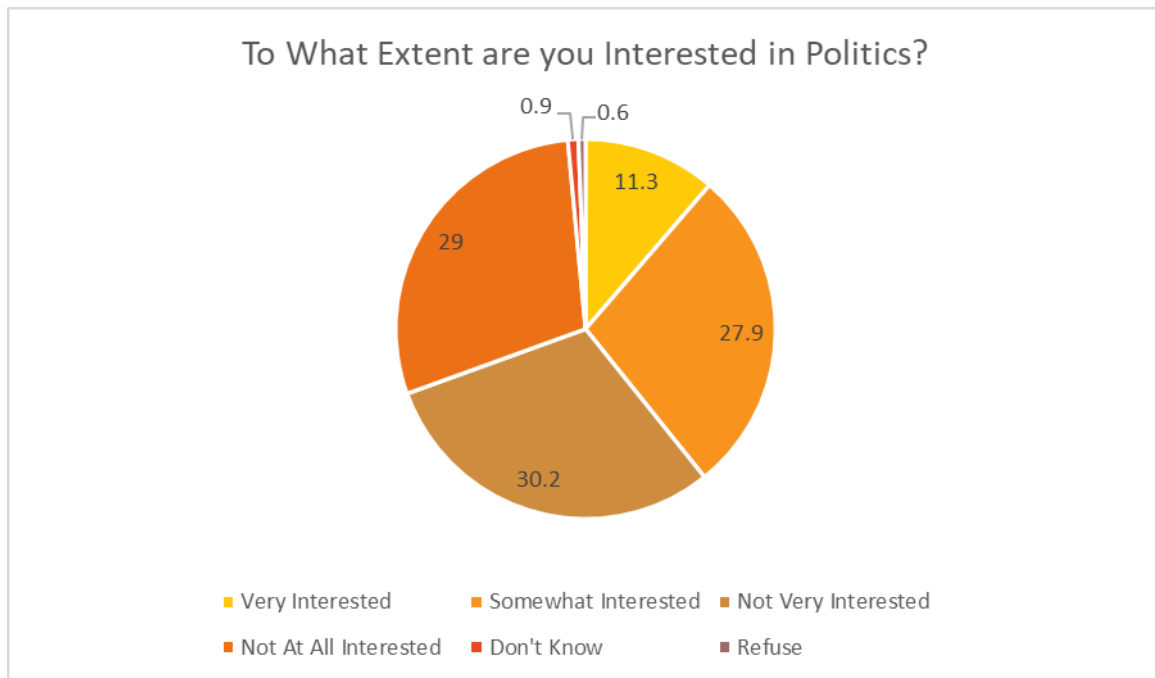
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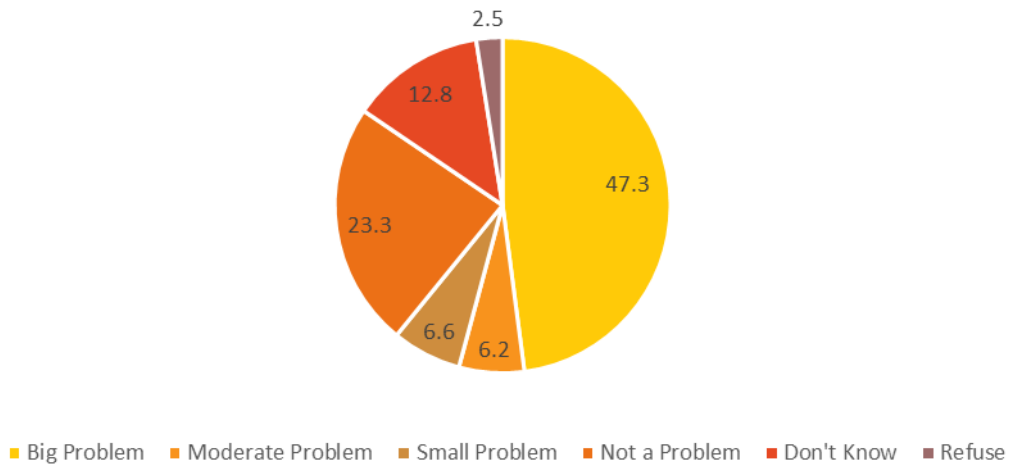
## Appendix

### Lebanon Data

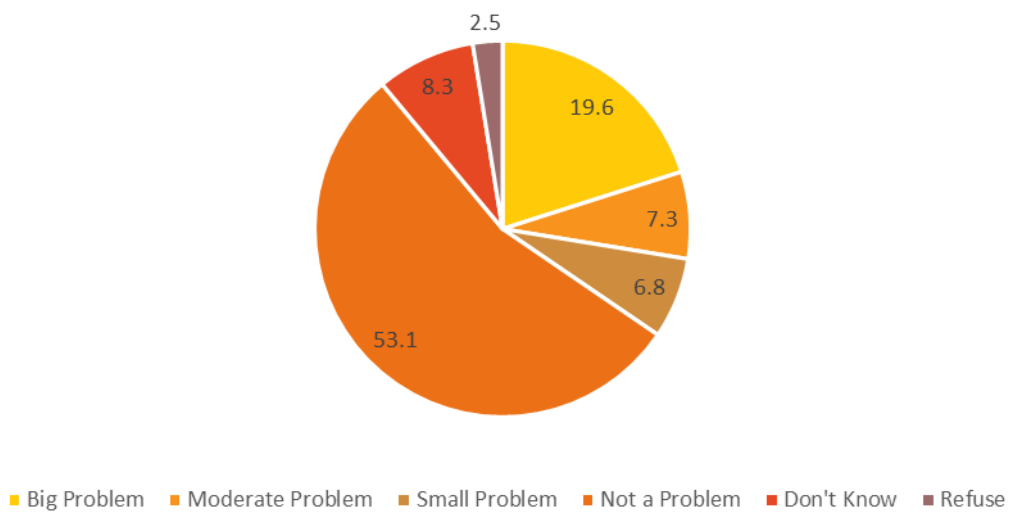


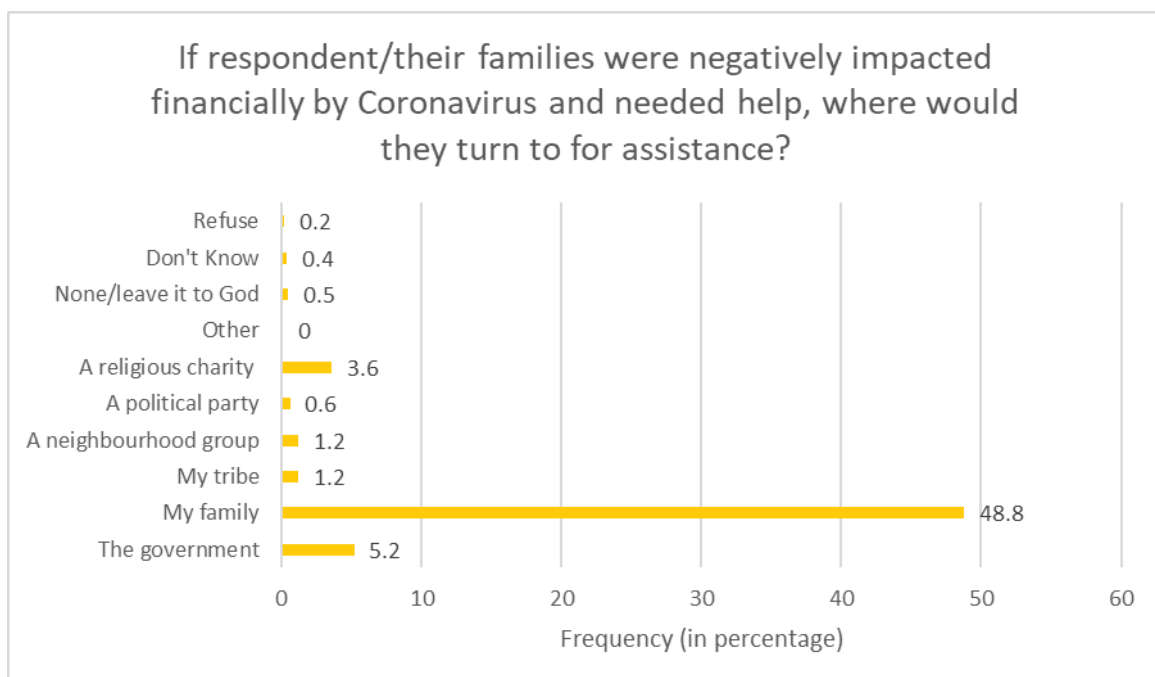
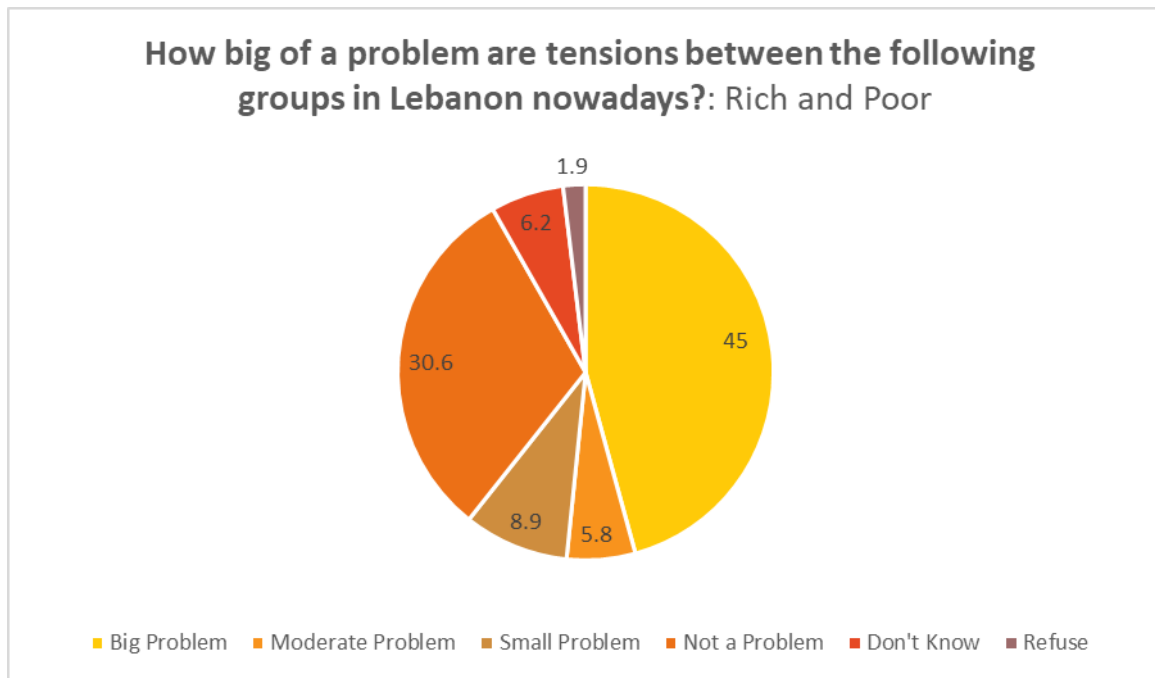


**How big of a problem are tensions between the following groups in Lebanon nowadays?: Government Supporters and Opposition Supporters**



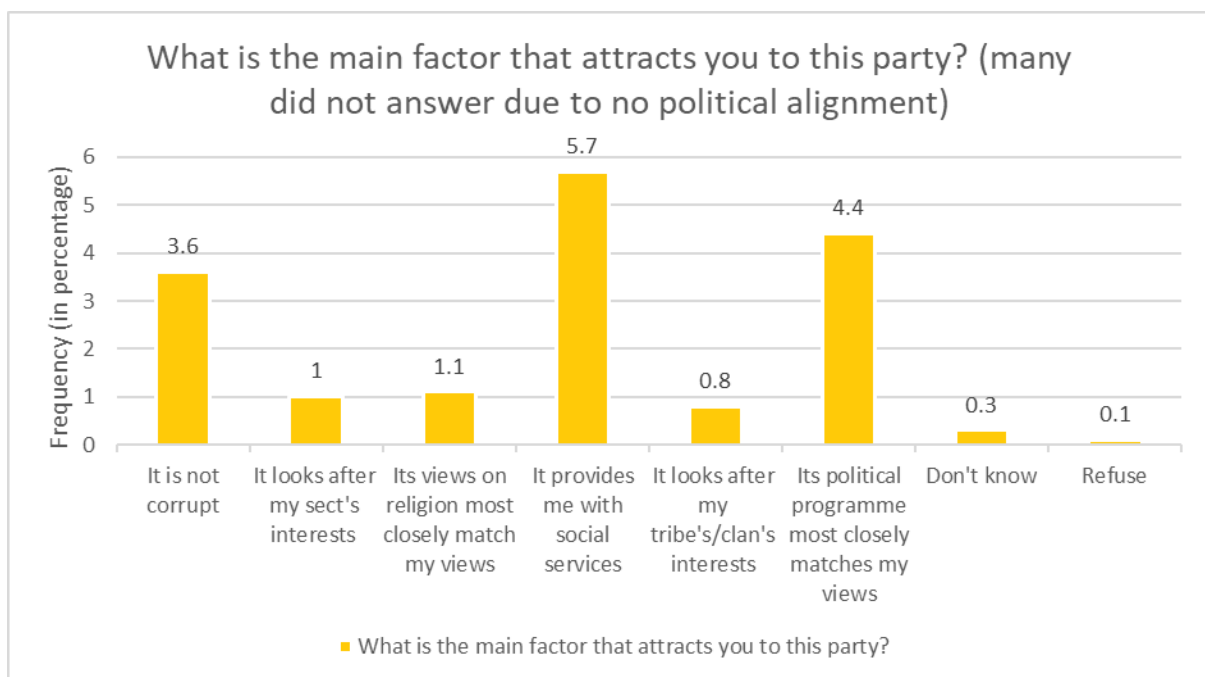
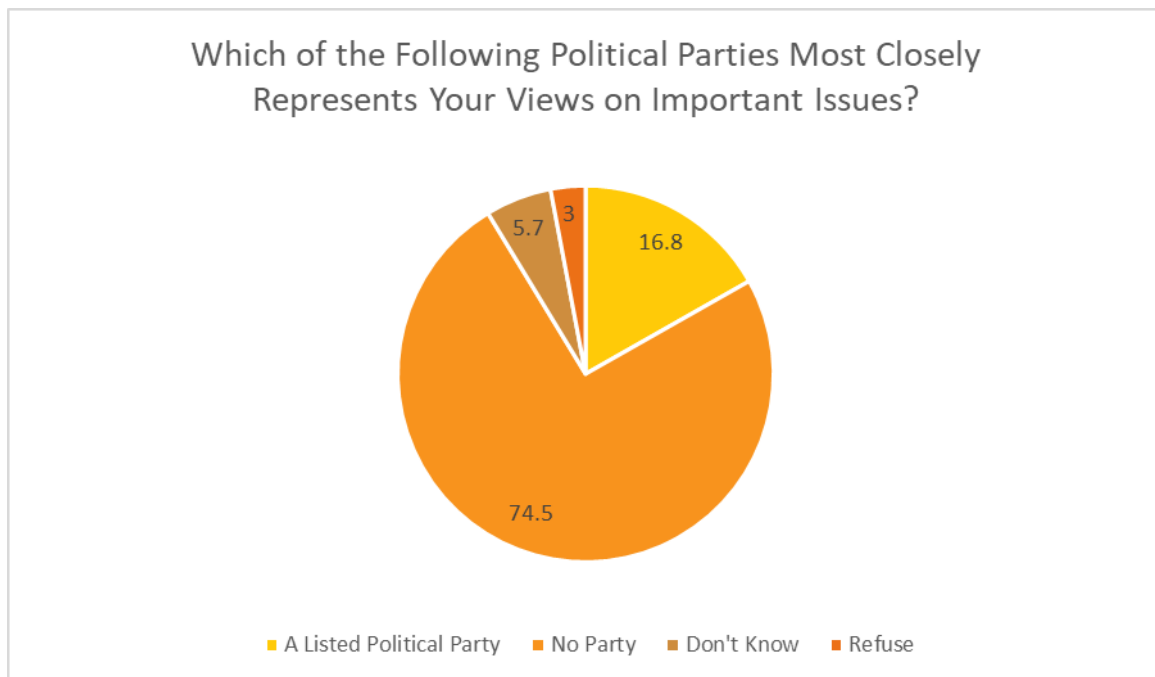
**How big of a problem are tensions between the following groups in Lebanon nowadays?: Sunni and Shi'as**



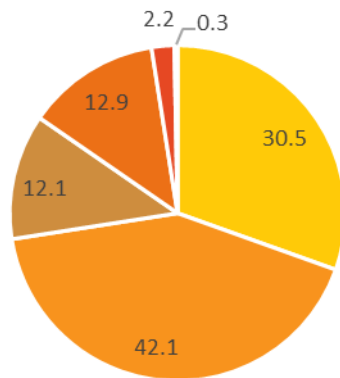




Iraq Data

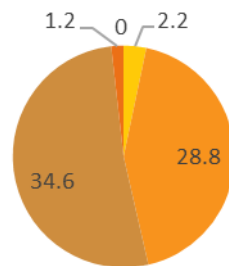


“A politician belonging to a sect different than yours can represent your concerns or solve the problems you and your community face.”



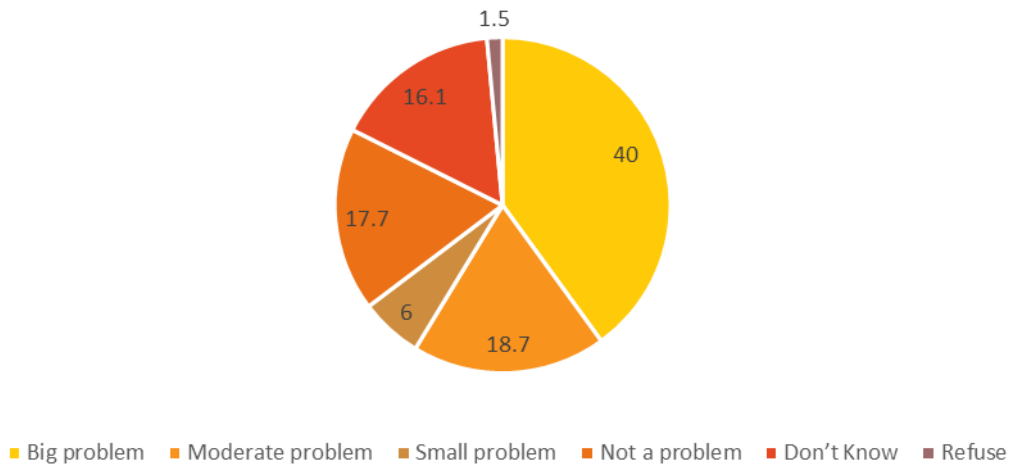
■ Strongly Agree ■ Agree ■ Disagree ■ Strongly Disagree ■ Don't Know ■ Refuse

National issues that are considered important for Iraq, ranked in order of importance

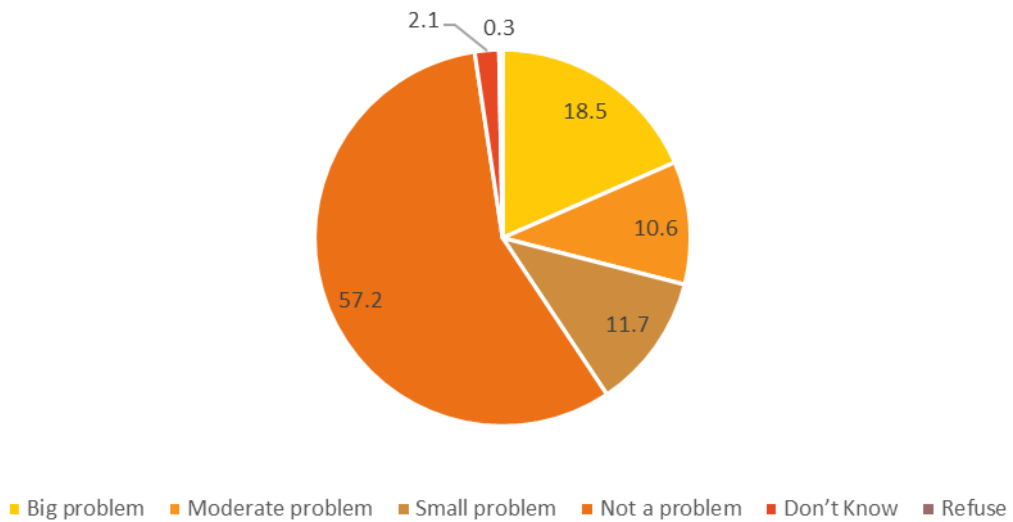


■ Giving people more say in important government decisions  
 ■ Preventing the spread of Coronavirus  
 ■ Fighting poverty and unemployment  
 ■ Reducing sectarian tensions  
 ■ Refuse

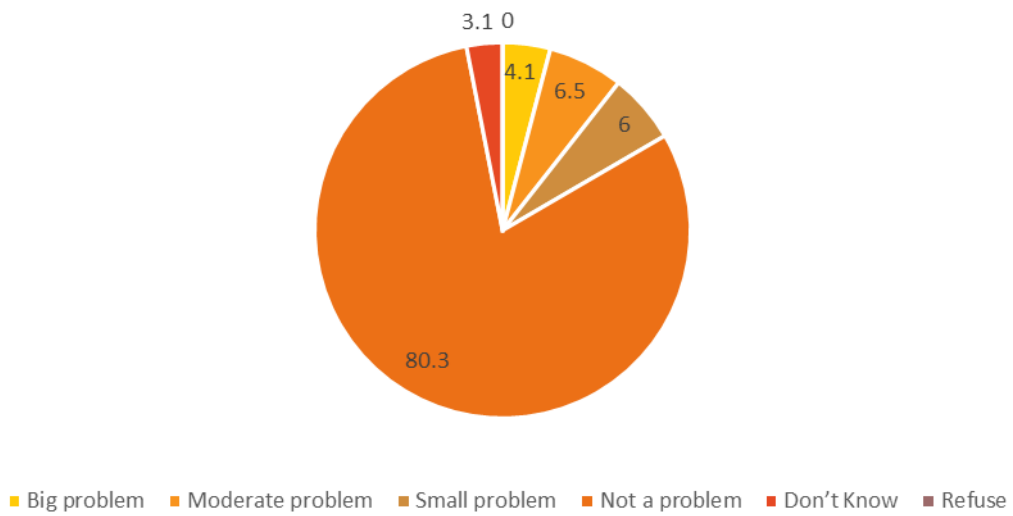
**How big of a problem are tensions between the following groups in Iraq nowadays?: Government Supporters and Opposition Supporters**



**How big of a problem are tensions between the following groups in Iraq nowadays?: Sunni and Shi'as**



**How big of a problem are tensions between the following groups in Iraq nowadays?: Muslims and Christians**



**How big of a problem are tensions between the following groups in Iraq nowadays?: Rich and Poor**

