Desectarianization in Lebanon: Structural Impediments and the Agency of Religious Leaders

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Dedication

When I set out on my PhD journey, I did not expect that it was going to take six years. I did not expect the research and writing to be easy. I did not expect a financially stable life for myself and my family. I did not expect a global pandemic to break out and disrupt my studies. I did not expect the collapse of my home country, Lebanon. I did not expect the Beirut port explosion to have the adverse effect that it had on me. All these things caused me anxiety and many sleepless nights. The only reason I was able to finish this journey is because of the support of my godsent wife, Joyce. Her love and encouragement are the only things I expected… and I got. I dedicate this thesis to her.

Abstract

This thesis examines the multifaceted issue of sectarianism and its negative effects on political stability, economic development, and social cohesion in the country. Using a constructivist framework, this thesis aims to contribute to the existing literature on desectarianization by analyzing the specific context of Lebanon. It identifies three categories of structures that facilitate sectarianization and impede the process of desectarianization: domestic structures, geopolitical structures, and normative structures. Domestic structures involve formal and informal domestic systems that privilege sectarian identities and patronage networks in Lebanon. Geopolitical structures refer to regional dynamics that deepen sectarian divisions. Normative structures encompass social constructs, like mistrust and the absence of inclusive citizenship education, which hinder effective desectarianization. The thesis explores the capacity of religious leaders to act as desectarianization actors to circumvent those structural impediments. Special focus is given to the agency of Shiite clergymen in the Lebanese context.

Table of Contents

Dedication....................ii
Abstract....................iii
Table of Contents....................iv
Acknowledgement....................v
Author's Declaration....................vi
Chapter 1: Confronting Sectarianism in Lebanon....................1
Chapter 2: The Emergence of Sectarianism in Lebanon....................38
Chapter 3: Domestic Impediments to Desectarianization....................56
Chapter 4: Geopolitical Impediments to Desectarianization....................84
Chapter 5: Normative Implements to Desectarianization....................115
Conclusion....................148
Appendix A: Profile of Interviewees....................160
Appendix B: Semi-Structured Interview Questions....................161
Appendix C: Key words and themes from interviews....................162
Bibliography....................167

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Author's Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own personal work and has not been submitted in substantially the same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere.

Chapter 1: Confronting Sectarianism in Lebanon

The Middle East is well known for its rich mosaic of ethnic, religious, and cultural groups that have coexisted for centuries, albeit not always peacefully. This rich tapestry of religious and ethnic groups has fostered a unique regional identity, contributing to the region's cultural wealth and historical significance. However, in recent years, the Middle East has witnessed a resurgence of sectarianism, which increased tension between religious communities, fueled violence, and presented serious impediments to regional stability. Sectarianism is a socio-political phenomenon that refers to damaging divisions and animosities between various ethnoreligious groups. It is a complex issue that arises from interaction between various factors, including but not limited to, historical grievances, political mobilization, economic disparities, and foreign intervention. The persistence of sectarianism, exacerbated by political mobilization from internal and external actors, contributes to intra- and inter-societal tensions, and hinders the formation of a stable and inclusive political framework.

In the last two decades, the Middle East witnessed a resurgence in sectarianism. In the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq and the ousting of the Saddam regime by the US and its coalition partners in 2003, a power vacuum was created. This seminal event destabilized the region as regional and local actors competed to fill the void and control the state's resources. This process set off a chain reaction that reverberated throughout the Middle East, igniting sectarian violence, and further complicating the political and security landscape of the region (Fawcett, 2023). The dismantling of Ba'ath's military regime, coupled with the rise of extremist groups and the meddling of regional and international powers, exacerbated sectarian divisions, and destabilized the region. This atmosphere of conflict laid the groundwork for the challenges that would arise during the Arab Uprisings (Haddad *et al.*, 2022a). As Arab protestors demonstrated in capitals around the Middle East and North Africa, they toppled authoritarian regimes and disrupted the existing political order. A period of chaos followed where power brokers sought to protect their interests and vie for influence in the newly emerging political landscapes (Salloukh, 2013). This provided fertile ground for the growth of sectarianism, as various religious and ethnic groups were mobilized to maximize control (Hinnebusch, 2019b).

The Arab Uprisings aimed to challenge authoritarian rule and promote democratic reforms. However, as ruling regimes sought to preserve their grip on power, they used sectarianism as a tool to oppose change. Ruling elites exploited existing sectarian divisions or manufactured new ones in order to divert attention from political demands and discredit opposition movements (Hashemi

and Postel, 2017). By framing conflicts in sectarian terms, regimes mobilize their core support base and justify their actions as necessary for the preservation of national unity or the protection of religious minorities (Lynch, 2016). For example, the Assad regime in Syria, which is dominated by the Alawite sect, painted the opposition as radical Sunni *takfiri groups* to justify its brutal crackdown on protestors and maintain support from Alawites and other religious minorities (Phillips, 2015a). Similarly, the Sunni ruling monarchy in Bahrain portrayed the majority Shiite opposition as Iranian proxies seeking to destabilize the country and spread Shiite influence (Mabon, 2019f). This narrative has helped the regime justify its crackdown on the opposition and secure support from its neighbor and Sunni powerhouse, Saudi Arabia. In Yemen, as well, conflict between Houthis and the internationally recognized government developed a sectarian character after Iran and Saudi Arabia supported the opposing factions, respectively (Valbjørn, 2018). The consequence of sectarian fighting in those countries, as elsewhere in the Middle East, are catastrophic, causing death, displacement, and suffering to a large percentage of the region's population.

Lebanon has a long history of sectarian conflicts, and it is now witnessing the cumulative devastation of sectarian politics. The country is sinking into one of the world's worst financial crises since the middle of the 19th century (World Bank, 2021b). The economic disaster rapidly diminished the purchasing power of the Lebanese Lira causing unseen-before poverty and unemployment rates (ESCWA, 2021; The National News, 2022). The crisis was also felt by way of fuel scarcity, incessant power outages, food shortages, and major strains to the medical and educational sectors (UN Lebanon, 2021; WFP, 2022; Azhari *et al.*, 2022; World Bank, 2021a). People lost their financial savings and the means to meet their daily needs. The overwhelming sense of frustration and despair are leaving people struggling to survive or escape the country en masse in search for a better future (The Monthly, 2022). In the absence of a national rescue plan that could save the country from financial ruin, deteriorating living conditions are producing a highly volatile security situation (Middle East Report N°228, 2021); Unregulated competition over basic, but scarce, resources antagonize people, which causes social unrest, factional clashes, and politically motivated violence.

A pertinent question to ask is who is responsible for unfolding disaster in Lebanon, and could it have been averted? This type of questioning is helpful because it holds culprits accountable and seeks to restore justice and a level of equity. It is also useful because it helps future governments avoid paths that lead to the same fate. However, this type of questioning can be misleading if it assumes that the current economic crisis is an isolated event or a one-off incident that was not anticipated. The assessment of the World Bank is striking in this regard. According to the Lebanon Economic Monitor, Lebanon is undergoing a "deliberate depression with

unprecedented consequences for its human capital, stability, and prosperity" as a result of premeditated (in)action by the country's political leadership (World Bank, 2022). That is, the economic collapse and the deplorable socioeconomic conditions are direct consequences of policies taken by powerful decisionmakers. It is not an accident that Lebanon's economy is collapsing and tearing apart the country's social fabric. Upon investigation, it becomes apparent that political opportunism and elite corruption are largely to blame for the disintegration of the modern state of Lebanon (Nagle and Fakhoury, 2021a; Merhej, 2021). Still, it is important to ask if the root cause of Lebanon's collapse is a governance issue or a systemic issue, or both. In other words, it makes a big difference if the underlying problem is with the current ruling elites per se and their poor performance in office, or if the problem is systemic and will invariably result in catastrophic outcomes regardless of who is in charge. Proper diagnosis of the problem determines the corrective response.

Confronting sectarianism in Lebanon (Research Problem)

A key concept that pervades order in Lebanon is sectarianism. Sectarianism has permeated nearly "every crook and cranny of Lebanese Life" (Salloukh *et al.*, 2015, p. 3). Sectarianism played a key role in determining the regime in Lebanon and in charting the country's political trajectories (Saouli, 2019a; Salamey, 2013; Ziadeh, 2006). Sectarianism underlies economic structures, distribution of resources, and class struggle in the country (Leenders, 2012a; Baumann, 2016a; Salloukh *et al.*, 2015). Sectarianism animates communal networks, civil society, and gender relations (Cammett, 2014; Kingston, 2013a; Nagle and Fakhoury, 2021b; Deeb, 2020). Sectarianism infringes on biopolitics and influences social structures (Nucho, 2016; Mabon, 2020c; Mikdashi, 2022; Chaer, 2016; Langlois, 2022). Sectarianism heavily shapes the posture of mainstream media outlets and their published content (Salamey and Hussain, 2013; Dajani, 2013; Trombetta *et al.*, 2020; Cochrane, 2007). Sectarianism has also largely framed Lebanon's historiography (Weiss, 2009). To posit that Lebanon's past, present, and near future is fused with sectarianism, is to emphasize the role that sectarianism plays in ordering the public and private lives of Lebanon's inhabitants.

Sectarianism is unavoidable when it comes to discussing political affairs or reform in Lebanon (Mikdashi, 2017). Any attempt to recover Lebanon from its downward spiral must address factors that agitate sectarian differences in the country. To that end, this research aims to explore means to move beyond sectarianism in Lebanon. It does so by asking three interrelated questions: What does it mean to move beyond sectarianism? What structures reproduce sectarianism in the

Lebanese context? And what can religious leaders do to circumvent those structures in order to pave the way for a post-sectarian order in Lebanon?

The notion of moving beyond sectarianism is contingent upon and complicated by a web of meanings that underlie sectarianism. This prompted a number of scholars to try and address this directly by providing elaborate definitions for sectarianism. For instance, Bassel Salloukh alongside a group of Lebanese authors state that "sectarianism is a modern constitutive Foucauldian socioeconomic and political power that produces and reproduces sectarian subjects and modes of political subjectification and mobilization through a dispersed ensemble of institutional, clientelist, and discursive practices" (Salloukh *et al.*, 2015, p. 3). In contrast to Salloukh's definitional focus on power dynamics, Raymond Hinnebusch highlights the identity aspect of sectarianism. He defines sectarianism as "identification with a religious community that sharply emphasizes boundaries with the 'Other', particularly when politicized, and even more so when involving claims of a monopoly over religious truth (Hinnebusch, 2019a, pp. 41–42). Still, another approach is taken by Adham Saouli which emphasizes social relations. Saouli writes that "sectarianism is a social actor's (individual or group) feeling of belonging, devotion, and allegiance to a sectarian community within a social context. The strongly felt belonging leads a social actor to exalt their community above others" (Saouli, 2019a, p. 69). These three sample definitions shed light on how sectarianism manifests itself in various ways. At the same time, the nuances in these definitions underscore the elastic and ambiguous nature of sectarianism (Makdisi, 2017b).

To circumvent the conundrum of trying to provide a standard definition for sectarianism that captures the many layers that are laden in the term, scholars sought to retire the "sectarianism" label in at least two ways: indirectly by avoiding its usage, and directly by calling for its discontinuation. The former can be observed in nuanced research that concentrates on the manifestation of sectarianism in a specific field. This type of scholarship investigates sectarian dimensions of the field in question in order to shed light on the complexity that sectarianism generates there. For example, this includes studies that explore sectarian politics (Valbjørn, 2020b; Hinnebusch *et al.*, 2019; Potter, 2014), sectarian violence (Carpenter, 2013; Gonzalez, 2009; Khalaf, 2002a), sectarian identities (Sayej, 2018; Alkooheji and Sinha, 2017; Iskander, 2012), sectarian spaces (SEPAD, 2020; Kasbarian and Mabon, 2016; Nagle, 2013), or sectarian discourse (Alghashian and Menshawy, 2022; Corstange and York, 2018a; Al-Rasheed, 2011). Furthermore, it is possible to avoid providing a holistic definition of sectarianism by narrowing the context under study. Research that focuses on sectarianism in specific countries are examples of that (Haddad, 2011; Nucho, 2016; Matthiesen, 2013). Either way, the point is to narrow the scope of inquiry pertaining to sectarianism, thus obviating the need for a universal definition.

Moreover, the ambiguous character of sectarianism and the inescapable difficulty inherent in trying to define the concept, prompted some scholars to openly call for abandoning the "sectarianism" label altogether. In his detailed study of how the "sectarianism" label is deployed in Arabic and English literature and popular usage, Fanar Haddad concludes that sectarianism "is not something that identifiably exists; rather, it is shorthand for a variety of symbols, behaviors, actions, attitudes and other phenomena related to sectarian identity" (Haddad, 2020b, p. 47). Haddad suggests that it is analytically more useful to speak of sectarian identities, rather than sectarianism. In addition, he argues that "sectarian" should only be used as a prefix to other terms (i.e. sectarian hate or sectarian identity), rather than a standalone adjective (e.g. accusing someone of being "sectarian"). Haddad correctly observes that "sectarianism" as a blanket term is unhelpful for analyzing political developments, because it obscures the forces at play. At the same time, giving up usage of the term risks undermining the complexity that characterizes the concept. It also downplays the prominence that sectarianism has played in shaping international relations of the Middle East (POMEPS, 2020; Gause, 2013). The generic term captures circumstances and factors that delineate and harden sectarian identities, though not necessarily with intentions to do so. For that reason, this research does not completely retire the sectarianism label, but refers to it sparingly to capture its broad ramifications.

Conceptualizing sectarianism

In the absence of a clear and uncontested definition for sectarianism, scholars have sought to differentiate between what they perceived are different types of sectarianism. Dichotomies have been drawn between positive vs. negative sectarianism, every day vs. elitist sectarianism, and bottom-up vs. top-down sectarianism (Haddad, 2011; Weiss, 2010a; Gengler, 2020; Dodge, 2014a). Alternative grouping introduces "banal", "instrumentalized" and "militant" types of sectarianism (Hinnebusch, 2016a). The different forms in which sectarianism manifests itself prompted Rima Majed, following the works of Brubaker on ethnicity (Brubaker, 2004), to conceive of sectarianism as a "practice of categorization" (Majed, 2020). In that regard, various conceptual and methodological approaches have been used to help frame diverse instances of sectarianism. Based on his survey of the post-2011 literature on sectarianism in the Middle East, Morten Valbjørn highlights four main strategies used by scholars to observe sectarianism (Valbjørn, 2021). The first strategy is to focus on the attitude and personal experiences of people exposed to sectarianism. This strategy emphasizes the importance of grasping sectarianism as perceived by the people affected by it (see for example (Fibiger, 2020; Deeb, 2020). The second strategy is to focus on the discourse used to advance sectarianism. This strategy examines sectarian narratives and sectarian framing of events across different platforms (see for example (Malmvig, 2020; Corstange and York,

2018b). The third strategy is to focus on the actual behavior of actors dealing with sectarianism. This strategy concentrates on observing the practices of regimes or non-state actors that are in engaged in or responding to sectarianism (see for example (Hinnebusch, 2019a; Gause, 2017). The final strategy focuses on public institutions that reinforce sectarianism. This strategy scrutinizes structures that propagate public displays of sectarianism, whether deliberately or not (see for example (Mabon, 2020b; Salloukh, 2020)

The broad scope available for conceptualizing, grasping and mapping sectarianism in the Middle East opens the door for questions about the source(s) of sectarianism: where does sectarianism come from? What causes sectarianism's ebb and flow? And what explains the recent surge of sectarianism in the Middle East? The answers to these questions typically lie on a spectrum that has primordialism on one end and instrumentalism on the other. Primordialism, and its variants "essentialism", "perennialism", or "ethnonationalism", emphasize the influence of biology, history, and culture on human behavior (Dixon, 2017). People essentially act according to parameters defined by identities that are deeply rooted. These identities are perceived as fixed, linked to a territorial space, and reinforced by traditions and social norms (Mabon and Ardovini, 2017). Thus, primordialists view modern Sunni-Shiite sectarianism in the Middle East as an expression of the ancient feud between followers of Islam's prophet, Mohammad, over the issue of succession (Nasr, 2006a). The feud, which dates back to the seventh century, was not resolved. Instead, it evoked growing hatred between two claimant-groups to the caliphate after the prophet's death: Mohammad's closest companions (Sunnis) and Mohammad's blood relatives (Shiites). Over the centuries, identities of the opposing groups evolved and hardened, creating animosity and a deep schism between Sunnis and Shiites (Dixon, 2017). These conflicting identities are very powerful because they are natural, meaning they are not imagined, but based on common descent. Thus, ethnosectarian identities have overwhelming influence on individual and group behavior (Dixon, 2017, pp. 17–18). From the perspective of primordialism, then, Sunnis and Shiites are bound to clash in their home region of the Middle East because the historical processes that produced them cannot be undone. What intensifies tension between the two groups are circumstances and events that reawaken intra-sectarian solidarity or inter-sectarian animosity, like the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran or the 2003 collapse of the pro-Sunni Baath regime in Iraq (Abdo, 2016a).

On the other side of the spectrum, instrumentalism claims that conflict between sectarian groups is not the outcome of ancient hatred or irreconcilable identities, but the result of power competition between political elites. In the instrumentalist framework, sectarian identities are not fluid, but "primarily seen as superficial political constructs, open to manipulation and exploitation

by political elites, who use sectarian fearmongering to garner vested patron-client relationships, as gateways to mass mobilization, or as powerful levers in regional rivalries" (Malmvig, 2015, p. 34). Instead of focusing on the content of sectarian identities to explain sectarian clashes, instrumentalists emphasize how sectarian identities are exploited by rational actors for material gain (Dixon, 2017). Behind the flaring of sectarian tension is the self-interest of a ruling authority (political or religious). Instrumentalists highlight the authoritarian context in which sectarianism thrives as a direct cause for the flaring of sectarian conflicts. Authoritarian rulers exacerbate existing sectarian divisions as a form of divide and conquer. They privilege one sect or simply marginalize another sect in ways that increase suspicion and tensions between the two sects. In doing so, rulers bolster their regime and shield it against a popular united front. As an example, Madawi Al-Rasheed points to the practice of Saudi authorities to exaggerate sectarian differences during the Arab Uprisings as a counter revolutionary strategy to prevent the development of national non-sectarian politics that threaten monarchic rule (Al-Rasheed, 2011). From the perspective of instrumentalism, then, sectarianism is a resource used by domestic or regional powers to thwart off threats and balance against each other (Gause, 2014). Thus, sectarianism is not inevitable, but subject to the security calculations of ruling authorities.

The primordialism-instrumentalism polarity is helpful for mapping various perspectives on the debate of how to explain sectarianism. However, upon close inspection, it appears that the space at either extremity, but to a lesser degree on the instrumentalist end, is mostly populated by uncritical politicians, commentators, and journalists (Valbjørn, 2020a). Those actors, in the West as well as in the Middle East, leverage mainstream media to project sectarian conflicts as either the latest episode of a never-ending ancient feud (see for example (See for example Dahan, 2018), or the outcome of cold and conniving conspiracy theories (see for example Ref, 173-197). In informed academic circles, by contrast, it is difficult to find scholars that are genuine primordialist or "pure" instrumentalists (Valbjørn, 2021). Scholars are cognizant that there are multiple factors that shape sectarian identities and cause sectarian confrontations. So, while scholars may place more emphasis on some factors over others, this should not be translated as subscribing wholeheartedly to one of the two camps. Rather, what is becoming more common in academia is a desire to find a theory for understanding sectarianism that is situated somewhere in the middle between primordialism and instrumentalism. This middle point is constructivism.

Constructivism comes from the field of social theory. It refers to a perspective that views reality as socially constructed through human interactions, language, and culture. In that reality, individuals actively create and interpret their own realities rather than passively receive them. In their influential book, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*

(1967), Berger and Luckmann propose that reality is an ongoing human construction achieved through social interactions. They argue that individuals collectively create meanings and interpretations through everyday interactions, which are then institutionalized and become part of the broader social reality. According to Berger and Luckmann, this process of social construction is continually reinforced through socialization and is integral to the maintenance of social order.

In the field of politics and international relations, constructivism extends its insights to state behavior, interactions between states, and the dynamics of the international system. Constructivism emphasizes the significance of social interactions, norms, and ideas in shaping political behavior, institutions, and outcomes (Wendt, 1999; Onuf, 1989). Unlike traditional IR theories that focus on material factors such as power dynamics (Mearsheimer, 2001) or economic interests (Nye Jr., 1991), constructivism suggests that beliefs, identities, and values play a crucial role in shaping political processes. Constructivism posits that the meaning of concepts such as identity, security, and sovereignty is constructed through interactions between various actors. In the context of sectarianism, constructivism argues that sectarian identities are not essential or natural, nor random or entirely malleable. Rather, sectarian identities are shaped and reshaped through circumstances, political discourse, and social interactions between different groups. A constructivist approach acknowledges that sectarian identities have historical roots, but those identities are continuously being morphed as they are instrumentalized by various actors (Darwich and Fakhoury, 2016a; Hashemi and Postel, 2017). As a given sectarian discourse is instrumentalized and gains prevalence, sectarian identities take on a life of their own and appear as almost primordial (Valbjørn and Hinnebusch, 2019).

In the constructivist middle ground, Valbjörn sees a crowded field with all sort of "third way" concepts that are trying to get beyond the dichotomy primordialism and instrumentalism. Valbjörn provides a helpful typology to group those possible ways. Those "beyond strategies" are the New Savior, the Baby and the Bathwater and the LEGO Eclectic strategies (Valbjørn, 2020a). The first two strategies relate to primordialism and instrumentalism in opposite ways. The New Savior strategy posits that primordialism and instrumentalism are too simplistic that they have to be rejected to give space to other theoretical approaches that could explain sectarianism more accurately. One such approach is constructivism. Constructivism claims that sectarian identities are neither natural nor given as primordialists believe, nor are they completely malleable as instrumentalists suggest. Rather, sectarian identities are socially constructed to resemble an imagined entity. From that perspective, sectarianism is perceived as a process that is continuously at work shaping and reshaping sectarian identities. Valbjörn identities several forces that engage in this process of (re)construction, such as authoritarian regimes (See for example Hashemi and

Postel, 2017; Hinnebusch, 2020; Mabon, 2019f), institutional structures (See for example Valbjørn and Hinnebusch, 2019; Gengler, 2019; Salloukh, 2017a), and historical processes (See for example Dodge, 2018; Saouli, 2015; Haddad, 2011). Other forces include clerical authorities (See for example Henley, 2017; Al-Qarawee, 2019; Alaaldin, 2018) and different forms of media (See for example Salamey and Hussain, 2013; Iskander, 2012). The underlying premise in the New Savior strategy is that there are better explanations for sectarianism that exists outside the confines of primordialism and instrumentalism, and they could come from various fields of studies, not least sociology and political philosophy (Valbjørn, 2021).

Unlike the New Savior strategy, the Bathwater strategy finds merit in primordialism and instrumentalism, though not in their pure form. So, rather than throwing out the baby with the bathwater (i.e., abandoning the two classic positions), the Bathwater strategy argues for their revision. One way to do that is by combining primordialism and institutionalism as do Naser and Abdo in their attempt to explain the surge of sectarianism in the Middle East (Nasr, 2017; Abdo, 2016a). Another way is to start with a recognition that sectarian identities are socially constructed, but because they are hardened over time, they become very difficult to reshape, and are best treated "as if" they are primordial. Valbjörn points to the work of Khalil Osman on sectarianism in Iraq as a clear example of that, where Osman openly commits to upgrading primordialism by "recasting the concept into forms that would satisfy the critics' strictures against the presumed essentialist naturalness of primordial attachments" (Osman, 2015, p. 36). The Bathwater strategy, then, is a way to salvage the salient features of primordialism and instrumentalism but without being controlled by them.

The third strategy for a meaningful departure from the primordialism and instrumentalism dichotomy is LEGO theorizing. This strategy assumes that no single approach on its own can provide a comprehensive explanation for sectarianism. To fill that gap, followers of the LEGO strategy adopt an eclectic approach that interlocks a mixture of approaches and theories, in a manner similar to assembling a LEGO building. This strategy can be applied to provide the full picture of sectarianism at a regional level, or state-level. An example of the latter is Valbjörn's own analysis of sectarianism in Yemen (Valbjørn, 2018), where he "combines instrumentalism (to explain domestic elites and regional actors original motives), constructivism (how sectarian identities became internalized and influenced threat perceptions), and institutionalism (the role collapsing state institutions) as complementary layers of explanations that all contribute to an understanding of the complex interplay between different drivers and actors placed at regional, state-institutional, elite, and society levels" (Valbjørn, 2020a, p. 101). The LEGO theorizing strategy acknowledges that

sectarianism is a complex phenomenon that requires a multi-level analysis; There is no grand theory that can do it justice.

It is important to highlight at this point that this research acknowledges the inherently social nature of sectarianism. This research approaches sectarianism from a constructivist perspectives, meaning that sectarian identities are treated as social constructs (Chandra, 2012). The research accepts that sectarian identities are not an inherent or natural aspect of human society, but rather they are a product of historical, cultural, and social processes. Instead of treating them as ancient, fixed, and/or enduring, this research treats sectarian identities as flexible, situational, and heterogenous (Majed, 2020). Furthermore, this research adopts the eclectic LEGO approach to analyze sectarianism because that approach embraces the complexity of sectarianism and encourages a holistic perspective that integrates diverse theoretical insights. While the LEGO eclectic approach could result in theoretical fragmentation and difficulty in synthesizing disparate explanations, it promises to provide, by comparison, a more nuanced understanding of sectarian dynamics through avoiding the pitfalls of oversimplification or theoretical bias.

Moreover, approaching sectarianism from a constructivist-LEGO perspective makes it possible to systematically consider different factors that reproduce sectarianism. As a social construct, sectarianism relies on structures that not only sustain its existence but also contribute to its reproduction over time (Shihade 2009). This encompasses formal structures and non-formal structures (Mabon, 2019e). Formal structures constitute institutionalized systems that wield significant influence over societal dynamics. These structures are often overt, codified, and sanctioned by official authorities, reinforcing sectarian divisions through legal, political, and economic mechanisms. Non-formal structures, on the other hand, operate on a more subtle level, permeating everyday interactions and shaping cultural norms. They are deeply ingrained in the fabric of daily life, influencing individuals' attitudes, decisions, and interactions. Investigating the LEGO bricks of formal and informal structures facilitates a holistic understanding of the complex interplay of forces animating sectarianism. More importantly, it lays the groundwork for investigating the agency of various actors to confront those structures that reproduce sectarianism.

Moving beyond sectarianism

The broad consensus that sectarianism is neither a pure primordialist phenomenon nor ruthless instrumentalization of sectarian identities, but it is in large part constructed, makes it reasonable to speak of sectarianism as a process. Ussama Makdisi had already made this observation in 2008 whilst critiquing orientalist treatment of sectarianism (Makdisi, 2008), as did many scholars following the rise of sectarian violence post-2011 (See for example Mabon, 2019e;

Hinnebusch, 2016b; Haddad, 2020a; Strobl, 2020; Mabon, 2019g; Phillips, 2016a). Yet, it was the work of Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel that helped popularize the constructedness of sectarianism (Hashemi and Postel, 2017). In their introduction to their co-edited book, *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*, they introduce the sectarianization thesis as "a process shaped by political actors operating within specific contexts, pursuing political goals that involve popular mobilization around particular (religious) identity markers (pg. 4). To Hashemi and Postel, the sectarianization process is a top-down process driven primarily by authoritarian regimes. Authoritarian regimes deliberately manipulate sectarian identities in various ways as a dual strategy for deflecting popular political and economic demands, and for cementing their position in power (pg. 5).

The sectarianization thesis follows a similar logic used by the Copenhagen school of security studies. The elemental assumption behind the school's securitization theory is that there are no security issues in and of themselves. Issues are rather constructed as security issues for the purpose of legitimizing the use of some extraordinary measures (Buzan *et al.*, 1998). Ole Wæver and Barry Buzan, the pioneers of the theory, define securitization as "the discursive process through which an intersubjective understanding is constructed within a political community to treat something as an existential threat to a valued referent object, and to enable a call for urgent and exceptional measure to deal with the threat" (Buzan, 2003, p. 491). Securitization is effectively escalating an issue to a degree that makes it an existential threat, and thus requires immediate and abnormal actions to remedy it. It is a deliberate process that urges the suspension of normal politics, and the use of exceptional measures to neutralize an imminent threat. Securitizing actors drive the process of securitization by attaching existential importance to a referent object, identifying an existential threat to that object, and presenting the security issue to a particular audience for their approval of extraordinary measures. Referent objects could be materialistic, ideological, or conceptual (e.g., state sovereignty, liberal democracy, or cyberspace). According to the theory, an issue is successfully securitized only when an intended audience accepts the securitizer's claim (i.e., securitization move), and thereby consents to the use of emergency measures that would not have otherwise been permitted if the securitizer did not construct a catastrophic scenario as a consequence of inaction.

Applying the securitization frame in the Middle East context comes with several challenges and limitations (for a detailed study about that, see (Bilgin, 2011) and (Mabon, 2018a). At the same time, securitization theory is particularly useful when it is in dialogue with the sectarianization thesis. Where securitization and sectarianization intersect is over framing a sectarian community as an existential threat to national security or to another sectarian community. Whether the threat

is real or perceived, elites frame a sectarian community as an imminent threat to justify the marginalization and repression of that community. This consequently enhances the sectarianizing elites' authority and legitimacy as defenders of the state or their own sectarian community.

Over the last two decades, several countries in the Middle East engaged in state-led sectarianization. For instance, the ruling family in Bahrain pursued a policy of "securitization through sectarianization" to crack down on the 2011 political protests (Matthiesen, 2017). Matthiesen notes that the monarchy supported Sunni Islamic movements after the Islamic revolution in Iran, to counter the influence of local Shiites on the island, and to "undermine the possibility of a broad-based coalition demanding democratic change" (pg. 200). In a similar context, al-Rasheed points to how the Saudi regime used Sunni-Shiite division to counter the domino effect of the Arab uprisings (Rasheed, 2011). According to al-Rasheed, the kingdom framed peaceful protests at home as a "Shia conspiracy against the Sunni majority with the objective of spreading Iran's influence in the Sunni homeland" (pg. 514). By doing so, the Saudi regime undermined efforts to mobilize people in various cities, and eliminated the need to make concessions. Moreover, by examining Saudi Arabia and Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian conflict, Tamrice Fakhoury and May Darwich show that "securitizing sectarianism" can occur transnationally and by non-state actors as well (Darwich and Fakhoury, 2016a). Other examples from Yemen (Valbjørn, 2018), Syria (Hadaya, 2020; Wimmen, 2018a), Iraq (Dodge and Mansour, 2020), and across the region more broadly (Mabon, 2018b) further demonstrate not only that sectarian identities are constructed and securitized, but also that they are manipulated to legitimize the use of extraordinary means (Malmvig, 2014).

A key concept that is related to securitization, and relevant for the discussion on moving beyond sectarianism, is desecuritization. Desecuritization, as the name suggests, is the mirror opposite of the securitization process. The main aim of desecuritization is to remove an issue from the sphere of security, and to place it in the realm of political debate (Wæver, 1995). It is about deescalating the security status of an issue so that it is no longer a threat. Desecuritization seeks to reverse what securitization accomplished. There are various ways to do that. Lene Hansen (2012) argues that there are four forms of desecuritization that capture any desecuritization attempt. Those forms are:

> *Change through stabilization* [which] is when an issue is cast in terms other than security, but where the larger conflict still looms; *replacement* [which] is when an issue is removed from the securitized, while another securitization takes its place; *rearticulation* [which] is when an issue is moved from the securitized to the politicized due to a resolution of the

threats and dangers that underpinned the original securitization; and *silencing* [which] is when de-securitization takes the form of a depoliticization, which marginalizes potentially insecure subjects. (pg. 529; italics in original).

By seeking to reverse the outcome of securitization, desecuritization functions on the same logic and assumption that underpin securitization. Since securitization reveals one's perception of self and of others, identity politics stand prominently behind security speech acts (Buzan and Weaver, 2009). By extension, this applies to desecuritization. In other words, at the heart of it, desecuritization works to resolve the "friend-enemy distinction" on which securitization is built (Hansen, 2012). An example of what that might look like in the Middle East context can be seen in how Turkey transformed its relationship with Syria and Iran, between the years 2000 and 2010, from that of hostility to cooperation (Aras and Karakaya Polat, 2008). However, the aggressive shift in Turkey's foreign policy towards Syria post-2011 illustrates the fragility of security arrangements and the significant impact that geopolitical factors have over securitization and threat perceptions (Kösebalaban, 2020).

Sectarianization does not operate in a vacuum but is conditioned by power balancing at domestic and regional levels. Indeed, geopolitical shifts since the Arab uprisings facilitated the securitization of sectarian identities in the Middle East (Mabon, 2019a). The competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran to dominate the region after 2003 contributed directly to the securitization of Shiites across the Arab world (Malmvig, 2014). Regimes across the region deployed sectarian discourse as a mechanism for preventing societies from forming a united opposition, and as a means for strengthening the regime's grip on power. Subsequently, political, social, and economic life orbited to a large extent around sectarian differences, which enabled sectarian entrepreneurs to further fragment society for their own benefits (SEPAD, 2018). Raffaella Del Sarto (2021) identities a self-perpetuating aspect to this mechanism of "sectarian securitization", a point similarly made by Yassin al-Haj Saleh (2017b). As sectarianization actors cultivate a heightened sense of insecurity amongst domestic groups, people respond reprehensively and out of fear against others, effectively setting in motion a "vicious cycle" that "foment fear and self-sustaining in-group/out-group biases, which, once unleashed, are extremely difficult to rein in" (Del Sarto, 2021, p. 762). From that perspective, it is critical to consider ways of breaking this vicious cycle; a process more frequently referred to as desectarianization.

Desectarianization is a relatively new field of study that is concerned with the mechanics of moving beyond sectarianism. The notion of bringing an end to sectarianism is not new, of course,

but recent studies have sought to provide a systematic way of framing that. Desectarianization does not stop at saying the sectarian identities do not have to clash, but considers ways for sectarian identities not to clash. Desectarianization builds on the logic that informs sectarianization and desecuritization. It approaches sectarianism from the perspectives of those two concepts in tandem. Desectarianization posits that since sectarian identities are constructed, then they can be deconstructed and re-constructed. Moreover, since sectarian differences are manipulated by sectarian elites to secure political survival, it is possible to imagine conditions that preclude or limit the capacity of those elites to do that, whilst respecting distinctiveness of sectarian identities. By combining those premises, desectarianization can then be described as a series of moves that challenge the political conditions which produce and frame sectarian groups as existential threats (Mabon, 2019a). In other words, desectarianization is a process that aims at diffusing sectarian tension by furnishing conditions that replace the conditions that enable sectarianization. It is path dependent in that it seeks to undo what sectarianization causes.

At a macro level, desectarianization is about countering sectarianism and its negative consequences. At a micro level, desectarianization encompasses a vast array of anti/counter/post/trans/cross/non/multi-sectarian moves that challenge a sectarianized order (Valbjørn, 2020b). The different ways of carrying out desectarianization reflect the complexity that characterizes sectarianism. It also reveals possible imaginaries about the role of religion in establishing a post-sectarian order. Anti/counter-sectarianism rejects any role be given to religion in organizing political life. This approach makes no space for sectarian particularities when it comes to ordering public life. Proponents of this approach campaign for a secular system to replace sect-based governance structures. A moderate example of this is the "Citizens in a State" political party in Lebanon. The party wants political representation to be connected to the people's place of residence and not to their familial or sectarian affiliations (MMFD, 2019). Still, the reason why the party is considered a *moderate* example of anti-sectarianism is because it is not totally against sectarian arrangement in the public arena. The party commits to establishing a uniform code of personal status independent from sect, but will make provision for whomever wants to relate to the state through sectarian mediation by applying to belong to one of the sects (MMFD, 2019).

Tans/cross/multi-sectarian approaches to desectarianization accept the salience of sectarian identities in society and try to harmonize that to challenge the sectarian status quo. Such approaches do not always have an articulated vision for what the new desired order looks like. Rather, the focus is on mobilizing a large and representative group to address an issue of common concern. The 2019 Lebanon uprising serves as an example of that. People from all sectarian backgrounds went to the streets initially to protest unreasonable taxes. When the protests grew

and the government collapsed, people could not bring a lasting change because they lacked a clear and unanimously agreed to program for ousting the political establishment (Makdisi, 2021). From that perspective, it can be said that tans/cross/multi-sectarian moves are critical but not sufficient to deliver a post-sectarian order.

Post/non-sectarianism, in a manner similar to Tans/cross/multi-sectarianism, is clear on what it is against, but not what it is for. Post/non-sectarian groups indicate a desire to engage in politics or to order society in a way that is free from sectarian animus. The challenge for such groups is that in consociational contexts, they are especially susceptible to marginalization or co-optation by more powerful groups that capitalize on sectarian identity (Nagle, 2018a). This is what Beirut Madinati discovered in the lead to the 2016 Beirut municipal elections. Beirut Madinati is a political movement that campaigns to introduce a new order to municipal life that is not subject to sectarian politicking (Beirut Madinati, n.d.). The group started as an initiative by individuals who privileged their belonging to the Beirut over their belonging to their respective sectarian communities. They organized themselves around expertise and a program that is transparent, democratic and collaborative. Beirut Madinati conducted itself in a professional and non-sectarian manner. It was the group's sectarian independence that marked it as a target by traditional sectarian parties (Rønn, 2020). Traditional sectarian parties formed a joint trans-sectarian list to counter, and ultimately beat, Beirut Madinati.

The defeat of Beirut Madinati, as well as repeated attempts by the political establishment to co-opt, subvert or repress other non/anti/cross-sectarian mobilization (Geha, 2019a) demonstrates that desectarianization efforts do not occur without opposition from sectarian leaders. Individuals and groups that challenge the prevailing sectarian order pose an existential threat to the system that enables and protects sectarian leaders. Sectarian leaders deploy all resources available to them to stifle desectarianization, including denying and falsifying any sectarianization (Menshawy, 2022). The relentless effort by sectarian elites to entrench themselves in power does not deny agency to desectarianization actors. On the contrary, it presupposes that there are various creative attempts being leveled against the sectarian order. The diversity of approaches available to challenge that order led Mabon to conceive of desectarianization as an "umbrella term referring to the broad spectrum of ways in which sectarian identities are contested and the politically charged aspects of sectarianism are reduced" (Mabon, 2019c); see also (Mabon, 2020a).

In reflecting on the ways non-sectarian movements in Lebanon and Northern Ireland aim to change their divided context, John Nagle (2017) notes two types of movements that can be seen

to encapsulate strategic ways of carrying out desectarianization: transformationist movements and pluralist movements. Transformationist movements are those that seek to completely change the system that produces hostile sectarian identities and politics. They are akin to anti-sectarian movements. An example of this is the YouStink movement that emerged in 2015 to protest the government's failure to collect rubbish from Beirut's streets (Khalil, 2017). The activists' chant "all of them, means all of them" incriminated the entire political class. It was a "contentious standoff" against a system that reproduces division and corruption (Kraidy, 2016). YouStink may not have delivered immediate change to the system, but it helped pave the way for imagining a different future, free from sectarian backroom deals.

The other type of movements that Nagle describes (i.e., pluralist movement) are typically trans-sectarian movements that generally promote diversity and tolerance in society. The overarching idea is for members of society to be comfortable in a heterogenous setting, and increasingly open to the presence of multiple identities. The activism of the LGBT community in Lebanon stands as a good example of that. Members of the community traverse sectarian boundary lines and create a public identity for rights-based demands (Nagle, 2018c). They challenge the confessional system that marginalizes them, and by doing so, they take part in bringing an end to sectarianism.

Another way of framing desectarianization has been proposed by Valbjørn (Valbjørn, 2020c), where he contends that there are at least three kinds of strategies or "paths" for challenging sectarianism. The first strategy is "All That We Share" and it is centered on highlighting major commonalities between people as means to make differences seem less significant. Religious ecumenical discourse figures large in this strategy as studies have shown that ecumenicism mitigates ethnocentrism and valorizes pluralism (Corstange, 2012a). The second strategy is "Good vs. Bad Muslims," "People vs. Regime," and Other Alternative Cleavages. Rather than try to obscure sectarian differences, this strategy aims to counter sectarianism by highlighting other cleavages that cut across existing sectarian divides. The popular protest chant "the people want the fall of the regime" is an example of this strategy in action. People from different backgrounds and across major Arab cities coalesced to direct their grievances against authoritarian regimes rather than against each other (Diana and Steuer, 2021). The last strategy suggested by Valbjørn is the "De-radicalization of Sectarianism and the Promotion of Inter/Cross-sect Cooperation". This strategy acknowledges that sect-based identities can be politically charged, but they do not have to be. So, the strategy emphasizes the social and ritual aspect of sectarianism, and aims to advance sectarian identities that are banal, not radical. The Sectarianism, Proxies and Desectarianization (SEPAD) Project, as well as the Project on Shi'ism and Global Affairs have made strides in that regard. Both

projects have called out simplistic and problematic understandings of sectarianism. Both projects have also advanced the knowledge pertaining to the de-escalation of sectarian conflicts. The three strategies can be followed asynchronously by various actors, but as Valbjørn warns, each of these strategies could backfire and may aggravate sectarianism instead of alleviating it (Valbjørn, 2020c, pp. 18–19).

By exploring means to move beyond sectarianism in Lebanon, this research advances an understanding of desectarianization that acknowledges the mobilization of sectarian identity as a discursive process. It recognizes that political cooptation of sectarian identity is a potent tactic for wielding power, but rather that seek to eliminate or diminish sectarian identities, this research's understanding of desectarianization aims to create an environment where sectarian identity is not an easy resource for political instrumentalization or societal division. So rather than adopting a single approach to desectarianization, it utilizes all available means, represented by Valbjørn's three paths, to furnish a context that is not conducive for sectarianization. From that perspective, desectarianization is a process with a direction and a destination, rather than a precarious or unreachable goal. It is about taking steps to reach a state where mobilization along sectarian lines is an ineffective strategy for amassing political power. This desectarianization accepts that it is not possible to control or completely eliminate the capacity of sectarian entrepreneurs to operationalize sectarian fears for political gain. However, what is possible, and what desectarianization should aim for, is to de-weaponize sectarian identity. That is, desectarianization should aim to minimize the usefulness and efficacy of political organizing or campaigning along narrow sectarian terms. It should aim to decrease the primacy of sectarian identity when it comes to associating with political projects. Put differently, moving beyond sectarianism means decreasing the influence of sectarian projections on shaping political life.

Furthermore, this research perceives desectarianization as both a reactive and proactive process. It is triggered by the outbreak of exclusionary practices of sectarian ordering that discriminates against people and disregards their equality and competencies. Desectarianization then is essentially about offering a counter narrative. It exposes political practices and power structures that favor sectarian interests over national interest, but it goes beyond rejecting them to offer alternative discourse to political organization vis-à-vis sectarian identity. While desectarianization is a reactive process, it is not passive. It is not satisfied with merely critiquing or scrutinizing a sectarian system. It is not merely anti-sectarian per se - in that it rejects sectarian politicking - although it certainly contains elements of that. Instead, desectarianization is a process that offers alternatives to divisive understandings of sectarian identity, political organization, and their relationship to each other.

Religion, as a central component of sectarian identity, plays a pivotal role in this process. Religion serves as a foundational element in shaping sectarian identity, providing a potent framework through which individuals perceive themselves and others within their communities. This identity, deeply ingrained and often intertwined with cultural and historical narratives, becomes a powerful tool for political mobilization. Political actors capitalize on religious divisions, exploiting sectarian identities to consolidate power and advance their agendas. As desectarianization involves challenging exclusionary practices and offering alternative narratives that transcend divisive understandings of sectarian identity, it requires proactive efforts to promote inclusive political discourse that prioritizes national interests over sectarian affiliations. Religion thus becomes a focal point for promoting dialogue, understanding, and cooperation among diverse religious communities, ultimately diminishing the influence of sectarian projections on shaping political life.

The fragmenting effect that sectarianization has on civil society makes desectarianization a protracted and chaotic process. That is, sectarian politics produce incongruent communities that are more aware of their differences than what they have in common between them (i.e. national interest). This siloing of communities, as a result of structures that primarily serve narrow sectarian interests, reduces spaces for inter-sectarian engagement. Therefore, the capacity to organize and reimagine the place of sectarian identity in public life is limited. Add to that the authority's determination to crush or neutralize any existential threat to its sectarian-based power grip, and you end up with a very resilient sectarian environment, guarded by a well-resourced political class. When the disenfranchised public tries to challenge that, various desectarianization efforts are carried out asynchronously, and seldom produce the necessary momentum to force change. Lack of coordination, and reprisal action from state authorities, dissipate desectarianization efforts.

Nonetheless, the division and deterioration that sectarian systems beget keep disaffected people yearning for systemic change. As sectarianization intensifies, so do feelings of frustration and discontent, which invariably feed desires and motives for change. From that perspective, it is helpful to view disparate desectarianization efforts as part of a grand movement; a movement that shadows sectarianization as its antithesis. Desectarianization efforts may be haphazard, but they are connected over space and time by the impetus that generates them. In other words, sectarianization engenders desectarianization, which encompasses anti-sectarianism, un-sectarianism, and non-sectarianism. For that reason, it is important to approach the concept of desectarianization as a continuum. Desectarianization acts in the past inform future ones. Future acts build on the outcome of historical ones. In

addition, circumstantial factors, as well as regional and international forces, influence desectarianization projections. As such, it is important to consider internal and external factors that animate sectarianization when analyzing desectarianization movements in a specific context.

Given the complexity and multivariate approaches embedded in this research's understanding of desectarianization, adopting a binary approach (i.e. successful vs. unsuccessful) to evaluate acts of desectarianization is unhelpful. Indeed, scholars have made similar observations about evaluating securitization and desecuritization moves (Côté, 2016). Alternatively, instead of trying to answer whether desectarianization is successful with a yes or no question, it is more helpful to inquire whether a desectarianization act brings a given situation closer to the desired state where sectarian identity is no longer an effective instrument for political campaigning or social divisions. This approach is possible because it presupposes an imagined desectarianized state where sectarian identities coexist harmoniously and without competition. The answer to the question whether a given act is an effective (not successful) desectarianization act will be subjective, and it will be better assessed relative to other desectarianization acts. The point to emphasize here is that desectarianization is an ongoing process as long as sectarian identities are being instrumentalized for parochial interests. From that perspective, a post-sectarian order is a relative construct that points to a political, economic and social environment that progressively shifts away from sectarian considerations towards embracing broader, more inclusive criteria for governance and societal organization.

Circumventing sectarian Structures

When considering formal and informal structures that reproduce sectarianism, it is helpful to categorize structures based on their nature and function. This provides analytical clarity and allows the research to systematically examine the various factors that influence sectarianism. With that in mind, this research groups structures into three categories: internal structures, external structures, and normative structures. Internal structures refer to domestic power structures that contribute to the perpetuation of sectarianism. They are typically institutional frameworks, policies, or power dynamics within a society that engender discrimination, unequal access to resources, and the marginalization of identity groups. By contrast, external structures refer to geopolitical dynamics and power competitions that have the ability to agitate sectarian differences. Regional rivalries, foreign interventions, and external actors often exacerbate existing sectarian tensions for strategic gain or ideological purposes. Finally, normative structures refer to norms, values, and cultural narratives that shape individual identities and collective consciousness. These

normative structures may include religious doctrines, prejudices, or historical narratives that feed intergroup animosity and suspicion. Recognizing and addressing these structures is essential for facilitating social cohesion, promoting reconciliation, and building inclusive societies resilient to the divisive forces of sectarianism. Therefore, any comprehensive approach to tackling sectarianism must encompass structural reforms, diplomatic interventions, and efforts to transform societal norms and narratives.

Besides being complex, sectarianism is a nuanced phenomenon. It varies from one country to another. In every context, there are unique political, economic and social conditions that govern the process of sectarianization. These conditions change over time and space. Therefore, any desectarianization effort must be considered in context. In order to better assess the capacity and effectiveness of Shiite clergymen in the contemporary Lebanese context, it is important to understand the historical background that gave rise to sectarian tension in Lebanon. That is the aim of chapter two. The chapter will situate the current sectarian tension in its historical context by highlighting historical developments that led to the emergence of the sectarian system and the hardening of divisions between the country's faith communities. The chapter will shed light on how sectarianism was institutionalized through formal and informal structures. This will pave the way for the subsequent exploration of impediments to desectarianization in Lebanon.

Against this background, it is important to underline that although existing structures constrain possibilities of furnishing a post-sectarian system, this does not eliminate the agency of desectarianization actors. Just as sectarian entrepreneurs play a pivotal role in propagating sectarianism (Hinnebusch, 2020), desectarianization actors have agency to challenge and reverse the sectarian order. A particular group of actors that has considerable agency to upend the sectarian system is religious scholars. In Middle Eastern societies, religious scholars are key architects of informal structures. Clerics acquire hermeneutical skills to interpret holy texts and religious traditions that are authoritative in the eyes of many people. This gives clerics unique leverage to shape norms and acceptable behavioral patterns in society. In the language of political sociology and social psychology, religious scholars constitute an epistemic authority (Kruglanski et al., 2005 in; del Sarto, 2021).They have expertise, empathy, and a reliable source of information, which enable them to influence the public in significant ways. Collectively, religious scholars form an epistemic community that shape the normative dimension of a polity (Sandal, 2011). Through religious decrees and public rituals, they draw the boundaries that delineate who is an insider and who is an outsider. This soft power that religious scholars possess explain why state leaders either seek to co-opt them or silence them (Tomass, 2012).

Recent studies have noted the ability of the clergy to de-escalate sectarian tension. Islamic religious authorities, for example, have leveraged their positionality, their historical legacy, and the sentiments of international Muslim communities to shun internal sectarian division and call for unity (Al-Sahlani et al., 2019). Yet in most studies about sectarianism, religious leaders are treated as clients of a more powerful ruling elite (See for example: Darwich and Fakhoury, 2016; Al-Rasheed, 2011; Aldoughli, 2021). They are portrayed as sinister agents that are blinded by material gain, or as unquestioning followers of superior religious and political authorities. Admittedly, there are legitimate reasons for that portrayal as most religious leaders are financially dependent on humble income from religious institutions or endowments (interviewee 1, 3, 4). Limited employable skills and the lack of financial autonomy of most ulema makes them subservient to the will of state leaders or leaders at the top of the religious hierarchy. In the Lebanese context, the mufti is the highest Islamic religious authority in the country. Sunnis and Shiites appoint their own mufti. The procedure for electing the mufti is highly politicized, involving leading clergymen, judges, and community notables (Skovgaard-Petersen, 1996). In other words, religious hierarchy is a political matter, not a purely religious one . Intra-sectarian groups compete to enlarge their influence by getting a mufti loyal to them in power. For instance, Hezbollah and Amal disputed on who should succeed Sheikh Abdul Amir Qabalan as head of the Supreme Islamic Shiite Council after his death (Houssari, 2021).

At the same time, there are independent clerics who speak against the sectarian system. These are figures that managed to secure financial stability through regular private donations or subsistence living (interview 10). When exploring the agency of religious scholars as desectarianization agents, this thesis will focus on this class of leaders. They are grassroots leaders that have limited, though growing influence, and openly speak out against the sectarian status quo. By definition, they are non-partisan. While they may share with sectarian parties some ideological positions, these leaders reject sectarianization. They oppose the policies and activities of sectarian parties that entrench sectarianism. They advocate for the establishment of an order that respects confessional nuances, and cuts the way on the instrumentalization of sectarian identity by sectarian zu'ama. These leaders want to see a strong state capable of providing for all its citizens indiscriminately. They are vocal about liberating people from obligations to sectarian leaders. They expose the discourse and tactics of sectarian leaders that manipulate sectarian differences to advance their own interests.

Religious leaders are uniquely positioned to engage in desectarianization for the same reason they are frequently co-opted to engage in sectarian mobilization. As community gatekeepers, they have grassroots influence, and they are equipped with theological understanding

and rhetorical tools to cultivate/refute religious positions and practices that escalate/de-escalate sectarianism. And because the task of desectarianization entails imaging an order where religious identities coexist peacefully and sectarian differences are not easily provoked, religious leaders can play an instrumental role in that regard. Not only are they able to deconstruct narratives that intensify sectarianism, but they are also capable of advancing alternative narrative that are faithful to religious ideologies and capable of creating inter- and intra-sectarian unity. The challenge for these desectarianization religious leaders is that they are a minority with limited resources and influence. The change that they would like to bring about does not come about easily. It requires determination and persistence. It is not a popular path to follow because it goes against the prevailing order. Moreover, calling out sectarian elites and exposing their sectarianization efforts makes desectarianization religious leaders a target. Several interviewed clergymen that challenge the sectarian status quo mentioned that they are regularly harassed by sectarian elites and their followers for not submitting to mainstream authorities (Interviewees 1, 2, 3, 4, 7). "They want us to repeat their narratives, do what they do, and say what they say. And when we do not, they demonize us and undermine our credibility and belonging to our own community (Interviewee 5). The opposition that these leaders face underscores their potential to upset the sectarian system. From that perspective, it is helpful to explore in greater details the agency of religious leaders as desectarianization actors in the context of Lebanon's internal, external and normative sectarian structures.

A) Internal structures

A hallmark of Lebanon's governing structure is sectarian power sharing. The logic of power sharing is grounded in the theory of consociationalism, which posits that power sharing in divided societies gradually fosters inter-sectarian trust and over time erodes sectarian cleavages (Lijphart, 1985). In practice, however, consociationalism in Lebanon facilitated the emergence of a complex and informal system of sectarian apportionment of state resources, known as *Muhasasa.* The principle of allocating state resources along sectarian lines dominated Lebanese politics (Saouli, 2019a). Sectarian leaders sought to enlarge their power by handing out government opportunities and resources along sectarian lines. This came at a time when many of the political elites that participated in building up the second Lebanese Republic started with little support among their constituencies due to fragmentations and shifts within each confessional community. To bolster their appeal and influence, they resorted to sectarian rhetoric and narrow local agendas (Leenders, 2012b). As a result, corruption and clientelism intensified, leaving most institutions and government ministries operationally mediocre and hopelessly inefficient under the control of sectarian elites (2012b, p. 210).

Instead of sharing power, sectarian leaders and warlords divided the country into spheres of influence (Nagle and Clancy, 2019). They confiscated state resources and distributed them amongst their constituents to solidify their legitimacy and expand their authority. Expansive and competing clientelist networks, organized along sectarian lines, emerged (Cammett and Issar, 2010; Salloukh, 2018; Hermez, 2011) and resulted in undermining state-building processes (Leenders, 2012b), reinforcing sectarian divisions (Nagle and Clancy, 2019), increasing political and social polarization (Kassir, 2004), and cementing existing inequalities (Makdisi and Marktanner, 2009). While the Taif Agreement aimed to establish a new political order in Lebanon that brings an end to consociationalism and eventually to sectarianism, Syria's tutelage over Lebanon between 1990 and 2005 significantly contributed to the entrenchment of sectarianism in the country.

Ostensibly, the Syrian government supported the Agreement and played a role in establishing a new government structure that reflects the revised power sharing arrangement. Nonetheless, instead of facilitating a genuine transition to a post-sectarian order, Syrian authorities focused on controlling key political institutions and promoting sectarian leaders who were loyal to the Assad regime. Damascus endorsed sectarian elites who practiced crony capitalism under the watchful eye of Damascus (Alagha, 2021). In that environment, rentier politics proliferated and sectarian patronage intensified. Syria's manipulation of the political landscape prevented the Taif Agreement from ultimately fostering a more inclusive post-sectarian order. As a result, Lebanon became home to one of the most unequal distributions of income and wealth in the world (Alvaredo *et al.*, 2019). The state had been instrumentalized by sectarian elites to gain legitimacy, extract profits, and get political immunity (Shehabi, 2020). A large portion of the Lebanese population suffered from the absence of equitable and transparent government structures (Baumann, 2019a). Poverty and unemployment rose steadily in the first decade and a half after Taif. In short, the sectarian power-sharing system has paradoxically entrenched sectarianism rather than mitigating it.

The *muhasasa* system entrenched sectarianism not only at the political level, but in the economic and legal sphere as well. Syria maintained a strong security apparatus in Lebanon following the Taif Agreement. By deploying a significant number of troops and intelligence personnel, Syria managed to control the security situation in the country. In addition, Syrian authorities controlled key political institutions in Lebanon, including the executive branch, the judiciary, and the military. This allowed the Syrian government to manipulate Lebanese politics by supporting and promoting business leaders and judges who were loyal to Syria, further entrenching sectarianism within the political system. Bassel Salloukh shows how sectarianism, manifested through sectarian power sharing, came to dominate Lebanon's political economy, resulting in a

"very sectarian public sector" that is rife with corruption, and predatory rentier practices along clientelist lines (Salloukh, 2019a). Tamirace Fakhoury makes a similar point by highlighting the limitation of power sharing for democracies that aim for social and economic justice. Fakhoury notes how sectarian power sharing in Lebanon "promotes elite feuding and policy deadlocks, backfiring on core aspects of state governance; namely, the provision of public services, the capacity to embark on legal reforms, and to account for the citizenry's grievances" (Fakhoury, 2019a, p. 20).

In essence, the effects of sectarian power-sharing in Lebanon extend beyond the political realm and permeates into the country's economic and judicial sectors. Lebanon's constitution, political economy, and judicial system will be discussed in greater details in chapter 3 as domestic structural impediments to desectarianization. The chapter will conclude with a view on the capacity of Shiite religious leaders to circumvent those structures and move the country beyond sectarianism.

B) External structures

It would be inaccurate to present consociationalism or sectarian power sharing as the ultimate cause of Lebanon's unfolding collapse. Lebanon's history is replete with periods of instability that indeed have connections to sectarian rivalries, but these rivalries on their own cannot explain state collapse (Bayeh, 2017). It is illuminating therefore to consider not only internal structures, but also external structures that facilitate sectarian mobilization and weaken the Lebanon's capacity to create equitable and sustainable living conditions for all Lebanese.

The political system that emerged after Taif was marked by near-permeant gridlock. Disagreements between the Maronite president, Sunni Prime Minister and Shiite Speaker of the Assembly over the jurisdiction of their power and limits of their influence led to arbitration by the Syrian overlord. Syria's manipulation of differences and resort to authoritarian interference shaped the political landscape of Lebanon, often exacerbating sectarian tensions in the (Leenders, 2012b; Dibeh, 2005). Syrian patronage of various sectarian leaders fueled sectarian divisions in Lebanon, which weakened the country and prevented the formation of a united opposition to confront Damascus.

A watershed moment that heightened sectarian tensions in Lebanon and led to several political developments that entrenched sectarianism was the assassination of Prime Minister Rafic Hariri on February 14, 2005. Killing the highest Sunni government official was widely perceived as an attack on the neoliberal economic age that Hariri ushered in (Safa, 2006). It was also seen as a threat to the political stature that the Sunni community had accumulated in

Lebanon and which Hariri symbolized (Khashan, 2013). Blame finger for the assassination quickly pointed at Syria who sought to contain Hariri's growing political and economic capabilities as well as his regional and international influence (Salloukh, 2011). The assassination divided the country into anti-Syria and pro-Syria blocs; March-14 and March-8, respectively. The two groups, but more successfully the former, organized cross-sectarian demonstrations that threatened the sectarian order. The March-14 bloc, spearheaded by Hariri's Future Movement and the Sunni community, and joined by the major Druze, Christians and Secularist groups, occupied downtown Beirut on the one-month anniversary of Hariri's assassination with more than one million protestors (Safa, 2006). This was a critical juncture in Lebanon's history movement because it was the largest and "the first cross-confessional mass mobilization of Lebanese citizens ever held with the prospect of weakening the hold of sectarian politics" (Clark and Zahar, 2015). While other trans-sectarian movements have been organized in the past, for example demanding the introduction of civil marriage law (Bray-Collins, 2013), they were never as large or as diverse as the March 14 group so called the cedar revolution.

The significance of the cedar revolution lay in the potential it held to usher a new order. This was captured by cross-sectarian demands to end Syrian occupation of Lebanon and to establish a free democracy. Syria propped the sectarian order in Lebanon through its endorsement of domestic structures that propagate sectarian politics. Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon thus signaled a change in the political landscape. The Cedar revolution, however, failed to reform the sectarian power sharing system (Shields, 2008; Kurtulus, 2009). Despite the massive potential for structural overhaul, the sectarian system was unscathed. Sectarian elites preserved the system by stoking sectarian fears and maintaining sectarian power sharing in the government. In fact, sectarianism was entrenched further considering that sectarian leaders recalibrated their influence and tightened their grip on power after the vacuum left by Syria's withdrawal (Kurtulus, 2009).

Sectarian politics were invigorated in post-2005 Lebanon, but not solely for domestic reasons (Dodge, 2020; Mabon and Ardovini, 2016; Wehrey, 2014).. The 2003 US invasion of Iraq created a power vacuum that disturbed the balance of power in the Middle East. In the aftermath of the collapse of Saddam's iron-first rule, and the absence of a comprehensive US plan for post-war Iraq (Godfroy and Collins, 2019), Iran's influence grew over Iraqi politics. Saudi Arabia felt threatened by Iran's encroachment on its sphere of influence. In their rivalry for regional hegemony, Iran and Saudi Arabia competed for control and influence in Baghdad as well as various Arab capitals. With support from the US, Riyadh took the lead in balancing Tehran and reversing its increasing role in the region (Clark and Salloukh, 2013a). The geopolitical

competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran created a structural dynamic that has antagonized relations between Sunnis and Shiites in Lebanon and the broader Middle East (Mabon, 2023). This dynamic is driven by a range of complex and interrelated factors that include regional alliances, ideological differences, and great powers interference (Han and Hakimian, 2019).

Riyadh's backing of the Sunni-led March 14 bloc and Tehran's backing of the Shiite-led March 8 bloc deepened the sectarian schism in Lebanon (Wehrey *et al.*, 2009). After a brief stint of national solidarity during the Israel-Hezbollah war in 2006 (Hafez, 2008), contestation between Lebanese Sunnis and Shiites intensified. The fact that Hezbollah, a comparatively small Shiite paramilitary organization, was not defeated by Israel, one of the best armed countries in the world, was hailed by many Lebanese and Arabs as victory for Hezbollah. This unsettled other sectarian communities, particularly Sunnis, because Hezbollah's mobilization of the Shiite community gave Shiites unprecedented power in Lebanon. In May 2008, fears of Shiite domination reached a new level after Hezbollah, and for the first time since the end of the civil war, used its weapons against its Lebanese rivals (Talbot and Harriman, 2008).

Hezbollah's quasi-victory over Israel in 2006 and the group's swift occupation of Beirut in 2008 infuriated Sunnis, and alarmed Saudi Arabia because they perceived that Hezbollah and its patron Iran were usurping the upper hand in Lebanon. The Saudis felt threatened by the shift in power so much that, according to a classified U.S. diplomatic cable disclosed by WikiLeaks, Saudi officials debated the creation of an Arab military force to intervene in Beirut and stop "Iranian takeover of all Lebanon" (Bazzi, 2015). The geopolitical rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran divided countries in the Middle East into two camps: a Saudi-led pro-Western group, and an Iranian-led anti-Imperial group. This became more pronounced in the days following the Arab Uprisings. Regional instability was framed as a Sunni-Shiite struggle (Malmvig, 2014), primarily by Saudi Arabia and its allies, although not exclusively or consistently (Byman, 2014).

Although Lebanon did not experience massive protests in the wake of the Uprisings, it could not escape the shock of the regional instability. The rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran escalated the security situation in the Middle East, and entangled Arab countries with a sizeable Shiite population, including Lebanon (Hazbun, 2016; DeVore and Stähli, 2015). By sponsoring opposing sectarian factions, whether through financing, diplomatic relations or armament, Saudi Arabia and Iran used Lebanon as "a venue for proxy conflicts" (Karasik and Cafiero, 2017). Similarly, Iran and Saudi Arabia, amongst other actors, transformed Syria into a battleground for regional hegemony. Over the course of their infighting, Riyadh and Tehran "sometimes promote[d] ecumenical politics, and at other times act[ed] as provocateurs of sectarian mobilization in order to exclude, divide and

consolidate their rule, while always claiming that they defend unity and cohabitation unlike the groups they fight against" (Khatib, 2019b, p. 388). What is important to underscore is that the competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran created a structural environment where sectarianism can be reinforced and sustained by internal and external actors (Mirza *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, it is necessary to consider the impact of that dynamic when exploring desectarianization in Lebanon.

A related and equally important regional dynamic that impacts sectarianism in Lebanon is the Arab-Israeli conflict. Lebanon has been directly affected by the Arab-Israeli conflict through several wars and conflicts, most notably the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. This conflict had a profound impact on Lebanon's sectarian balance, as it led to the displacement of many Lebanese citizens, especially those who were Shia Muslims. It also deepened the divide between Lebanon's Christian and Muslim communities, as some Christians saw the Israeli invasion as a way to protect their interests in the country (Haddad, 2002a). Moreover, the conflict has fueled sectarian tensions in Lebanon by exacerbating differences between the country's various religious groups. One of the main reasons for this is that Lebanon has a significant Palestinian refugee population, many of whom were displaced as a result of the creation of Israel in 1948. The presence of these refugees has been a source of tension in Lebanon, as they are seen by some Lebanese as a threat to the country's sovereignty and fragile sectarian balance (Haddad, 2000). Palestinian refugees were mostly Sunni Muslims. This changed the demographic makeup of some areas of Lebanon and led to tensions between the Palestinians and other sectarian groups, especially the Christian communities. Over time, the Palestinian refugee population grew, and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) became a significant player in Lebanese politics, often aligning with the country's left-leaning and nationalist groups. Israel is perceived as the root cause of the Palestinian refugee problem; a problem that still persists seventy-five years later. Attitudes of Lebanese people toward Israel and regarding resettlement for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon vary along sectarian lines (Haddad, 2002a; Haddad and Jamali, 2003). This makes discussions about a peace process a divisive subject, charged with sectarian undertones, especially given Iran and Hezbollah's ideological commitment to destroy the Zionist regime. In other words, the Arab Israeli conflict creates a regional structure that deepens sectarianism in the Middle East (Del Sarto, 2019), and complicates the diffusion of sectarian tension in Lebanon.

Chapter 4 will explore how Saudi-Iran Power Struggle and the Arab-Israeli conflict complicate sectarianism in Lebanon, and how they stand as impediments in the face of grassroot desectarianization. Special attention will be given to explore the agency of Shiite religious leaders as desectarianization actors in this regard.

C- Normative structures

As sectarian leaders collaborate to protect the sectarian system, they automatically reproduce sectarianism and create a culture where norms and practices are shaped by sectarian identities and divisions. The sectarianization practices of sectarian elites create a general culture where sites of contestation are characterized by sectarian competition. A culture of sectarianism develops and shapes people's daily lives, from sports competitions (Nassif and Amara, 2015), to urban development (SEPAD, 2020), to electoral campaigning (Corstange, 2012b), and to school curriculums (Baytiyeh, 2017). Over time, pervasive sectarianism has come to permeates all aspects of Lebanese society, from politics to education to the media. This observation is backed by local surveys and field studies, which indicate that sectarianism infiltrated Lebanese identity and became a fixture of everyday life (Cammett, 2019; Nucho, 2016)

The pervasiveness of a sectarian culture was captured during the 2015 You Stink protests by the conceptualization of the "sectarian ghost" by AbiYaghi, Catusse and Younes (2016). According to the authors, sectarianism played a major role not only in the conscious mind of anti-government protestors, but also subconsciously through how they positioned themselves. A sectarian discourse forced itself on organizers of the *hirak* as they fumbled over how to define themselves, or whom they were against. Protestors struggled to find a common identity to their activism without slipping into sectarian language or issues connected to sectarian parties in Lebanon, such as Hezbollah's arms. The point here is not that everything is sectarian, but that "attempts to build a prevalent antisectarian consciousness in Lebanon are inevitably caught up in sectarian and antisectarian realities (AbiYaghi *et al.*, 2016, p. 75). In other words, the moment you start talking about sectarianism or eliminating it, this leads to further sectarianism by reinforcing the idea that sectarianism is an insurmountable obstacle.

From that perspective, movements that seeks to deconstruct sectarianization in Lebanon must acknowledge that sectarian consciousness shapes the daily lives and interactions of Lebanese people. Tamirace Fakhoury made that observation during the Arab Uprisings when she concluded that:

> a revolution against sectarianism in Lebanon would entail a change of political culture and institutions. It would presuppose first and foremost a new political consciousness marked by an all-encompassing commitment to deconfessionalization, otherwise any project proposed or imposed by a Lebanese party to desectarianize the system would acquire confessional tones (Fakhoury, 2011, p. 11)

Ibrahim Halawi reached a similar conclusion by observing political opposition in Lebanon between 2011 and Lebanon's October 2019 protests. Halawi argues that the articulation and organization of political opposition is limited because of a deeply rooted "sectarian episteme" of politics (Halawi, 2023). He shows that non-sectarian oppositional actors concede to the pervasiveness of sectarian identity and avoid confrontation with sectarian prejudice. In turn, sectarian leaders capitalize on this pervasiveness and embed sectarian identities further.

Attending to normative structures is essential for understanding the underlying dynamics of sectarianism and developing effective strategies to address it. Norms shape the behavior of individuals and communities. By examining normative structures, it is possible to uncover deep-rooted beliefs and attitudes that fuel sectarianism. Since norms often perpetuate stereotypes and prejudices against other groups, harboring an "us versus them" mentality, interrogating and challenging normative structures can promote empathy, understanding, and mutual respect among different communities. This can help break down barriers and reduce intergroup hostility.

So, in addition to domestic and geopolitical structures that facilitate the mobilization of sectarian identities, it is equally important to consider normative structures that propagate a culture of fear and suspicion from the sectarian other. One of the key factors that contributes to this sectarian culture is inter-communal distrust (Alijla, 2022). The history of sectarian conflicts, the legacy of the civil war, and the fragmented state institutions have created a deep-seated sense of mistrust among different sectarian communities (Alijla, 2020). This mistrust is often reinforced by political and religious leaders who use sectarian rhetoric to mobilize their followers and to maintain their power. Mistrust often leads to the reinforcement of negative stereotypes about other sectarian communities. These stereotypes become ingrained within the collective consciousness of each group, shaping attitudes, behaviors, and intergroup interactions. Over time, these negative perceptions become normalized within the community, contributing to the maintenance of sectarian divisions. Mistrust between sectarian communities can lead to the normalization of segregation and exclusionary practices. Communities may establish physical, social, and cultural boundaries to protect themselves from perceived threats posed by other groups (Hermiz, 2017). These boundaries serve to reinforce the sense of "us" versus "them" and maintain the status quo of sectarian divisions within society.

Moreover, distrust abounds in the absence of healthy citizenship education. Inclusive citizenship education is important for promoting a sense of belonging and a shared national identity that transcends sectarian identities. Healthy citizen education emphasizes critical

thinking skills and empathy, enabling individuals to question their own biases and understand the perspectives of others. In the absence of such an education, individuals may be more susceptible to accepting simplistic narratives that demonize members of other sectarian communities and fail to recognize their shared humanity. This lack of critical thinking and empathy perpetuates sectarianism by inhibiting constructive dialogue and mutual understanding. In Lebanon, citizenship education has often been fragmented along sectarian lines, with different religious communities having their own curriculum and textbooks that reflect their own sectarian identity and beliefs. This fragmented approach to citizenship education perpetuates sectarianism in Lebanese society by reinforcing sectarian identities and dividing individuals along sectarian lines. It can also lead to a lack of understanding and appreciation of other religious communities and their contributions to Lebanese society.

Chapter 5 will explore in depth how the absence of intercommunal trust and healthy citizenship education in Lebanon function as normative structures that impede the process of desectarianization. The chapter relies on input from interviewed religious leaders as well as publicly available data sets to paint a detailed picture of the current situation on the ground. In a manner similar to the preceding chapters, chapter 5 will suggest ways for Shiite religious to overcome those impediments and contribute to desectarianization.

Claims to originality

This thesis seeks to contribute to the literature on desectarianization by furthering the discussion on how to move beyond sectarianism in the specific context of Lebanon. It uses a constructivist framework to conceptualize sectarianism and deconstruct sectarianization practices. It does this firstly by identifying structures that facilitate sectarianism and impede the process of desectarianization. Those structures are grouped into three categories: domestic structures, geopolitical structures, and normative structures. Domestic structures constitute formal and informal structures that are instituted and maintained by the state to organize people's private and public affairs. These structures are characterized by privileging sectarian identities and concomitant patronage networks. Domestic structures include the Lebanese constitution, the neoliberal economy, and the Lebanese judiciary. The second category, geopolitical structures, points to regional dynamics in the Middle East that create facilitating conditions for sectarian mobilization. There are geopolitical structures in the Middle East that contribute to the rise of sectarianism by creating divisions based on religious and ethnic identities, and by providing opportunities for state and non-state actors to exploit those divisions for their own gain. Two such structures, which have contributed significantly to ordering the regional system, are the Saudi-Iran rivalry and the Arab-

Israel conflict. The third type of structures that foster sectarianism and impede the process of desectarianization are normative structures. These are immaterial social structures that generate and sustain a sectarian culture. The thesis will explore mistrust and the absence of inclusive citizenship education as normative structures that hinder effective desectarianization. These normative structures have been identified by interviewed members of the clergy as key obstacles that stand in the way of working towards a more peaceful and unified society that embraces diversity and fosters cooperation.

Secondly, this thesis advances the discussion on desectarianization by exploring the agency of religious leaders to act as desectarianization actors. Religious leaders possess symbolic power that can be a powerful force for sectarianization or desectarianization. One approach to understand this power is through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991). According to Bourdieu, symbolic capital refers to the various forms of distinction and prestige that individuals and groups acquire through cultural recognition, and which they deploy to gain advantage in social interactions. Symbolic power is the ability to shape the beliefs, values, and behaviors of individuals and groups through the use of symbols and cultural practices. In the context of religious leadership, symbolic capital can take many forms, including religious knowledge, charisma, reputation, and institutional authority. Religious leaders who possess high levels of symbolic capital are able to wield significant influence over their followers, shaping their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors in ways that reflect the leader's own values and priorities.

Religious leaders possess considerable symbolic capital (Noori *et al.*, 2017). They draw that capital from various sources, but mainly from developed expertise in understanding and teaching their religious ideology and practices (Verter, 2003). Religious traditions are often complex and multifaceted and require extensive study and training to master. Religious leaders who acquire a deep understanding of their tradition and its teachings can use this expertise to establish themselves as authorities on matters of faith and its applications. They can use that symbolic capital to reinforce their legitimacy and authority, and to strengthen their position within society. Another source of symbolic capital for religious leaders is institutional authority (Urban, 2003). Religious institutions are often highly structured and hierarchical, with clear lines of authority and well-established protocols for leadership succession. Religious leaders who hold high-ranking positions within these institutions may be regarded as having greater legitimacy and authority than those who do not. A religious leader may also possess other forms of capital that complement his symbolic power, such as social and cultural capital. Nevertheless, despite the many sources of symbolic power available to religious leaders, it is important to note that this power is not necessarily absolute or unassailable. In many cases, religious leaders must contend with competing

sources of symbolic capital, as well as with the domestic, geopolitical and normative structures in the context where they serve.

Furthermore, while divergent theological interpretations are not the main force behind sectarian mobilization, they can be a significant contributor to the entrenchment of sectarian divisions or reconciliation within communities (Mohseni and Sagha, 2022). From that perspective, religious leaders have a unique agency to act as desectarianization actors. Religious leaders form an “epistemic community” that has authority in the sphere of religious and social norms (Sandal, 2017). They have the skills (hermeneutics) and resources (sacred scriptures) to manufacture knowledge that could propagate or diffuse sectarianism. In other words, depending on religious leaders’ interpretation of holy scriptures and appropriation of sacred traditions, religious leaders can advance a discourse that either fuels sectarianism or confines it. This is significant because as experts in theological matters, religious leaders have one foot in the realm of religious symbolism, and as citizens and members of society they have the other foot in the world of political and social organization. They navigate the sacred-secular divide with ease, and thus can plan an instrumental role in desectarianization.

This thesis contributes to the literature on desectarianization by advancing knowledge in the field of desectarianization studies in at least two unique ways. First, while it considers that desectarianization is a constant process of reimagining and renegotiating the role of religion in ordering public life, it affirms that by viewing protest movements in the post-Taif period as connected parts of a desectarianization wave. By approaching the Cedar revolution (2005), the YouStink movement (2015) and the Oct-17 protests (2019) as nodes on a desectarianization continuum, and by using empirical field research and publicly available data sets, the research claims that desectarianization is a long ongoing process that has no single or uncontested trajectory. Moreover, by adopting this approach to studying sectarianism in Lebanon, the research identifies various impediments to desectarianization. The research goes further by highlighting normative impediments to desectarianization in addition to internal and external structural impediments. This is significant because it points researchers and policymakers to look beyond domestic and geopolitical factors, and to look for social structural barriers that reproduce sectarianism and complicate the process of desectarianization.

Secondly, this thesis advances collective understanding of desectarianization by taking the agency of desectarianization actors as a lens for analysis. In particular, the focus that the research places on exploring the agency of Shiite ulema as desectarianization actors in the Lebanese context is original. Religious leaders are often portrayed as part of the problem that reproduces

sectarianism. This research challenges this orientalist perspective by approaching clergymen in the Middle East as part of a solution to the sectarianism problem. It does this by exploring the capacity of religious leaders to overcome domestic, geopolitical, and normative impediments to desectarianization. Moreover, while literature on peace studies places emphasis overwhelmingly on the agency of Christian clergymen as community builders, this research pushes the boundaries by focusing on the agency of Muslim clergymen. And by specifically focusing on non-partisan Shiite clergymen, this research challenges a common perception of a homogeneous Shiite community in Lebanon that is subservient to Hezbollah.

Methodology and positionality

To answer the research questions posed by this study, this research combines both primary and secondary data sources to provide a comprehensive analysis and understanding of sectarianism and desectarianization in Lebanon. Primary data collection is crucial to gain grassroots perspective on structures perpetuating sectarianism, and to generate firsthand insights into the agency of religious leaders to contribute to desectarianization. As already indicated, sectarianism is a complex phenomenon with multiple factors that facilitate its dominance. Therefore, it is analytically more useful to narrow down the analysis by exploring the agency of a particular group of religious leaders. To that end, this thesis will focus on Shiite religious leaders (i.e., ulema) and will explore their capacity to circumvent structural impediments identified earlier. The analysis will particularly target the agency of non-partisan Shiite clergymen since they have a higher degree of independence than clergymen loyal to the Shiite political and religious establishment represented by Hezbollah and Amal. It is important to emphasize that while Amal and Hezbollah play a major role in influencing the Shiite community in Lebanon, it would be erroneous to posit that the Shiite community is homogenous or that Hezbollah and Amal have exclusive representation of Lebanese Shiites, not least amongst religious leaders. Clergymen like Yassir Awdeh, Mohammed Ali Hajj al-Amili, Abbas Hayik, Abbas Jawhari, Mohammed Ali al-Hussini, AbdulSalam Dendesh, Hussein Muchayik, Abbas Harb Al-Amli, and Ibrahim Soroor al-Hashim stand as examples of clerical voices that are not aligned with the Hezbollah-Amal duo.

Beyond the need to focus the analysis by narrowing the discussion to a smaller subset of actors, there are two main reasons for choosing the Shiite community as the sample to inform this research. Firstly, Shiite Muslims represent one of the largest confessional communities in Lebanon. Shiite religious scholars thus have access to an expansive network of Shiites to target and work towards reorienting their understanding regarding Shiite identity and its place in ordering public life. Desectarianization success amongst Shiites will likely have a trickling effect on other

confessional communities because it stands as one of the least likely or most difficult communities to confront sectarianism, given Hezbollah and Amal's dominance. Progress towards desectarianization amongst Shiites is likely to have broader effect on sectarianism across the country. By contrast, it is less likely for clergy-led desectarianization to spread to other communities if it emanates from the midst of one of the smaller confessional communities. That is because change is more difficult to bring about in larger communities due to embedded complexity and diversity. The underlying assumption herein is that religious leaders are most effective amongst their own community of faith. Members of a confessional community are suspicious of a religious leader from another confessional community that is not active or credible amongst his own co-religionists.

Secondly, the Shiite community is one of the most politically and socially organized communities in Lebanon. Two political parties, Hezbollah and Amal, almost have total monopoly over representation of Shiites' political and religious interests. As consequence, the affairs of the Shiite community are largely coordinated and streamlined by both parties. For the last two decades, Amal and Hezbollah have largely been in sync about sharing Shiite representation and protecting intra-sectarian solidarity. In that context, most clergymen toe the Shiite duo's line and thus are not in a position to challenge their dominance and sectarianization. However, the Shiite community cannot be said to be politically homogenous. There are many dissenting voices and there are signs of fracture amongst the Shiite electorate, especially the Oct-17 protests in Lebanon (Salameh, 2021; Yee and Saad, 2020). In that context, there are also a small number of independent clergymen that are critical of Hezbollah and Amal's policies. They question the parties' handling of Shiite identity, rituals, and religious institutions. This research will focus on exploring the agency of such leaders as desectarianization actors.

In this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted in the summer of 2019. Interviews were conducted in Arabic with fifteen religious leaders: eleven Shiites (interviews 1-11), one Sunni (interview 12), one Maronite (interview 13), one Greek Orthodox (interview 14), and one Protestant (interview 15). While Shiites religious leaders are the focus of this study, interviews with non-Shiites serve as a form of triangulation, providing multiple viewpoints on the same topic. The selection of interview participants was based on their familiarity with the religious and political establishment in Lebanon, and their experience in navigating the sectarian system. Thus, all interviewees were Lebanese natives, and they spent most, or all their adult life in Lebanon. Interviewees were over 45 years old, and they have solid memories of the Lebanese civil war and the post-war period. All interviewees were deliberately selected from the grassroots level. None were in a senior religious or government position. Furthermore, interviewed leaders were selected

because they are active in society, either through writing and publications, or through involvement in social services, such as peacebuilding efforts or educational initiatives. Another factor that shaped the selection of Shiite interviewees in particular was their political alignment. The goal was to meet with leaders that spread across the spectrum of loyalty to Hezbollah and Amal. Out of the eleven interviewed Shiites, seven (interviews 1-7) were unassociated with Hezbollah and Amal. These leaders have different perspectives on the perceived hegemony of Hezbollah-Amal, and they range in vocalizing their opposition to the religious and political establishment. Of the other four other Shiite interviewees, one was affiliated with a Hezbollah-led educational organization (interview 8), and another sheikh was active in an Amal-led social organization (interview 9). The remaining two interviewees (interviews 10-11) expressed their loyalty to Islamic resistance, presumably Shiite resistance given their turban style, but they did not have formal affiliation with or express public allegiance to Hezbollah or Amal. An anonymized summary of interviewees' confessional backgrounds, political orientation, and location of the interview is provided in Appendix A.

Interviewees were identified by their public profile or through common friends. Initial contact was made over the phone to explain the PhD project and to arrange for a meeting. I had no interaction with any of the Shiite or Maronite clergymen before I interviewed them. I had a working relationship with the Sunni, Greek Orthodox and Protestant clergymen from previous projects. Interviews were carried out in the offices of the clergymen, located in the greater Beirut area, the South Lebanon Governorate, and Nabatiyeh Governorate. Interviews lasted for an average of 90 minutes and revolved around the questions listed in Appendix B. The tone of the interview was casual, and interviewees were given space to take the conversation where they felt comfortable. Interviews with Shiite sheikhs connected to Amal, Hezbollah or the Islamic resistance more broadly were generally shorter and a bit tense. The sheikhs seemed suspicious and they were more discreet. They spoke in shorter sentences and digressed little from the main questions. They spoke in general terms, avoiding direct criticism of the sectarian system, and of Hezbollah and Amal more specifically. It was challenging to have them reflect on sectarianism without implicating their superioris or Hezbollah officials.

By contrast, interviews with the other Shiite leaders were more elaborate and passionate. They expressed themselves freely and gave the impression that they were hurting from the sectarian system in Lebanon. They all felt like they have a role to play in desectarianization, but their role was not the primary role. As one of the leaders said, "I can influence one or two people, or maybe a small group", but unless things change at the top, we are not going to have lasting change". Interviews with non-Shiite clergymen were useful for providing input on their own agency

as religious leaders. Interviews were cordial and on point. Although interviewees felt like they share in the responsibility to bring an end to sectarianism, they generally gave the impression that they, and by extension their class of religious leaders from their sect, were not the main perpetuators of sectarianism, and therefore their contribution is less significant. Nevertheless, all the interviews provided valuable qualitative data, allowing for an in-depth exploration of perspectives and opinions related to the future of the sectarian status quo in the country.

As interviews were conducted and recorded in Arabic, it proved cumbersome to use software to transcribe and translate them. Instead, each interview was meticulously reviewed, and detailed notes were taken to capture the essence of the discussions. During the review process, particular attention was paid to identify key words and phrases that religious leaders used in connection to what makes sectarianism a potent force in Lebanon, why it is hard to get rid of it, and what they can do about it. These key words emerged organically from the interviews, reflecting what religious leaders perceived to be salient issues related to sectarianization and desectarianization in Lebanon. To ensure comprehensiveness and accuracy, the selection of key words was based on their relevance to the research questions and how frequently they appeared in the discussions. Additionally, each key word was evaluated within its context to capture the nuanced perspectives of interviewees. Once the key words were identified, they were analyzed and grouped to uncover common themes. This involved categorizing key words based on their thematic relevance and exploring relationships between different concepts. Emergent themes were used to identify and investigate structures that reproduce sectarianism and impede the process of desectarianization. Data from the interviews was also instrumental for identifying avenues for religious leaders to circumvent sectarian structures. Appendix C lists key words from each interview, and emerging themes.

Identifying key words and themes from interviews is inherently a subjective process, which may entail potential bias. For this reason, collected data was cross examined against secondary sources. Incorporating secondary sources into the analysis serves as a strategy for mitigating potential biases and enriching the analysis of interview data. In addition, secondary sources provide a wealth of information that deepen the analysis of themes identified from interviews, and generate new insights that may not have been apparent from interviews alone. To that end, this research heavily investigated and referenced scholarly books and peer reviewed academic journals. Online news articles, official government and NGO reports, as well as articles from ownership-verified websites were used to a lesser extent. Furthermore, publicly available datasets were used to corroborate research findings. This included published reports from the Arab Barometer (2020-2022) and raw data collected by the SEPAD project (2021-2022). In addition, unpublished memoirs

of Lebanese Shiite clergymen from the pre-independence period were consulted to better understand the agency of Shiite religious leaders. These texts capture social and political activities of Shiites in south Lebanon, led by clergymen and other notables, in defiance of French mandatory rule. These resources were part of a private library collection that interviewee 3 had archived.

Finally, positionality is a critical concept in research writing, and it refers to the researcher's social location and the impact that their social identities, values, and beliefs may have on their research. Acknowledging positionality is crucial for producing credible and reliable research and reflecting on one's assumptions and biases. In carrying out this research, I acknowledge that I am Lebanese Christian. I did not grow up in Lebanon and my parents did not live in Lebanon during the civil war. However, I lived in Lebanon for six years between 2011 and 2017. I personally experienced the challenges of living in a sectarian system, and I participated in the YouStink street protests. From that perspective, I am predisposed to eliminating sectarianism, but I understand how difficult that can be. I also acknowledge that I write from my position as a Christian, which means that there are Islamic issues and confessional idiosyncrasies that are unfamiliar to me and so limit my comprehension of all the factors at play when it comes to exploring sectarianism and the agency of Shiite religious leaders as desectarianization actors in Lebanon.

While those factors did not change in the process of doing the research, what may have affected my positionality is the Oct-17, 20219 protests and the Beirut port explosion in 2020. These two major events severely disrupted life in Lebanon and disturbed the status quo. For me personally, the damage that followed these two events, and the failure of ruling elites to take responsibly for what happened and provide appropriate response angered me. I was provoked by the audacity of sectarian elites to exonerate themselves, and I regarded with contempt the sectarian system and all the structures that reproduce sectarianism. This may have clouded my perception of sectarian identities in Lebanon, and the role they should play in ordering society. Filled with range and intensity to bring an end to sectarianism in Lebanon may have skewed my reading and analysis of the research findings.

Chapter 2: The Emergence of Sectarianism in Lebanon

Introduction

Sectarianism is a complex phenomenon that revolves around mobilizing sectarian identities. Discussions about moving beyond sectarianism thus require an understanding about not only how sectarian identities are mobilized, but also how sectarian identities are formed in the first place. What contributes to the complexity of sectarianism is the multivarious ways in which sectarian identities are formed. There are endogenous and exogenous factors that shape the construction of those identities. Fanar Haddad (2020b) provides a helpful framework for conceptualizing how sectarian identities are formed, imagined, perceived, and practiced. He suggests that sectarian identities develop over four overlapping, interdependent and mutually informing and mutually reinforcing dialogical levels: doctrinal, subnational, national, and transnational (pg. 82). Sectarian identity is the cumulative product of forces operating at each one of these levels in a fluid and non-hierarchical manner. No level is more or less important than the other three for tracing the evolution of sectarian identities.

This chapter lays the foundation for a discussion about desectarianization in Lebanon by exploring the evolution of sectarian identities as primary social markers around which public and political life became organized. The chapter uses a historical approach to highlight key moments in Lebanese national history that led to the accentuation and later institutionalization of sectarian identity. The analysis is provided in a chronological order and covers dynamics at the doctrinal, subnational, national, and transnational levels. The period under study in this chapter spans from the late Ottoman period when inter-sectarian relations at the subnational level became inflamed in Lebanon. This provoked change to the status quo at the national level. Subsequent regional and doctrinal developments agitated sectarian identities and enlarged differences. Successive local authorities and regional powers sought to accommodate changing sectarian dynamics by introducing new structures to regulate life. Unavoidably, these structures emphasized sectarian identities and highlighted communal differences. Over time, the structures that aimed to bring order to a volatile sectarian situation hardened and were instrumentalized by sectarian elites to entrench sectarianism and expand their influence. The purpose of this chapter is to uncover the emergence of the structures that currently stand as impediments for desectarianization in Lebanon. Subsequent chapters will analyse those structures in greater detail. The chapter will also inform the discussion on the capacity of religious leaders to act as desectarianization actors by critiquing their historical contribution to entrench religious identity as a social and political differentiator.

Religion, sects, and structural changes

Lebanon experienced waves of sectarian conflicts throughout its history (Shehadi and Haffar Mills, 1998; Khalaf, 2002b; Picard, 2002; Salibi, 1988; Fawaz, 1994). However, just because the territory of modern Lebanon was home to various religious communities, it does not mean that those communities were predestined to clash. There is no basis on which to posit that Lebanon's inhabitants are inherently sectarian or that they could not coexist peacefully, given that there were long periods in the nation's history marked by peace and religious tolerance (Makdisi, 2019; Akarli, 1993). Therefore, there must be other conditions that periodically agitated sectarian identities and gradually established a sect-based order.

In exploring those conditions, it is pertinent to go back in time to the beginning of the nineteenth century when sect-based power relations started occupying a bigger space in the political realm. Mount Lebanon was an Ottoman administrative unit ruled by an *Emir* that was appointed by the Ottoman regional leader, or *Wali.* The Emir was responsible for collecting taxes from inhabitants in his district. He did so by appointing local chiefs, *Muqata'jis,* to raise the prescribed taxes from sub districts in his domain. *Muqata'jis* were fief-holders that levied people directly, and in the process, they kept an undeclared portion of the proceeds for themselves, which made them wealthy and influential over time. The *Emir,* therefore, was not an absolute leader over his domain. He ruled through the *Muqata'jis* and that made the relationship between the two precarious and competitive (Frazee, 1997).

In that hereditary feudal order, the life of inhabitants of Mount Lebanon was structured around kinship, traditions, and prestige (Harik, 2017). Family ties figured prominently in the political system of Mount Lebanon. Members of an extended family often lived in close proximity to each other and shared the same fate. They owned and worked the land cooperatively, and they were assigned tax dues as a collective unit (Beinin, 2001). This formed a bond of solidarity between family members, and rendered family lineages as basic units of social, economic and political organization (Hakim 2013). Family members operated as part of a homogenous unit, upholding the rights and responsibilities of their kin. Notable families were distinguished by their size and the number of lands they owned. They usually included individuals unrelated by blood but integrated through political or economic ties. It is important to highlight that under Ottoman rule, and up to the middle of the nineteenth century, allegiances amongst the populace were primarily drawn along family lines and village coalitions. Religious affiliations did not frame people's political loyalties (Rabah, 2020, p. 41)

Several religious communities inhabited Mount Lebanon, but they were not always in competition with each other. Religion's sphere of influence during the opening decades of the

nineteenth century was confined to establishing social norms and customs. Religious practices enforced cultural norms that perpetuated the established political order. While it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which communities distinguished themselves along religious markers, "the differing religious communities appeared to carry some sense of communal distinctiveness tempered by shared worldviews, customs and interests that cut across sectarian divides" (Hakim 2013, 28). Public and collective religious rituals contributed to a sense of communal distinctiveness, but the shared social and political realities, historical traditions, and interest calculations blurred the boundary lines between the various religious communities. Political alliances among notables and relations between commoners cut across sectarian lines (Harik 1968, 24). That would not have been unusual or uncommon under the Ottomans (Makdisi 2019). The empire had reigned over multi-ethnic and multi-religious groups for centuries. They promoted inter-communal tolerance, though not as a value in and of itself, but as a strategy of rule (Greene, 2020)

By the middle of the eighteenth century, Druze and the Maronites dominated Mount Lebanon, while Shiite power was in decline (Winter, 2010). Druze and Maronite *Emirs* and *Muqata'jis* ruled over adjacent areas, and they formed a web of alliances and competition between them for control. Historically, relations between the two communities were congenial because leaders' legitimacy relied on personal allegiance: it was "more a function of … loyalty between protector and protégé than an attribute of coercion and impersonal authority" (Khalaf, 2002b, p. 65). Furthermore, life in Mount Lebanon, like most agrarian societies at the time, required a degree of interdependence between co-inhabitants. In that systems, Christian and Druze peasants lived in relative harmony (Hazran, 2014). However, that situation began to change at the turn of the nineteenth century as the Maronite population boomed, and their wealth from silk trading increased significantly (Khoury 2010). More importantly, Maronite self-awareness flourished as a result of gradual empowerment by the Maronite church (Hojairi, 2021).

Up until the eighteenth century, the Maronite church had few resources, and was dependent on Maronite notables for protection and financial sustainability. This limited the clergy's influence and the church's potential to expand. By the middle of the eighteenth century, the Maronite Church, with backing from the Roman Catholic Church in Rome, undertook significant reforms to strengthen its internal structure and secure its autonomy. It enacted measures that prohibit interference from Maronite notables in selecting bishops and electing the patriarch. It also acquired land and enlarged its waqfs to wean itself off from dependence on the notables (Tannoury, 2010). The Church generated regular income, and eventually became one of the richest institutions in Lebanon (Harik 1968). The church improved its

standing, and steadily accumulated more influence amongst its flock. As the population grew, clergy presence was more conspicuous as additional priests were ordained to pastor new churches. Moreover, the Church established schools, and set up religious societies for lay people. These activities allowed the Maronite church to stimulate religious life in the parishes more consistently and to cultivate sectarian distinctiveness and confessional awareness in a religiously diverse environment (Abraham, 2020).

More significantly, the ecclesial reform that the church enacted disturbed the order that had prevailed in Mount Lebanon, and it paved the way for structural changes in the country. As the church became more autonomous and less reliant on *Muqata'jis,* the clergy helped spread literacy and educated Maronite commoners. As a consequence, Maronites, which were increasingly aware of their church-provided training and Maronite distinctiveness, became the dominant force in the administration of Mount Lebanon (van Leeuwen, 1994). This had the effect of undermining traditional authorities. Moreover, Maronite clergy, inspired by French counterparts, introduced egalitarian ideas that posed a threat to the *muqata* system and the legitimacy of the *Muqata'jis* (Churchill, 1994, pp. 89–90). Already in 1807, Maronite *nazirs* or *muddabirs* (i.e., responsible supervisors) were appointed for tax collection in place of Maronite *Muqata'jis* (Firro, 1992, p. 54; Harik, 2017, pp. 229–289). The new ideas transmitted by the clergymen diminished the clout of ruling elites. The clergy also introduced the peasantry to the system of *vekils*, or representatives. Those *vekils* escalated the concerns of Christian villages that they represented. This arrangement introduced an alternative political order that is based on public interest and individual rights (el Khazen, 2006). A shift was happening where personal and kinship-based allegiance were replaced by ties based on communal (initially class/peasant and eventually sectarian) and public interest (Ozavci, 2021, p. 236). That is, in Mount Lebanon in the early nineteenth century, the clergy facilitated a structural shift in the ordering of political and public life. This demonstrates that religious leaders have a capacity to transform people's perception of themselves and by extension their relationship to ruling elites and governing structures.

Sectarian identities and political mobilization

As the church promoted Maronite identity and helped introduce structural changes that are predicated on sectarian identity, this overlapped with shifts in domestic and regional power balancing. Bashir II al-Shihabi (1788-1840) became *Emir* and ruled intermittently between 1789-1840. This set a precedent of a Maronite occupying the highest position in the emirate. Bashir's ancestors, the Shehabis, were originally Sunni Muslims, but for unrecorded reasons, few members converted to Christianity, including the father of Bashir II. Bashir himself was born

Christian. To fortify his rule, *Emir* Bashir II leveraged the power that he had accumulated to replace *Muqata'jis* that posed a threat to him with members of his family and close associates. As a result, many Druze *Muqata'jis* and some of their Maronite allies were dispossessed and their lands were allotted to recently enriched Christian merchants. Bashir leveraged the existing network established by the Maronite church to solidify his grip on power (Harik, 2017). In the process, he amplified the influence of the clergy, but painted a target mark on the back of Maronites. Druze felt most frustrated by changes to the political order as they saw their power shrink.

By evicting and exiling Druze figureheads, Bashir II had effectively terminated Druze's political domination of the Mountain. It should be emphasized, however, that although Bashir II crushed Druze leadership, his motive as far as can be seen was overwhelmingly political, not sectarian; Bashir II saw the chief Druze leader, Jumblatt, as a political rival, not a sectarian foe (Salibi 1965, 27). Nonetheless, this did not stop the Druze from feeling disempowered as a community. The disruption in the balance of power in favour of the Maronites, and the absence of significant Druze leadership, embittered the Druze and encouraged them to cooperate with each other more consciously. The situation was aggravated after Bashir II supplied Ibrahim Pasha of Egypt with a Maronite contingent to subdue a Druze rebellion in their home district in the Shouf. Henceforward, Bashir II was perceived as personal enemy of the Druze, and some discord ensued between Druze and Maronite communities. From that point on, sectarian identity gained significance as a political and social marker and a cause for division (Ozavci, 2021, p. 235)

Inter-sectarian confrontations erupted and led to a series of bloody conflicts that culminated in 1860 with a massacre of a large number of Maronites in Mount Lebanon and Damascus (Al-Bustani, 2019). That trauma galvanized a process of sect-based othering that spread across Mount Lebanon. The Greek Orthodox community, which felt relegated by the ascendency of the Maronites and their numerical superiority, organized itself and occasionally fought alongside the Druze against their Christian kin. By contrast, and perhaps to spite them, Greek Catholics also organized themselves but took the side of the Maronites in conflicts (Salibi 1965, 51-52). As a result, sectarian self-identification was pronounced and inter-sectarian rivalry shaped Lebanese collective memory. This was cemented by a change in formal structures where the administrative order of the *Double Qaimaqamate (1842-1860) and* the *Mutasarrifate* (1861-1918) were introduced and were predicated on appointing rulers according to a sectarian formula devised by the Ottomans and European imperial powers (Bayeh, 2017b). Sectarianism was thus structurally embedded in the system of social and political governance. It is important to highlight that although the elevation of sectarian identities as a factor in ordering public life happened under Ottoman eyes, it was contrary to the spirit of the *Tanzimat* reforms, which the

Empire had launched a few years earlier. In the age of imperial expansion, it was the European great powers, and chiefly Britain and France, that pressured the Ottomans to provide concessions to non-Muslim communities. Stated differently, foreign powers played a central role in negotiating a sect-based system under the pretense of representing and protecting religious minorities (Makdisi 2019). This underscores the point that by utilizing patronage networks, external actors can upset the sectarian balance of power and harden sectarian differences by promoting structures that are predicated on accommodating sectarian identities.

Institutionalizing sectarianism

By the beginning of the twentieth century, a new generation of educated individuals and members of a growing merchant class contested the prevailing authoritarianism of the *Mutasarrifate* and the dominance of the Maronite Church (Khuri, 1969). Influenced by secular and nationalist thoughts from neighboring provinces and emigrant communities, this new intelligentsia of the Arab Renaissance promoted liberal principles of equality, freedom of expression, rule of law, and individual rights (Traboulsi, 2012, p. 66). In their struggle against two pillars of the prevailing order, the *Muqata'jis* system and the Maronite Church, they undermined narrow sectarian politicking. They spoke of a Lebanese national identity that is based on a common patriotic bond, without preferential treatment for any of the confessional groups. A new discourse was emerging that challenged existing structures and assumptions about the primacy of sectarian identity in organizing the public sphere. This discourse was politically charged by two main issues that characterized the debate about nation identity in Lebanon: the geographical boundaries of an autonomous Lebanon, and that entity's relation to 'Natural' Syria. Divergent and irreconcilable views polarized people. On the one hand, the Maronite patriarchy wanted to preserve the special autonomous status of Mount Lebanon, but enlarge its area in order to create an economically self-sufficient polity (Haddad, 2002b). This was an acceptable proposition by many Christians and Muslims, but there were sharp disagreements over where exactly to draw the boarder lines. The Church and many Christian notables wanted boundaries that would ensure Christian majority in its confines. On the other hand, the majority of Muslims and a significant proportion of Orthodox Christians did not want to sever ties with their Arab kin in neighboring Syria, and wanted to enjoin the two spaces into one (Ellis, 2019). The Lebanese could not reach a consensus about the frontiers of their homeland, but that only became an urgent issue to address after the Ottoman Empire was defeated in the First World War.

The Allies who anticipated the demise of the Ottoman Empire had already negotiated its dismemberment. Lebanon was placed under direct French control, and Syria was placed in

France’s sphere of influence. Although Britain and France were war allies, they were suspicious of each other, especially after it came known that the British had made contradictory promises to different stakeholders about custodianship over Syria (Barr, 2011). Competition between the French and the English obscured the future of Lebanon. The two imperial powers deliberated the fate of the area but they did not prioritize its settlement. Both sides wanted to optimize their influence in the region without facing off against each other. They each sought to strengthen their own local allies in order to maximize their foothold in the region. This encouraged Lebanese notables to organize themselves and present their aspirations before the victors of WWI.

The Administrative Council, which is a multi-confessional body of Lebanese elected officials established in 1861 to advise the Ottoman *Mutasarraf*, sent three different delegations on three separate occasions to plead their case for administrative and political independence (Simon, 1996). They petitioned for a Greater Lebanon (*Grand Liban)* according to its “historical and natural borders”. Maronite Patriarch Elias Huwayik was the most vocal proponent of that concept. He was an ardent defender of a Maronite-dominated independent Lebanon under French sponsorship. He headed the second delegation to the Paris Peace Conference to protest the integration of Lebanon in a Syrian Kingdom (Barak, 2017). On September 1, 1920 the French Commissioner declared the establishment of Greater Lebanon, encompassing Mount Lebanon, the coast from Tripoli to Tyre, plus Hasbaya, Rashaya, Ba`albak and Akkar. Ultimately, it was the Patriarch’s vision that came to pass. That the contours of the new state matched the vision of the Patriarch enhanced influence of Christians in general and the Maronite Church in particular. It also signaled the agency of a religious leader to bring about an order that corresponds to his understanding of self and other. This is especially true considering that half the members of the Administrative Council that accompanied the patriarch opposed his vision and wanted to unite Lebanon with Syria (pg. 146-148).

The establishment of a Christian dominated Greater Lebanon raised the fears of Muslim groups (Akarli, 1993; Olmert, 1996), but it was the new structures that France introduced which enflamed sectarian relations and institutionalized sect-based politics. Upon receiving mandatory control over Lebanon, France replaced the Administrative Council with an Administrative Commission (Traboulsi, 2012). The former was composed of equal members of Christians and Muslims and had veto power over taxes, while the latter was two thirds Christian and only one third Muslim and it functioned more as a consultive body. After Muslims objected that ratio, the French high commissioner enlarged the number of counselees from 15 to 17, but still gave Christians a slightly bigger share of power: 9 Christians to 8 Muslims. Not only did French colonial interference disrupt the relatively stable status quo (Akarli, 1993), but it legitimized an order

that is based on disproportionate sectarian power sharing (Akarli, 1988). In that order, Lebanese sectarian communities will be competing for preeminence.

In 1926, after careful vetting from French authorities, the Lebanese promulgated their first constitution to govern their affairs. The constitution called for equality of all citizens and equal access to public positions. At the same time, the constitution was tacitly sectarian in that it required, in Article 95, fair distribution of government and administrative posts amongst confessional groups, (Zamir 1997, 28-41). A modern non-sectarian state would not have reserved any government positions to be occupied by individuals based on their religious sect. Although Article 95 was drafted as a temporary measure to smoothen the transition in Lebanon from the order of the *Mutasarrifate* to that of a modern national state, it paved the way for the National Pact agreement of 1943 which ratified an unbalanced power-sharing formula between Christians and Muslims (el-Khazen, 1991). Furthermore, according to the constitution, the state relegated arbitration on personal affairs (e.g., marriage, divorce, inheritance, custody of children…etc.) to religious courts exclusively, which weakened citizens' sense of civic responsibility and boosted notions of sectarian belonging (Botrous, 2020; Weiss, 2008). Thus, the building blocks for institutional sectarianism were laid: a system of governance that distributes privileges along sectarian lines, an empowered religious establishment that has substantial legal leverage over its religionists, and an educational system that sharpens sectarian distinction between future generations of Lebanese citizens (Weiss, 2010b).

It is important to highlight that the institutionalization of sectarianism did not occur arbitrarily. Rather, it was part of a colonial strategy to divide and rule Lebanon (Makdisi, 2000; Thompson, 1999). France sought to protect its geopolitical interests in the Levant. It found in Maronite elites a vanguard that that would help France project its ideology in the region, alongside a policy of minority protection (Bahout, 2016b). France created a system that privileged Christians in administering the state, thus deepening divisions between Christians and Muslims. However, the role of France in advancing sectarianism should not be overstated. Sectarian divisions already existed in Lebanon, and during the mandate period they manifested themselves in debates about the future of the state and its relationship to Syria and France. The matter came into sharp focus in 1936 after major protests in Syria pressured France to promise Syrians independence. This in turn prompted the Lebanese to demand the same status, but France only offered them "internal independence": Paris intended to keep the country's defense and foreign relations under its control (Traboulsi, 2012, p. 99). All the same, talks of independence raised major concerns across the Lebanese spectrum. Christian 'protectionists' were apprehensive about Syria annexing Lebanon once both countries broke free from French mandate. Correspondingly, Muslim 'unionists' feared that a French-sponsored independent

Lebanon would shatter their dream of integration with Syria (el-Khazen, 1991). From that perspective, France helped aggravate sectarian relations that already existed by exploiting divisions between Lebanese people in the form of erecting a sect-based order and governance structures.

Ethnic and sectarian identities were mobilized by protectionists and unionist in order to advance their own political projects. Ultimately, it was a string of factors that settled the fate of the country and the final power sharing formula: The outbreak of WWII and the fall of the French regime, a positive shift in Maronites' attitude towards Syria, political pragmatism amongst Lebanese Sunni leaders, and promises of economic prosperity from the liquidation of French holding companies (Tarabulsi 2012). These factors coalesced and led to the independence of Lebanon in 1943 and the declaration of the unwritten National Pact which divided the three top positions in the country among the largest confessional groups: presidentship to Maronites, premiership to Sunnis, and deputies speakership to Shiites. A new electoral law was also decreed that delivered six Christian parliamentarians for every five Muslims. By drawing sectarian boundaries around executive and legislative authorities, as well as grade one posts in the government, sectarian identity was reified, and institutional sectarianism was ratified.

Sectarianism in the age of prosperity

In the decades following independence (1943 - 1970), Lebanon underwent major state building measures and experienced steady economic growth (Kaufman, 2021; Gates, 1998). Liberal economic policies and laissez-faire tendencies attracted international investment and oil wealth deposits (Khalaf, 2002b, pp. 159–169). The flow of capital transformed Lebanon into a financial and commercial hub for the region. The wealth of the burgeoning nation-state, however, was concentrated in the hands of a consortium of thirty families(Traboulsi, 2012, p. 116). The financial oligarchy that came to power was composed of 24 Christian families (nine Maronites, seven Greek Catholic, one Latin, one Protestant, four Greek Orthodox and one Armenian), and six Muslim (four Sunni, one Shiite and one Druze). Between them, members of the consortium held positions of control in all financial sectors, and they managed to preserve that wealth in a few hands through intermarriages and business partnerships. In addition, the oligarchy dominated the executive branches of the government where power was concentrated. They reduced the Parliament to a weak body that ostensibly represents the various sects, but effectively serves as a calibrator of "sectarian peace" (pg. 118). That is, the legislature served as a site for balancing historical sectarian fears of domination, through the quota system, whereas

the country's economic growth and projection was in the hands of the executive branch and financial elites. As new parliamentarians developed a deeper understanding of the political system's dynamics, and they got access to diverse governmental resources, they challenged traditional leadership and worked towards developing their own popular bases.

Effectively, political leadership was transitioning to the hands of semi feudal *zu'ama* (Hourani, 1966). Traditionally, these were descendants of the *muqata'jiye* of a bygone era. They were landowners or descendants of notable families that could trace their lineage to a historical period when they had recognized privileges. Their leadership was modeled on a cult of personality and blind obedience. The za'im was highly esteemed and he ruled autocratically. He ordained what was good for his community, and habitually defended and promoted the community's welfare in political settings. In exchange, he earned his people's loyalty and maintained it by shielding them from political and economic hardships (Farha, 2015). This type of *za'ameh* was most common within the Druze community in Mount Lebanon, and the Shiite community in the South and the Baalbek-Hermel region (Khalaf, 1968). These *zu'ama* engaged with parliamentary democracy as a family enterprise, leveraging family connections to amass votes and passing down their position in government to their sons and relatives. It is difficult to ascertain the extent to which these *z'amat* were also drawn along confessional lines. There is no doubt that they hinged on family and clan links, but confessional loyalty would have surely reinforced the *za'im's* social standing and expanded his influence (Hamzeh, 2001).

With the advent of economic prosperity and the proliferation of commercial monopolies, the doors were wide open for the formation of new client-patron relationships. A new cadre of *zu'ama* emerged that derived its legitimacy from harnessing the political economy of Lebanon (Arsan, 2018). They capitalized on the opportunities that the confessional system granted to entrench themselves in power. Those *zu'ama* rose to prominence as they put their political access and financial resources in service of each other. Given the consociational nature of the Lebanese system, they projected themselves as patrons of their respective confessional communities, and took the liberty to negotiate amongst themselves division of public offices and resources (Salamey, 2009). They were aided in their conspiring by the reality of the underdeveloped state of the government. There was no transparency or accountability in conducting public affairs. The *zu'ama,* who saw no personal benefit to them in establishing a strong state, hampered measures that would reform the governing and economic structures (Ofeish, 1999). These *zu'ama* did not belong to a single sect, but they included representatives from all the religious communities, but most importantly from the Sunni, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, and Maronite communities (Najem 1998, 59). The rise of these sectarian leaders at a time of prosperity demonstrates the reflexivity of sectarian narratives and stickiness of sectarian

identities (Haddad *et al.*, 2022b) . When exploring desectarianization, it is important to consider the conditions where sectarianization takes place, but the point to underscore here is that while mobilizing people along sectarian lines intensifies during hardship times (Cammett, 2015), it can still take place during affluent periods. The disparity in income or resource distribution amongst sectarian communities, is one of the main factors that fuels inter-sectarian suspicion (Assouad, 2021). This political economy of sectarianism in Lebanon will be discussed in more details in chapter four.

Sectarian identity at the intersection of nationalism and insecurity

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the imminence of pan-Arabism and the influx of Palestinian refugees to Lebanon polarized the Lebanese people. On the one hand, union between Egypt and Syria renewed a sense of belonging amongst Lebanese Muslims who called for closer relationship with their Arab neighbors (Attie, 2020). On the other hand, a significant portion of the Muslim community sympathized with Palestinians' dilemma and joined their armed struggle to liberate what was portrayed as Muslim and Arab lands occupied by Israeli Zionist forces (George, 2022). The proliferation of arms and military bootcamps amongst Palestinians unsettled Maronites who had largely controlled the army, but felt that the security situation in the country was slipping out of their control (Naor, 2019; Khalil, 2016). Political parties like the Phalange under the leadership of Pierre Gmeyyel, and the Progressive Socialist Party under the leadership of Kamal Jumblatt epitomized the two poles of the power struggle between Christians and Muslims. Gmeyyel, a Maronite *za'im,* wanted to preserve the status quo. He campaigned for intensifying national security to confront the rising power of Palestinian militants who were launching attacks against Israel from Lebanese territories and consequently drawing Israeli aggression. Gmeyyel considered the Christian-Muslim balance in Lebanon so delicate that Lebanon's entanglement in regional affairs would have catastrophic consequence on the country (Nisan, 2017). He was supported in his views by most Christians, and primarily Maronites, who harbored memories of endangered Christian survival. To Gmeyyel, Lebanon is an independent state that is characterized by a Western-leaning Christian character, and that character was being threatened by the prospect of naturalizing Palestinian refugees and by Palestinian Liberation militarism (Moumneh, 2018). On the other hand, Jumblatt, who hails from a family of leading Druze *zu'ama*, contested the Western-leading policies of the government and called for restructuring of the political and economic order in the state (al-Khazen, 1988). He was supported by the vast majority of the Druze and many Muslims who belonged to leftist groups, primarily Shiites. Jumblatt and Gmeyyel were both charismatic leaders, commanded large militias, and were able to mobilize people along sectarian and ideological lines.

Competition between their respective blocs (the Lebanese Front and the Lebanese National Movement) had sectarian undertones, but at the root of it were questions about sovereignty and contents of national identity (Khazen, 2020). The Lebanese Front sought to reestablish the authority of the law as means for protecting national security and territorial integrity of the state. The National Movement, on the other hand, emphasized political and social reform, the abrogation of sectarianism, and a clear proclamation of the Arab identity, which entails direct support of Palestinians. In other words, the struggle was whether to preserve the status quo privileging Christians or introduce structural reforms that alter the sectarian balance and Lebanese national identity (Traboulsi, 2012).

The sectarian composition of the opposing groups emphasized demarcation lines between Christians and Muslims. As a result, political affiliation increasingly insinuated sectarian identity, and vice versa. When the civil war eventually broke out, it entangled all sectarian communities. The precariousness of the security situation catalyzed an arms race amongst Lebanon's sectarian zu'ama. Escalations spiraled into open hostilities during the spring of 1975. In the following years, Palestinian factions and sectarian groups engaged in provocative acts against perceived threat from each other. This included, massacres, kidnapping, extortion, racketeering, arbitrary imprisonment, displacement of entire civilian communities, and setting up permeant military installment (Hägerdal, 2021). Beirut was divided into an Eastern Christian controlled zone and a Western Muslim controlled zone. While violence did not fall neatly along sectarian lines, it had the unmistakable effect of hardening sectarian identities (Choueiri, 2007).

Moreover, external actors were complicit in prolonging the war and enflaming sectarian tension. The 1970s and 1980s raised difficult questions about the future of Palestinian-Israel conflict, Arab nationalism, Islamic movements, and Cold War projections (Khalidi, 2009; Ashton, 2007; Lippman, 2016; Kerr, 1971). The Lebanese were divided over how to align their country on these issues. Contradictory perceptions of national identity, and fierce competition between power elites left the country fragmented, unstable, and permeable (Fakhoury-Muehlbacher, 2008). Regional state actors intervened to advance their agenda in the region. Syria, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt, Iraq, and Libya had all backed different factions in the conflict (Hudson 1978). Violence turned to bloodshed as states intervened militarily and/or supported their clients with arms. Broadly speaking, war time alignments fell along sectarian lines, but were governed by political pragmatism. For instance, at the outset of the conflict, Syria sided with Christian militias to confront the growing power of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and avert an Israeli attack (Naor, 2014). However, when Christians seemed to be getting the upper hand and posed a threat to Syria's hegemony, Syrian forces turned their guns against Christians enclaves (Eisenberg, 2009).

Similarly, Damascus found it strategic to support Shiite groups, but not wholesale. Syria backed AMAL as a Lebanese Shiite resistance movement against Israel. When Iran established Hezbollah in Lebanon, Syria did not accept Tehran's growing influence and was suspicious of its mobilization of Shiites (Khashan, 2019a). Damascus urged AMAL to oust Hezbollah from Beirut and the South, which led to bitter intra-sectarian Shiite fighting. This demonstrates that Syria supported or fought different sectarian groups, not out of ideological conviction, but to pragmatically firm up its control in Lebanon (Avi-Ran 1991). By doing so, not only did Syria deepen sectarian divisions, but it, alongside other foreign powers, contributed to the securitization of sectarian identities. Other regional actors exasperated sectarian cleavages to advance their interests. Israel set up the South Lebanon Army chiefly as a Christian proxy group to fight ward off Palestinian, AMAL and Hezbollah fighters near its boarders (Mowles, 1986). Saudi Arabia supported Christian groups that opposed Nasserism (Wehrey *et al.*, 2009, p. 78). Iran created Hezbollah as an Islamic Shiite resistance movement against Israel (Norton, 1987a, 2009a). In short, regional states were directly involved in mobilizing sectarian groups in Lebanon. Given that sectarian identities operate in a complex space, animated by transnational religious networks and influenced by geopolitical calculations(Mabon and Wastnidge, 2019), when exploring desectarianization, it is important to consider external factors; Namely, foreign sponsorship of sectarian groups.

Sectarianism in the post-war period

The civil war in Lebanon ended with the signing of the Taif Accord on October 22, 1989. Under the supervision of regional and international powers, the Accord brought warring factions to the negotiating table for the purpose of agreeing on a scheme for national reconciliation. The outcome was simply a constitutional remaking of the sectarian order (Salloukh *et al.*, 2015, p. 21). A new power sharing formula established parity between Muslims and Christian in the Parliament. The executive power of the Maronite president was severely diminished, turning him into a mere symbol of national unity and a guardian of the constitution, lacking real power to enforce decisions (Haddad, 2002c). Executive power was invested in the Council of Ministers, which preserved a sectarian balance but was to remain headed by a Sunni Prime Minister. The cabinet was governed by a preamble to the Taif Accord which states that "illegitimate is the authority that negates the covenant of mutual existence," interpreted to mean that decisions must be taken in consensual manner; that is, with consent from sectarian representatives (Salloukh, 2010).

The Taif agreement was a cumbersome arrangement that crippled government decision making, because its aim was to preclude the domination of any sectarian group over the others (Hudson, 1999; Rais, 2005a; Nagle and Clancy, 2019). The Taif Agreement could have paved the way for the emergence of a non-sectarian system, as the Agreement indeed indicated was the goal. However, far from abolishing sectarianism, the Taif transformed the hierarchical communal partnerships among the major communities into a consociational, intercommunal collective partnership (Ziadeh 2006, 140). In the post-war period, old and new *zu'ama* reproduced sectarianism by leveraging formal structures to block measures that could terminate the sectarian order, such as establishing the national committee for abolishing political sectarianism, which Article 95 of the constitution calls for. In parallel, the *zu'ama* exploited state resources and expand their sectarian patronage networks and enlarge their political capital (Najem, 2000; Salloukh, 2019b; Leenders, 2012a; Rabil, 2011; Baumann, 2016a). While the Taif Agreement intended to lay a foundation for a post-sectarian system, that trajectory was thwarted when the sectarian *zu'ama* received amnesty for their war crimes and took control of the state's levers of power (Nagle, 2022). By extending the logic of *muhasasa* across diverse areas of public administration, sectarian zu'ama weakened state institutions and utilized existing sectarian structures to entrench themselves in power (Mansour and Khatib, 2021).

One of the key factors that enabled the *zu'ama* to dominate the state and maintain sectarian structures was the tutelage the Syria exercised over Lebanon (Hinnebusch, 1998a). By coercing the Lebanese government to sign a joint security agreement, Damascus bolstered its military presence in Lebanon and made the Lebanese army subservient to its command. Political life under Syria's neo-colonialism produced new political elites that were loyal to Syria, or they had to comply with Syria in order to survive (El-Husseini, 2012). This raised the ire of oppositional groups, especially Christians who saw two of their most popular leaders, army General Michel Aoun and Lebanese Forces militia leader Samir Geagea, forced to exile and imprisoned respectively (Shaery-Yazdi, 2020). Syria controlled the sectarian system in Lebanon by cultivating alliances with leaders from across the sectarian spectrum (Naor, 2017). At the same time, Syria had strategic ties with Hezbollah. It allowed Hezbollah to continue its military operations against Israel in the South as part of its geopolitical maneuvering (Khashan 2019, 72-73). Syria already had a strong Shiite partner through AMAL, and by providing coverages for Hezbollah's resistance, it secured near-complete backing from Shiites in Lebanon. This inevitably cemented a sectarian connection between the Assad regime (president Hafez and his son Basshar) and the Shiite community (Alam, 2019). After the withdrawal of the Israeli Defense Forces from most of South Lebanon in the summer of 2000, Hezbollah gained wide Lebanese popularity for its effort to liberate a large part of the country. Hezbollah turned that popularity into political gain when

it entered the 1992 parliamentary elections and consistently enlarged its coalition since then (Nilsson, 2020a). This solidified the alliance between the Syrian regime and Shiite *zu'ama* in Lebanon. The fact that most Shiite elites aligned with the Assad regime rendered Syria pro-Shiite and Shiites pro-Syria. This aggravated non-Shiites who objected Syria's presence in Lebanon, and in turn intensified inter-sectarian tensions (Deeb, 2013a).

A sectarian balance of power was maintained in Lebanon thanks to the role that Damascus played as an arbiter (Najem, 2012, p. 63). That balance, however, was disturbed when Prime Minister Rafic Hariri was killed in a car bomb that rocked the Beirut seaside on February 14, 2005. The death of Hariri was a watershed moment. Hariri was an eminent Sunni *za'im* who represented the highest Sunni political authority in the country and the face of Lebanon's reconstruction and modernization (Meier and di Peri, 2016). Killing him symbolized an attack on the Sunni community, on the political project that Hariri advanced, and on Hariri's sponsors. Speculations immediately surfaced following the bombing that the Assad regime was behind the attack (Blanford, 2006a). Rafic's son, and Lebanon's soon to become prime minister, Saad Hariri also blamed Syria for his father's death, though he later retracted his accusation in 2010 (Perry and Fletcher, 2020). On the one-month anniversary of the killing, anti-Syrian groups gathered in downtown Beirut to protest Syria's military presence and intervention in Lebanon. Anticipating massive participation, the rival pro-Syrian groups sought to counter anti-Syrian fervor by organizing similar protests one week in advance, and to show solidarity with Damascus. The March 14 and March 8 groups, as the two groups later came to be known, divided the country into a Sunni-led bloc and a Shiite-led bloc. That polarization not only prolonged the life of the sectarian system, but it also "raised sectarian modes of subjectification and mobilization to new levels" (Salloukh *et al.*, 2015, p. 28). The emergence of the March-14 and March-8 coalitions demonstrates that even though sectarian confrontations can be mitigated, which is what Damascus had managed in the post-war period, the existence of sectarian structures keeps divisions alive and increases distrust between confessional communities. From that perspective, desectarianization efforts must go beyond seeking a sectarian balance, and consider pathways for deconstructing structures that perpetuate and reproduce sectarianism.

The competition for dominance between Christians and Muslims, which had animated Lebanese politics for most of the twentieth century, shifted to a competition between Sunnis and Shiites following the assassination of Hariri. That should be seen against the background of geopolitical struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran to fill the vacuum created by the ousting of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq (Mabon, 2013a, 2018d). The US-led coalition forces embarked on policy of de-bathification, which had the effect of destabilizing security in Iraq and alienating Sunni elites. Subsequently, instance of sectarian violence increased in Iraq and sectarian rhetoric

became more widespread across the Middle East (Dodge, 2014; Potter, 2013). Iranian and Saudi elites sought to securitize each other in the eyes of their respective audiences (Mabon, 2018c). In Lebanon, this raised tension between the Saudi-backed March-14 group and Iran-backed March 8 group.

Given that a new post-Syrian order was being negotiated, or at least perceived as such, both Riyadh and Tehran were keen on seeing their local Lebanese allies maximize their control in the new system. Negotiations between March-14 and March-8 reached a breaking point when the former determined to dismantle Hezbollah's private telecommunication network. Hezbollah considered the network an essential component of its arsenal because it provides secure for communication between Hezbollah operatives. Naim Qassem, Hezbollah's deputy secretary general, claimed that targeting the network was tantamount to attacking Hezbollah and undermining its ability to fight Israel (Aljazeera, 2008). On May 7, 2008, a general strike was announced by the pro-March-8 General Workers Union, which resulted in skirmishes between March-14 and March-8 loyalists. In less than a week, Hezbollah-led militants descended upon West Beirut, purged the stronghold areas of March-14 leadership, attacked Hariri's Future television network offices, and handed control of the city center to the Lebanese army. Hezbollah had already demonstrated its military strength after the war with Israel in the summer of 2006. What is significant about the May-7 incident is that it shows Hezbollah's preparedness to turn its weapons inwards, against its fellow Lebanese. Subsequently, suspicion of Hezbollah and its proxy relationship to Iran intensified. This further anchored Hezbollah to Shi'a partisanship and alienated it from the other Lebanese sectarian groups (el Husseini, 2010)

The Sunni-Shiite fault line was widened following the outbreak of the Arab Uprisings (Phillips, 2015b; Abdo, 2016b; Salloukh, 2013; Hinnebusch, 2019c; Matthiesen, 2014; Mabon, 2020b). Although Lebanon did not experience riots that threatened its sectarian regime, its proximity to Syria and the ties between the Assad-regime and Hezbollah polarized the Lebanese population. Matters became more contentious when Hezbollah fighters travelled to Syria, against the Lebanese government's policy of disassociation, to aid the regime militarily and save it from collapse (Mason, 2021; Al-Aloosy, 2022). Publicly, Hezbollah provided several reasons to operate in Syria. It alleged that it was going to protect Shiite shrines from Jihadi destructive forces (Phillips, 2016b; Wimmen, 2018b). It also stated that it got involved to defend its "resistance ally" and strategically eliminate threats to Lebanon's borders (Ali, 2019). Whatever the reasons are, Hezbollah's self-sacrificing narrative and mission to rescue the Assad regime angered many Lebanese, especially Sunnis, who felt Hezbollah's membership in the axis of resistance jeopardized the security of Lebanon and entangled the country in a war that it was

not prepared or willing to fight. Importantly at stake was Lebanon's close ties with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states (Salloukh, 2017b).

As the rift between sectarian elites widened, political life in Lebanon was paralyzed. A presidential vacuum lasting for 29 months between 2014 and 2016 loomed over the country. During that period, the level of government dysfunction reached a new peak. In 2015, the government failed to provide an environmentally friendly and sustainable solution to a growing waste management crisis (Kraidy, 2016). As a response, protesters from across Lebanon coalesced and took to the streets of Beirut demanding an end to government backroom deals and sect-based outsourcing of government services. A non-sectarian protest movement formed quickly under the banner YouStink; a reference to corrupt politicians who could not agree on how to split the profits from garbage collection. The YouStink movement demanded the government's resignation for allowing sectarian differences to supersede the public's environmental and health needs (Nagle, 2018b). The movement attracted people from different sectarian backgrounds to demand honorable living and to hold accountable politicians responsible for deteriorating living conditions in Lebanon. By lifting slogans such as *kelon ye'anie kelon* (all of them means all of them), protesters were emphasizing that the problem they are confronting is deeper than an isolated waste management. The problem lies in the sectarian system, which transforms the state into a "pie" of resources and opportunities, fought over by sectarian elites. And when sectarian elites disagree on how to divide the pie, they suspend the state's operations. The YouStink movement sought to expose that, but it was crushed by security forces loyal to political elites. The trans-sectarian nature of the YouStink movement represented a threat to the order of sectarian politics, and that was not going to be tolerated by sectarian elites. Nevertheless, the movement spawned other trans-sectarian movements, such Beirut Madinati, Hizib Sabaa and Mwatenoon wa Mwatinat fi Dawla. These groups were composed of professionals and activists who sought to challenge the sectarian logic of Lebanese policy making by contesting municipal and parliamentary elections on an openly non-sectarian basis (Baumann, 2019b). These movements represented fresh modes of desectarianization that played key roles in mobilizing people during the 2019 protests.

Conclusion

This chapter grounds sectarianism in Lebanon in historical developments. It traces the evolution of sectarian identities from being exclusively religious and social markers to being political markers around which the Lebanese republic was built. That process involved internal and external actors that institutionalized sectarism by introducing structures that regulate public and private life around parochial sectarian calculations. As a result, awareness of sectarian

differences increased and competition between sectarian zu'ama for power and influence intensified. This made Lebanon's path towards national unity and stability challenging and riddled with conflicts. A fifteen-year civil war exasperated sectarian hostility and left society fragmented and bereft of a unifying national identity (Aboultaif and Tabar, 2019).

Sectarian in-fighting transformed the country into a battleground for the Middle East (Hirst, 2010). Following the gathering of the Lebanese deputies in Taif, war militias were dissolved (except Hezbollah) and a cease fire eventually prevailed. The end of the civil war provided a chance to reflect on factors that led to the outbreaking of the war, and a timely opportunity to reform the system so as to minimize the escalation of sectarian conflicts in the future. That opportunity, however, was usurped by former sectarian militia leaders and new aspiring sectarian zu'ama that came to occupy political office. Instead of dismantling the pre-war sectarian system, they contented themselves with recalibrating the sectarian balance of power in a more equitable manner (Nagle and Clancy, 2019). Christians and Muslims had attained equal representation in parliament and in high-ranking government posts. While that may have appeased previously disgruntled groups, it came at the expense of preserving the sectarian order.

Modern Lebanon was established on a system that institutionalizes sectarian differences through power-sharing structures. The war changed the parameters of the system, but the system remained largely intact. Old and new sectarian elites competed and cooperated amongst themselves to win the loyalty of their sectarian community and to advance their personal interests (Hamzeh, 2001). To secure their share of power in the sectarian system, sectarian elites manipulated formal and informal structures in Lebanon (Ezzeddine and Noun, 2020; Bogaards, 2019; Clark and Salloukh, 2013b) and instrumentalized regional security dynamics to their advantage (Hassan, 2022; Mabon, 2020b; Darwich and Fakhoury, 2016c). In that context, regional states offered patronage to sectarian elites (The Saudi Cables, 2012, no. 12139), and thus played an explicit role in preserving the sectarian system (Salem, 2008). From that perspective, the interplay between sectarian leaders and regional actors prolonged the life of the sectarian system in Lebanon and left opponents of the system facing domestic, geopolitical, and normative impediments to desectarianization. The next chapter will focus on domestic impediments.

Chapter 3: Domestic Impediments to Desectarianization

Introduction

In the international state system, states are considered to be sovereign. Each state has the legal authority and responsibility to order its political affairs independently, and without interference from other states. To that end, ruling authorities create structures that regulate public life and maintain law and order throughout the state's territory. These structures are social constructs that aim to create political and societal order. They are fundamentally imagined and are often a site of contestation between subjects and rulers (Angrist, 2019). From that perspective, it is possible for structures to be negotiated; to be modified, expanded, reduced, or eliminated. Over time, however, social structures become increasingly rigid and difficult to change (Harrington, 1999). In the hands of self-serving rulers, they become means to suppress the masses and enforce the will of ruling elites. Rulers leverage established structures and coercive means of the state to silence opposition and neutralize groups or movements that undermine the regime's security and governing structures.

In Lebanon, the order that regulates the public (and private) lives of citizens is built on structures that privilege sectarian identities. These structures identify sectarian identity as a primary category for demarcating in-groups and out-groups. They essentially serve as mechanisms for including and excluding people based on their sectarian identity. In that context, an individual's sectarian identity sets the boundaries or limits on what that person can and cannot do in society. While there exist other structures in Lebanon that are blind to sectarian differences, the emphasis that rulers place on what may be considered sectarian structures gives those structures preponderance over non-sectarian structures. Under those conditions, political and public life becomes oriented around sect-based distribution of resources. Given the limited nature of state resources, sectarian leaders compete over maximizing their sectarian community's share of resources. This competition fosters division and suspicion, rather than cooperation and trust, amongst the country's citizens. To secure their share in power, sectarian leaders uphold and maintain sectarian structures because those structures provide them with the legitimacy to rule and means to mobilize their co-religionists. With that mind, desectarianization efforts that are aiming to have sustainable change must contend with standing sectarian structures. Desectarianization must expose sectarian structures, and explore ways to deconstruct those structures or circumvent their fragmenting effects.

This chapter will investigate three primary domestic structures that prolong sectarianism in Lebanon: the Lebanese constitution, the political economy of Lebanon, and the Lebanese judicial system. These structures are extremely important because they play a chief role in regulating the political, economic and social lives of Lebanese citizens. In Lebanon, these three structures are technically independent of each other. The constitution guarantees that the country's economic system (Preamble F) and the judicial system (Article 20) are free from government interference. In reality, however, all three structures are linked in being tools for sectarian mobilization. Sectarian elites instrumentalize these structures to perpetuate sectarianism and undermine desectarianization initiatives. This chapter will explore how sectarian elites do that and to what effect. The chapter will highlight the capacity of the sectarian elites to control and navigate the sectarian system. which paves the way for a more informed discussion on the agency of desectarianization actors in general, and Shiite religious leaders in particular.

3.1 The Lebanese constitution and sectarianism

In democratic countries, codified constitutions describe the governance structure of a state. They provide the framework for determining the relationship between citizens and their governments. They articulate the rules of the social contract that outline the rights and responsibilities of the ruler and ruled. Constitutions are typically written at the founding of the state to describe the political orientation of the state and provide a structure for how authority will be practiced and delegated (Saouli, 2019b). Constitutional amendments are introduced at major milestones in the history of the nation and according to a meticulous process that ensures a level of consent from people's representatives.

The first Lebanese constitution was drafted under the supervision of the French Mandate in 1926, and remained substantially unchanged until the end of the civil war in 1989. The constitution preserved a legacy of the Ottoman Double Qaimaqamate and Mutasarrifate systems of governance in that it included a provision for distributing power based on religious identity (Harris, 2012). French and British colonia powers mandated a 6:5 ratio in parliament between Christians and Muslims (Rabbath, 1972). While that constitution was deemed controversial by many Lebanese, not least because of what it implied about relationship to Syria and the consequential identity of Lebanon, it was not repealed when Lebanon won its independence in 1943 (Salem, 1998). On the contrary, power sharing along sectarian lines was further consecrated with the establishment of the National Pact between Lebanon's independence heroes, Maronite President Bechara al-Khoury and Sunni Prime Minister Riad al-Solh. The National Pact was a nonwritten agreement that divided the highest political positions

in the country amongst Lebanon's major sects. The agreement intended to facilitate trust between Western-leaning Christians and Arab-leaning Muslims, and to undermine attempts aimed at annexing or dividing Lebanon. Effectively, The National Pact sought to Arabize Christians and Lebanonize Muslims in Lebanon (Rabbath, 1972). It is worth noting, however, that the National Pact was not a pure device of Lebanese ingenuity, but "an arrangement that emerged at an opportune time and was facilitated by the concurrent occurrence of developments both within Lebanon and in the region" (El-Khazen, 1991, p. 5). It was a consensual agreement between Lebanon's leaders and regional powers to deliver stability.

Although the National Pact was a momentous verbal agreement between leaders of Lebanon's independence, the Pact continued to be upheld by every government since independence as if it were legally binding. By impacting the top positions in the government, the Pact made sectarian power sharing the de facto ruling order (Bahout, 2016a). In that regard, the Lebanese constitution and the National Pact served as formal and non-formal sectarian structures, respectively. They created a system of governance that has sectarian identity as its cornerstone. Despite attempts 1960s and 1970s from right-wing groups (Abisaab, 2015) and left-wing groups (El-Khazen, 1988) to redraw the system and unhinge it from sectarian identity, the system remained unmistakably sectarian. Sectarian *zu'ama,* especially Christians, defend the system because ostensibly it stands as the guarantor of religious diversity and continued Christian presence in Lebanon (Calfat, 2018). While that may be the case, it is undeniable that sectarian leaders have accumulated a lot of wealth and power from navigating the sectarian system. This will be explained in detail in the next section. The point to highlight here is that structures harden over time. They become rigid, and difficult to change, particularly when there are individuals that reap personal benefits from their existence.

After more than a decade of sectarian fighting in a bloody civil war, the sectarian system seemed to be living its final days. In 1989, deliberations between decisionmakers in the city of Taif in Saudi Arabia produced the Document of National Accord, which was later known as the Taif Accords. The document introduced constitutional amendments that were intended to end the civil war and address issues that led to the outbreak of the conflict in 1975 (Norton, 1991). Besides recalibrating the ratio between Muslims and Christians in parliament to parity, and transferring of the executive power from the office of the president to the convened council of ministers, the Taif Accords' major changes include a mandate to end political sectarianism. Article 95 was revised, and it stipulates that:

> *The Chamber of Deputies, elected on the basis of half Moslems and half Christians, must take the appropriate measures to eliminate political sectarianism, according to an*

interim plan, and the formation of a National Council under the presidency of the President of the Republic consisting, in addition to the President of the Chamber of Deputies and the Prime Minister, political, intellectual and social notables. The mission of the Council is to study and suggest the means capable of eliminating the sectarianism, and introducing them to the Chamber of Deputies and the Council of Ministers, and to follow up on the interim plan. In the transitory period:

1. *The sects are fairly represented in the formation of the Cabinet.*
2. *The rule of sectarian representation is abrogated. Jurisdiction and efficiency are adopted in public employment, the Judiciary, the military and security establishments, the public and mixed organizations, according to the exigencies of national harmony, with the exception of the jobs of the first rank and the equivalence of the first rank therein. These jobs are equally divided between Christians and Moslems without specifying any job to a specific sect, taking into consideration the two principles of jurisdiction and efficiency* (The Lebanese Constitution, 1990)

The amended constitution is unequivocal about the future place of sectarianism in Lebanon. It requires the post-Taif government to desectarianize the political system. Article 95 unambiguously rejects the fixation of sectarian considerations as the ordering principle for national life. The provision for dividing first rank jobs along sectarian lines is laid out as the exception, not the rule. To support the drive for desectarianization, article 24 was also revised and it affirms that parliamentary elections are to be organized according to an electoral law free from sectarian representation or calculations. At the same time, article 24 mentions that until a non-confessional electoral law is established, elections after the war are to be conducted according to proportionality between Muslim and Christians sects. The article, however, fails to specify a timeline for the development of a non-sectarian electoral law. Nevertheless, if there was any doubt or ambiguity about the agenda of the *Taif* Accords, the constitution's newly added preamble plainly states desectarianization as the ultimate goal. The eighth point of the preamble declares that "eliminating political sectarianism is a basic national objective, to be achieved according to a transitional plan (The Lebanese Constitution, 1990). It was clear to those who formulated the Accords that the sectarian system was a cause for division and conflict, and that it needed to be terminated (Karam, 2012).

Signing the Taif Agreement was a major milestone in Lebanon because it marked the end of an era and the beginning of a new one. While most politicians paid homage to the Accords at the time, none of the desectarianization efforts outlined in the constitution were

subsequently carried out (Krayem, 1997). For instance, post Taif governments did not introduce a non-sectarian electoral law nor establish a national council for eliminating sectarianism, as the revised constitution stated. More than thirty years have passed since the Taif agreement, but the sectarian system remains rooted, leaving sectarian elites with ample time to expand their influence and consolidate their support base (Nagle and Clancy 2019). All the consecutive governments since the end of the civil war endorsed the Taif agreement in the name of mutual coexistence. A few sectarian leaders even publicly called for the establishment of a secular state (Ofeish, 1999). Yet, no demonstrable progress has been made to transition to a new order. Quite the contrary, time and time again, the political establishment practices gerrymandering and changes electoral laws to ensure that their representatives remain in power, and as a result prolong their sect-based rule (Salloukh, 2019c; MacQueen, 2016). So, although the revised constitution legitimizes desectarianization of the political system, activating that desectarianization process requires the political will and compliance of the ruling class.

The constitution at the mercy of sectarian leaders

To grasp how the constitution stands as an impediment to desectarianization in Lebanon, one must look beyond the content of the constitution. Since there are several texts in the constitution that clearly call for establishing an order on non-sectarian basis, it stands to reason that there are forces that stand in the way of applying those texts. Those forces are represented in the chamber of deputies, which is responsible for legislating laws, and in the office of the president and the council of ministers, which are responsible for executing laws and safeguarding the constitution, respectively. Ruling authorities, therefore, have the legal power to terminate sectarianism, but by obfuscating the meaning of articles that pertain to the post-sectarian order, ruling authorities manipulate the constitution to derail desectarianization efforts, and consequently prolong the sectarian order.

The treatment of Article 95, quoted above, provides a case in point. Article 95 represents the essence of the Taif Accords and the gateway to a post-sectarian order. The article has been the subject of much debate and controversy since its promulgation[1]. More recently, in 2019, president Aoun revived the debate about Article 95 and called on House Speaker Berri to discuss its interpretation with the House legislators (Aoun, 2019). The article prescribes the first step towards "eliminating sectarianism," which is the establishment of a National Council that studies and explores desectarianization dynamics. The Council's composition, mission, and

[1] For an annotated bibliography of studies about Article 95, see Civil Influence Hub webpage: https://cih-projects.appspot.com/Dashboard

accountability structure are described in detail. That is clear and helpful, but until the Council is established, legislators must abide by subpoint 1 and 2 of Article 95, and this is where things get convoluted.

While the rule of sectarian representation in the formation of the cabinet is to be abrogated, this comes as a clause in the transitory period. This led some to argue that unless the first part of Article 95 is applied, which is the establishment of the National Council, the second part, which is the abrogation of sectarian representation in public positions, is not applicable (Ismail, 2019b). Advocates of this linear reading of the constitution underscore their stance by emphasizing point J in the constitution's preamble: "There is no legitimacy to any authority contradicting the charter of co-existence". The charter of co-existence is interpreted by proponents of this position as equal representation in the public sector realm, and it is the principle that overrides any legal arrangement until sectarianism is eliminated. Opponents of this view reject this interpretation of "the charter of co-existence" and explain that it is confined to the social sphere and inter-communal relations (Sleiman, 2019). They critique their adversaries for their inconsistent handling of the constitution, citing how they insist on applying subpoint 1 of Article 95 (fair sectarian representation in the formation of the cabinet), but not subpoint 2 (fair sectarian representation in Grade One posts and their equivalents). It appears that the underlying problem is that concepts like "charter of coexistence", "transitory period", "fair representation", and "Supreme Defense Council" were introduced in the constitution without clear definitions (Lahham, 2019). These concepts, however, emerged out of a specific context. Fighting factions in the Lebanese civil war became convinced that any resolution to the conflict would only come via a political compromise, not through military means. The legislators at Taif understood that and modified the constitution accordingly, as a form of political settlement (Mansour, 1993). The deputies believed that they were going to execute the Taif accords themselves, and pave the way for a post-sectarian system in Lebanon (Lahham, 2019). They omitted explaining seemingly ambiguous concepts in the constitution, because they did not seem ambiguous to them.

What the legislators at Taif did not anticipate was their replacement with the civil war militia leaders and Syria loyalists. In the summer of 1992, parliamentary elections were held in Lebanon according to a sectarian electoral law. Christians boycotted the elections because Lebanese authorities were not able to guarantee fair conduct (Khoury, 1993). Instead, Syrian security forces supervised the elections, which resulted in deputies sympathetic to Damascus occupying the parliament. One of the drafters of the Taif Accords was disgruntled by how the 1992 elections were help, and he considered the elected parliament "an instrument; its

presupposed purpose is to shatter the system from within and drain it of its original substance: national accord, national representation, independent decision making, and national sovereignty" (Mansour, 1993, p. 180). Under Syrian tutelage, sectarian-leaders-now-lawmakers received pardon for their war crimes (Ghosn and Khoury, 2011). From their new position of influence, sectarian leaders had no incentive in creating institutions that transcended sectarian power sharing, because that would remove their legitimacy and threaten their authority. To further entrench themselves in power, sectarian leaders problematized applying the constitution by complicating its interpretation. Eventually, they suspended any desectarianization deliberations, and only brought up the subject superficially ahead of elections or when it paid them political dividends to do so.

Lebanon has technically been in a transitory period since the end of the war because elections remain based on sectarian quota (Rais, 2005b). Since the Taif Accords never specified a timeline for the termination of sectarianism, the political establishment deflected responsibility to act swiftly. There was no internal, regional, or international pressure on Lebanese decisionmakers to end sectarianism immediately, as long as Syria had the security situation in Lebanon under control (Knudsen, 2005). Sectarian elites used the constitution to maintain legitimacy of their rule. By presenting themselves as guardians of the constitution, they misleadingly framed any desectarianization effort as a coup against the Taif Accords. The irony is that sectarian elites, who in few years prior were militia leaders fighting each other in the civil war, became responsible for dismantling a system that grants them amnesty and power (Baytiyeh, 2019).

The constitution between sectarianism and political sectarianism

The Taif Agreement leaves open the degree to which sectarian identities will play a role in regulating public life in the future. The constitution avoids weighing in on that topic by making distinctive references to the dyad "sectarianism" and "political sectarianism". The nuance appears insignificant, but it conceals a contentious point between mainstream Christian and Muslim groups (Mikdashi, 2019a). Eliminating "political sectarianism" in the first part of Article 95 is understood to refer to the sect-based power sharing system, or consociationalism (Lijphart, 1969), which is coeval with the Lebanese republic. On the other hand, eliminating "the sectarianism" in the second part of the Article bespeaks of liberating the public sphere from the domination of sectarian elites and their distribution of government positions and resources amongst their constituents (Wehbe, 2010). Political sectarianism is a legal arrangement that is subject to change over time, while sectarianism as a social phenomenon that is underpinned by informal zu'ama leadership and clientelism (Cammett, 2015). The two concepts are not mutually

exclusive. In fact, desectarianization involves working on both levels. The problem is that of sequence: whether to terminate political sectarianism first or sectarianism (Lahham, 2021)

In general, Sunni and Shiite groups have prioritized the elimination of political sectarianism because they stand to benefit from a system that does not limit their representation in Parliament. While no official census has been conducted in Lebanon since 1932, recent estimates put Sunnis and Shiites as the leading majority in the country (Ramadan, 2019). Christians, out of fear of losing their historical privileges, especially at the executive level, have cautioned against hastening the desectarianization of the political system. Christians argue that removing legislations that guarantee Christian inclusion in decision making and the public sector would undermine coexistence and would lead to their dissolution (Shqair, 2021; Abu Fadil, 2014). For that reason, Christian elites have prioritized abolishing sectarianism from people's hearts before removing it from legal texts (Abbas, 2009). In parallel, they emphasize demolishing social structures that reproduce sectarianism as a first step. Namely, they call for abrogating the fifteen different religious personal status laws, and the establishment of a mandatory civil status law (Mhanna, 2023). This would amount to a unified law that manages personal affairs (marriage, divorce, inheritance, child custody…etc.) of all citizens uniformly. In order to appeal to all segments of society, the new law would overturn religious courts and sect particularities. While Christian authorities might acquiesce to this due to theological flexibility, Muslim leaders have unwaveringly rejected this approach (Rahi, 2019). Suspending religious courts undermines Islamic law and practices, and it confounds jurisprudential views within the Lebanese Muslim community (Mikdashi, 2019b).

Sectarian leaders, Christians and Muslims, are weary of measures that distance people from religious authorities. Measures that undermine submission to the religious establishment would pave the way for a secular state that permits civil marriage and encourages inter-sectarian marriages and birth registration outside the sectarian record. Therefore, while sectarian leaders publicly avow to combat sectarianism, "Muslim and Christian political and religious leaders have used these two principles, ending political sectarianism and a unified personal status law, against each other to effectively neutralize calls for either" (Mikdashi, 2019a). By controlling the interpretation and application of the constitution, Christian and Muslim leaders, alongside religious leaders, impede top-down desectarianization and discredit any initiative that threatens the sectarian system.

Architects of the Taif Accords anticipated conflict over interpretation and application of the law and other legal proceedings. For that reason, the deputies decreed the establishment of

a Constitutional Council. The responsibility of the Council is to review the constitutionality of laws and to arbitrate disputes and protests resulting from parliamentary and presidential elections (Article 19). The Council is the official body of experts that would provide a definitive interpretation where there is legal ambiguity. It is not permissible for any other judicial authority to carry out this task (Shafy, 2008). The Constitutional Council acts as the ultimate guardian of the constitution. The legislator at Taif wanted, through the establishment of the Council, to protect the will of the people in directly choosing their representatives on the one hand, and to protect the people's indirect will on the other hand, through monitoring elections and the constitutionality of laws (Morcous and Shokrallah, 2014). That means that the Constitutional Council is in a position to illegalize political sectarianism, and by the same token adjudicate on the sequence of rolling out desectarianization measures. The problem is that the Council does not intervene unless a request or appeal is filed by the president, house speaker, prime minister, or ten parliamentarians (Morcous and Shokrallah, 2014). Moreover, judges that constitute the Constitutional Council are appointed by the parliament and the cabinet. The problem that this poses to desectarianization is that ruling authorities are the ones that appoint judges, and these appointments submit to sectarian calculations and distribution.

While the Constitutional Council is not accessible to individual citizens, but to elected or appointed politicians, there is an exception. Officially recognized heads of the sectarian communities have the right to refer to the Council laws relating to personal status, the freedom of belief and religious practice, and the freedom of religious education (Article 19). So, although sectarian leaders control the legal tool that legitimizes sectarian structures (i.e. the constitution), there is a window for religious heads to challenge their manipulation of the constitution. Religious heads have historically shown great concern for civil peace and mutual co-existence between Lebanon's citizens (Henley, 2016) The relationship between religious heads and sectarian elites varies from one sect to another. What is important to highlight is that within the religious establishment there is space to challenge sectarian structures not from the bottom-up but from the top-down.

Agency of religious leaders

When it comes to challenging sectarian structures, religious heads may have different interest calculations than grassroot religious leaders. Plus, grassroots religious leaders may be subject to more restrictions than their superiors. Nevertheless, this does not eliminate the agency of grassroots religious leaders. For starters, religious leaders can use their limited influence to advocate for constitutional reform. They can emphasize how certain legal elements

reinforce sectarian structures, and then they can ask for their removal or modification. For instance, religious leaders can advocate for the adoption of a non-sectarian electoral system, the establishment of a civil code for personal status law, or the formation of a more decentralized governance structure that can help to diminish the importance of sectarian affiliation. By focusing on structural factors, grassroots religious leaders demonstrate their preparedness to confront root causes of sectarianism, and not just address symptoms of the problem. Religious leaders can play a role in ensuring that new structures are inclusive and foster national unity, while also respecting the rights and freedoms of religious communities.

Moreover, as insiders within their faith communities, lower ranking clergymen can expose corruption in the religious establishment of their community. This would contribute to desectarianization in a subtle but important way. By exposing religious institutional corruption, which outsiders may not be privy to, religious leaders undermine perceptions of cohesion and integrity that religious heads and sectarian zu'ama try to project. While all communities suffer from a degree of corruption, covering corruption and shielding those that are involved in the act, damages feelings of belonging to that community, since people generally do not like to be associated with a corrupt group. As one of the interviewed sheikhs reflected: "I meet a lot of people that are not proud to be Muslims or Christians. It is not that they do not want to be Muslims or Christians. It is that they are ashamed to say that they belong to this group or that group. Or they tell you this person is not real Muslim. Or that person is not real Christian" (Interview 11). The point that the sheikh was trying to make is that people do not want to belong to a group that has a bad reputation. From that perspective, exposing corruption can be conceived as of as a form desectarianization in that it drives a wedge between religious identity and belonging in the Lebanese sectarian system. As corruption in religious institutions is exposed, that will either lead to reform and a healthier separation between religion and politics, or it will lead to more people distancing themselves from the religious institutionalism and eventually sectarian belonging.

In the Shiite sphere, non-partisan clergymen, alongside other individuals, have displayed great courage in exposing corruption in Shiite religious institutions, such as in the Jafari courts (Hussein, 2020; Janoubia, 2020), the Higher Islamic Shiite Council (Al-Shartouni, 2019; Fayyad, 2019), and the office of religious endowments (*awqaf*) (Fadil, 2017; Al-Khyami, 2019). These institutions have been co-opted by Hezbollah and Amal (interview 3). Therefore, it takes somebody disinterested in neither party, with knowledge of the inner workings and networks of the Shiite community to uncover inhouse corruption. The list of clergymen that have risen to this mission includes: Yassir Awdeh, Mohammed Ali Hajj al-Amili, Abbas Hayik, Abbas Jawhari,

Mohammed Ali al-Hussini, AbdulSalam Dendesh, Hussein Muchayik, Abbas Harb Al-Amli, Ibrahim Soroor al-Hashim, and many others. These clergymen operate independently mostly, but with occasional coordination between two or three of them (Interview 3). The public profile and popularity of these non-partisan clergymen varies. For instance, the list includes former general secretary of Hezbollah Subhi al-Tufeyli, former mufti of Tyre Ali al-Amin, and ex-Hezbollah leader Hasan Moshymish. Unsurprisingly, the integrity and reputation of these leaders is often attacked by Shiite zu'ama. It is difficult to assess the impact of each clergyman's effort, but it is the collective and cumulative effort of the group that can advance desectarianization.

Independent Shiite clergymen have used various platforms at their disposal to disseminate their message. These platforms include mosques, Hussainiyas, printed publications, online news website, interviews on mainstream media channels, live broadcasting of Friday prayer, video messages, Facebook groups, and Twitter accounts. During the Oct-17 protest, a number of those clergymen were also on the streets protesting alongside people. Their message of anti-corruption and anti-establishment contributes to the ethos of desectarianization. That is, by criticizing Shiite institutions and Shiite zu'ama, non-partisan Shiite religious leaders undermine the salience of sectarian identity as a public commodity that can be easily instrumentalized. Sheikh Yassir Awde said it unequivocally: "The solution [to sectarianism in Lebanon] is a civil state even if it contradicts Islam in some areas. But I think religion is a personal choice. It is an individualistic choice…I do not care what the religion of the ruler is. What I care for is just governance…Abolishing the Lebanese civil record is what leads to national fusion. It is what makes a person Lebanese" (Awde, 2021). To be sure, the Sheikh's words are not novel, but when they are declared by religious leaders, they carry more weight because of the authority and legitimacy that clergymen enjoy, specifically those that are not co-opted by the zu'ama. "They [ruling elites] do not like it when we criticize them in public, and expose their corruption. It hurts their image in the eyes of their constituents. People already know that their political leaders are corrupt, but when they hear that affirmed through others, it emboldens them to confront those leaders. Naturally, this annoys the ruling elites who try to present themselves as ardent defenders of their communities" (Interviewee 3). This explains why many independent clergymen are targeted by sectarian elites (Interviewee 2).

In short, religious leaders can facilitate bottom-up desectarianization by exposing structures and institutions that reproduce sectarianism, and by advancing a discourse that disentangles religious identity from sectarian structures that are instituted by the state and protected by the religious establishment.

3.2 A Skewed Political Economy

As the previous section showed, sectarian elites reproduce sectarianism by instrumentalizing legal structures to entrench themselves in government and ward off desectarianization acts that threaten their rule. In parallel, elites perpetuate sectarianism by manipulating the Lebanese economic system to create dependencies that entangle people's lives in sectarian clientelist networks (Cammett and Issar, 2010; Cammett, 2014). In classic consociationalism fashion, elites negotiate amongst themselves how to divide and distribute state resources (Salamey and Payne, 2008). Elites develop political, financial, and monetary policies that enrich them, and enlarge the gap between the rich and the poor (Assouad, 2021). In that context of extreme income and wealth disparity, survival is contingent on receiving extra-governmental assistance (Nucho, 2016; Cammett, 2015). Sectarian elites readily fill that gap through their party-affiliated organizations, in exchange for sectarian solidarity and political allegiance (Haddad, 2013). In the Lebanese system, elevation of socioeconomic status is tied to having special access (i.e. wasta) to sectarian elites and their service providers (Egan and Tabar, 2016). This section will highlight how sectarian elites in the post-war period created socioeconomic conditions that reproduce sectarianism and their sect-based rule. The section will shed light on how neoliberal policies that elites introduced hurt national interest, divided society, and benefited sectarian leaders by regulating life around sectarian clientelist networks.

In September 2021, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) estimated that 82 per cent of the population in Lebanon suffers multidimensional poverty with no access to health, education and public utility (ESCWA, 2021). It is true that the plunge into poverty was accelerated by the outbreak of the coronavirus and a stall in the global economy, but the sudden spike in poverty levels exposed the fragility of the Lebanese economic model that was reinvigorated following the civil war (Malaeb, 2018).

Besides physical damage to the country's landscape and infrastructure, the war had a devastating impact on political and economic life. Failing to reach national conciliation, sectarian warlords disregarded the authority of the central government. Instead of collaborating to restructure the economic sector, they leveraged the sub-economies and makeshift institutions that they created during the war to organize and expand their own power enclaves (Tarabulsi, 2012). This coincided with a surge in demand to fill public administration and civil service posts that had been vacated during the war (El-Zein and Sims, 2004). Shortage of skilled and educated labor, due to war casualties and heavy emigration during the fifteen years of war, led the government to recruit unqualified individuals. This hindered advancement in the public sector, and over time "most public services and utilities lacked capacity and lost their true function,

becoming instead simply sources of rent-seeking, employment, bribery, and transfers for the benefit of [sectarian] warlord constituencies" (le Borgne and Jacobs, 2016, p. 8). Sectarian leaders recruit their loyalists in public institutions to bolster their influence over those institutions and to expand their sectarian network (le Borgne and Jacobs, 2016). After the war, sectarian leaders overstaffed the public sector, putting an unreasonable and growing financial burden on the government's treasury. This severely limited the government's spending flexibility, and drastically intensified rentier structures that reproduce sectarianism (Salloukh, 2019b).

After Taif, a temporary economic surplus and a refurbished infrastructure meant that there was considerable wealth and opportunities for the sectarian elites to divide amongst their supporters. Negotiations between elites over how to distribute state resources elicited a *muhasasa* approach to governance: an approach that is based on dividing state resources into portions and distributing those portions proportionally and by consent between Sectarian elites (Rizkallah, 2017). Elites illicitly granted government jobs, contracts, and amnesty to their loyalists, which served to sanction corruption and encourage nepotism (Leenders, 2012b). This was particularly egregious in public sector employment. Jobs were effectively handed out according to a more rigid sectarian quota, which strengthened the political elites' ensemble of control, and served to reproduce the sectarian system (Salloukh, 2019a).

Over the years, a significant proportion of annual expenditure was spent settling the interest on debts, and paying salaries of people in the public sector (Chaaban, 2019b). The latter, in particular, reveals the inner working of the sectarian system. Public sector employees as a percentage of the total labor force doubled from 12.5 per cent in 2004 to 25 per cent in 2017 (Salloukh, 2019a, p. 50). In terms of expenditure, the wages and benefits of personnel across the entire public sector, including staff at municipalities, state-owned enterprises, and government agencies ballooned to 38 per cent of total government spending in 2018 (Hussein, 2018). The sharp increase in public employees is not due to economic growth, but to severe overstaffing that serves purely sectarian-clientelist *muhasasa* calculations (Bou Khater, 2022). Sectarian leaders injected hordes of their followers into the public sector beyond the sector's need and capacity. By extending the National Pact principle of *muhasasa* from the political realm to the material and economic realm of the state, elites sectarianized the economy, which gave them more tools to solicit sectarian loyalty and propagate their rule.

Moreover, postwar sectarian elites entrenched sectarian identities by undermine class-based ones (Bou Khater, 2022). Rafic Hariri and his successors pursued a series of policies that

obliterated Lebanon’s productive sectors and expanded the service sector. Hariri’s neoliberal order had the effect of diminishing the size and influence of the labor force. This fragmented workers and made it difficult for them to organize and challenge the sectarian order (Khattab, 2022). The General Confederation of Labor was one of the key organizations that posed a threat to neo-Liberal sectarianism, because it was one of a few national actors that could mobilize people across Lebanon in revolt against the sectarian system. Under Hariri’s rule, the General Confederation of Labor was subjugated to the leadership of sectarian parties, who in turn silenced pro-labor voices (Bou Khater, 2015). Sectarian leaders perceived labors organizing as a possible means of rebellion against the sectarian system, but rather than using repressive or legal tactics to emasculate the labor movement, sectarian elites co-opted the movement by manipulating the confederation of labor unions to serve as a vehicle for the ruling elite's interests and as a tool for negotiating their disputes over the sectarian distribution of benefits and resources (Bou Khater, 2022).

Neo-Liberal sectarianism

A key concept that captures the dynamics governing the political economy of Lebanon is neo-liberal sectarianism, which refers to the mutually beneficial relationship between political and economic power in Lebanon (Khattab, 2022; Baumann, 2019a; Daher, 2016; Dib, 2020; Salloukh *et al.*, 2015). This relationship was facilitated by the postwar implementation of neoliberal policies in finance and urbanism, which took advantage of the social and political divisions along sectarian lines in Lebanese society. Sectarian elites concentrated political influence and wealth in their hands by leveraging the public sector to promote and safeguard the interests of their co-religionists, thereby ensuring people’s loyalty. Rents generated from the public sector and the service sector stimulated the local economy, while the industrial and agricultural sectors were neglected (Dibeh, 2021).

At the helm of this new era of rentier capitalism was prime minister Rafic Hariri, and his real estate development company, Solidere. During the war, Hariri masterfully navigated political and financial networks in Lebanon and abroad so that by the time of his premiership in 1992, Hariri and his circle of associates dominated Lebanon and its financial sector (Hourani, 2015). The neoliberal order that Hariri inaugurated was built on drawing financial capital from abroad, and mainly from Gulf states with petrodollar surplus. His strategy brought about prosperity and stability, but it was confined prosperity without growth, and temporary stability that masked sectarianization.

Hariri focused on two sectors for attracting foreign investments: the real estate and the banking sectors (Baumann, 2017a; Daher, 2022). To restore the real estate market after the war destroyed the infrastructure and European-like image of Beirut, Hariri lobbied for legislation that transferred ownership of tens of thousands of private properties in downtown Beirut to the Lebanese Company for the Development and Reconstruction of Beirut Central District, also known as Solidere. Hariri founded Solidere to rebuild Beirut and present it as the new face of Lebanon. Solidere draws its power from being a private-public partnership with the Lebanese government, and in having eminent domain, which means that the company can legally confiscate properties without consent of the owners (Yassine, 2020). Solidere became one the biggest companies and it was managed by Hariri. Solidere was a major source of rent, and it exemplified how the state enables wealth accumulation at an urban scale (Baumann, 2016a). Solidere aimed to maximize profits by catering to the high-end and luxury market segments, which helped widen the gap between the rich and the poor (Daher, 2022). Solidere's profiteering from rebuilding Beirut was not an exception. The lax regulatory policies of the Lebanese government promoted hundreds of "mini-Solideres" across Beirut, where luxurious skyscrapers were replacing Ottoman- or Mandate-era villas (Krijnen and Fawaz, 2010). These projects blurred the line between public and private property and concentrated wealth in the hands of sectarian elites and their networks.

The wealth generated from handing out overpriced government contracts was concentrated in the hands of a few contractors and indirectly their political sponsors. Sectarian leaders created clientelist networks through which they handed out government contracts, plus social services that the state had no capacity to offer. It suited sectarian leaders to keep the state absent in that sense because that gave sectarian leaders incentives to seek monopolistic control over representation of their respective communities, in part through the establishment of nonstate systems of public goods service provision in health care, education, and social welfare (Cammett, 2014). Elites positioned themselves as vanguards of their sectarian community's interests and main providers of its needs. This gave rise to a range of third-party service providers that are aligned to sectarian leaders. This dynamic of absenting the state and getting sectarian NGOs to fill the resulting void maintained the relevance of sectarian networking in everyday life, which ultimately helped reproduce sectarianism (Haddad, 2020c)

While the real estate market generated considerable rent for sectarian elites, it was rent from the banking sector that characterized Lebanon's neo-Liberal age. Hariri sought to gain depositors' trust by offering competitive interest rates. To do that, fluctuation in the value of the Lebanese Lira had to be minimized, which required state intervention. In 1997, the Lebanese

currency was pegged to the US dollar at a fixed rate of 1,500 Lira to the dollar. To maintain that formula, continuous inflow of capital had to be secured. Hariri facilitated that through steady borrowing from Lebanese commercial banks Lebanese banks lent the government money against government bonds (i.e. sovereign guarantees) yielding exorbitantly high interest rates; reaching 37% yield in 1995 (Banque Du Liban). At the same time, those banks were offering their individual clients lower interest rates on their deposits, averaging about 6.6 per cent as a spread (Peters *et al.*, 2004). To put it crudely, banks were making huge profits by simply taking people's money and lending it to the government. The risk that banks had to carry was that of the government defaulting on its commitment to repay its debts. Given the atmosphere of positivity that marked the early 1990s, not least due to the Middle East peace process and the Madrid conference, Lebanese leaders reasoned that the world would come to Lebanon's rescue if it were to go bankrupt (Nahhas, 2022).

In a healthy economy, the central bank would not provide interest rates on its treasury bills above market levels. Yet in Lebanon this was a common practice as "most of the commercial banks in Lebanon are politically connected. 18 out of the 20 banks have major shareholders linked to political elites, and 43% of assets in the sector could be attributed to individuals and/or families closely linked to politicians" (Chaaban, 2019a). Moreover, there is a high concentration of wealth in the hands of a few elites. For instance, only 8 "political families" control 32% of the commercial banking sector's total assets (Chaaban, 2019a). Anticipating huge returns on their investments, unbridled officials facilitated the rapid expansion of public debt almost exclusively based on borrowing from the domestic market and in foreign currency. In the late 1990s, and after the collapse of the peace process, external states, especially France, Saudi Arabia and the US, provided Lebanon with financial grants and flexible loans to keep the government afloat (Dibeh, 2007). While the capital injection saved the country from financial ruin, it extended the life of a system that needed urgent restructuring.

The exponential growth of the national debt drowned the country in an endless cycle of debt servicing, leaving the government with relatively few dollars to cover other expenses. Interest rates on the government bonds in the early 1990s were so high it meant that "interest payments on [Lebanese] pound-denominated debt constituted, on average, 45 percent of total government spending, leaving just over half of total government expenditures to finance all other public spending needs. When scaled to government receipts, by 1996, interest payments represented close to 68 percent of the budget deficit. In other words, two-thirds of any new debt was being issued only to finance interest payments owed on existing debt" (Salti, 2019, p. 9). Excessive borrowing over the years, which is un-reversable by tax revenues, raised Lebanon's

debt-to-GDP ratio to more than 150 per cent in 2018 (World Bank 2019). While a high ratio is not conclusive, as can be seen in Japan's case which is the third largest economy in the world, maintaining such high ratios requires two interrelated conditions that Lebanon lacks: political stability and economic growth.

Lebanon's implementation of neoliberal policies were spearheaded by Hariri, but they have been supported by successive governments and a range of actors, including international institutions like the World Bank and IMF, regional investors from Gulf states, and international states, mainly France. The implementation of these policies led to an increase in social and spatial inequalities, which can be attributed to privatization of public goods and clientelist awarding of state contracts (Daher, 2022). Sectarian elites channeled material assistance unevenly to fuel intra-communal cohesion and inter-sectarian tension (Shehabi, 2020). Generally, Lebanon's center and surrounding districts were allotted more money in the national budget than the periphery. Municipalities in rural areas were deprived of funding that would offer residents there a fair chance to accumulate wealth and break free from dependence on assistance offered by sectarian leaders. The distribution of government social services and community development projects followed a sectarian logic that makes the Sunni-dominated North and Shiite-dominated South to be the most poverty-stricken regions of Lebanon (Alijla, 2016; Salti and Chaaban, 2010). This spatialization of sectarianism This spatialization of sectarianism, underscored by urban planning that conforms to sectarian aspiration, divides the country into enclaves that enable and reproduce sectarianism (Tamimova, 2022; Ghanem, 2021; Bou Akar, 2018; Haugbolle, 2012; Dibeh, 2005). In the end, it is sectarian elites who benefit the most from these policies through clientelist allocation of state resources and manipulation of demographic expansion.

Agency of religious leaders

Religious leaders are as affected by the economic collapse in Lebanon as the general public. They may have reaped some special benefits from a system that capitalizes on their religious rhetoric, but they generally did not amass outrageous wealth from the system the way bank directors and bank shareholders did. Religious leaders do not possess material resources that can resuscitate the economy. Nor do they have the financial expertise to engage in discussions on restructuring the economy. What they have is the ability to advance a discourse that facilitates desectarianization. This is crucial at a time when the country is undergoing major transformations. No matter what economic structures replace the post-Taif structures, these structures have political and social ramifications for generations to come. Non-partisan

clergymen can contribute to the process of desectarianization by endorsing structures that promote transparency and accountability. Religious leaders can encourage transparency and accountability within their own religious communities and the broader political system. "We [religious leaders] have little resources beyond words. We cannot fix things on our own, but we can point to where the problem lays. We can raise our voice about the need to establish a fair society, and live a virtuous life. There's no guarantee that people will listen to us, but this is our God-given calling and what religion requires (Interviewee 5). By advocating for anti-corruption measures and supporting efforts to hold political leaders accountable, religious leaders can help dismantle the clientelist networks that fuel sectarianism.

Furthermore, by fostering a culture of integrity, religious leaders can help break the cycle of corruption that perpetuates sectarianism. Any economic system is subject to abuse and may be worked to solidify sectarian networks. From that perspective, religious leaders can contribute to desectarianization by promoting ethical business practices within their communities and by condemning corruption, nepotism, and cronyism. To do that, religious leaders can organize awareness campaigns to educate their followers about the virtue of ethical business practices and the negative impacts of corruption, nepotism, and cronyism on society. Raising awareness about how economic structures can create inequalities and reproduce sectarianism creates pressure for change. As religious leaders engage in awareness campaigns, they foster a sense of collective responsibility among their followers to demand more inclusive and accountable governance structures. This would not only reduce the reliance on sectarian networking for access to resources and opportunities, but also contribute to the establishment of a more equitable and just society, ultimately addressing the conditions that fuel sectarianism.

In the Lebanese context, independent Shiite clergymen can serve as desectarianization actors in two related ways. First, as they withhold their trust from sect-based parties, they can encourage their adherents to do the same. In national elections, Lebanese Shiites overwhelmingly cast their votes in support of Hezbollah and Amal candidates. By laying the blame for the collapse on Amal and Hezbollah, as well as other sect-based parties, without distinction, clergymen weaken ties between Shiites and Shiite political parties. This is helpful, but it is inefficient desectarianization in the context of economic collapse, because it does not address the people's material needs. Plus, it leaves the door open for other Shiite-parties to compete for Shiites voices and in the process revive sectarianism and the muhasasa system. This is where the second aspect of how independent clergymen can contribute to desectarianization comes in. Shiite clergymen that are keen on moving beyond sectarianism must go beyond merely not-endorsing Amal and Hezbollah. They ought to lend their support to non-sect based

political parties, and to publicize their decision. This does not mean campaigning for a particular party, but rather it is campaigning for different political behavior. By backing groups that are not organized around sectarian membership and considerations, clergymen support the establishment of a post-sectarian order. Furthermore, by declaring their support for non-sectarian groups, religious leaders are indirectly "blessing" the decision of their adherents to do the same.

Independent clergymen supporting a non-sectarian candidate or program over a sectarian one sounds straight forward, but it is not that simple. In a politically charged context, religious leaders must be careful to protect their independence. The propaganda machine of Hezbollah and Amal is powerful and capable of making charges of "traitorship" stick on their opponents (Interview 8). Plus, there is always the concern of endorsing someone that does not have a real chance of winning. The electoral law in Lebanon is designed to divide seats amongst sectarian zu'ama in a predictable way (Interview 8). Before Oct-17 protests, all interviewed clergymen did not feel there is a chance of changing the system through elections, even if non-sectarian parties had contested elections. However, dynamics have changed dramatically after Oct-17 and the Beirut explosion. There are now numerous parties and coalitions that are new on the political stage. These parties are cross-sectarian in their composition and political outlook.

3.3 Sectarianization of the Judicial System

Liberal democracies are predicated on the principle of separation of powers (Lauristen, 2010). That is, across the main branches of government (legislative, executive, judicial) no branch should interfere in the duties or prerogatives of the other. The intention of this principle is to prohibit one branch from becoming too powerful. A system of checks and balances limits the capacity of one branch to dominate authority and prevents people from manipulating the system to advance their personal interests (Zabavs'ka, 2018). By the end of the civil war, Lebanese lawmakers acknowledged the importance and utility of this principle and spelled it out in the fourth preamble of the revised constitution: "The political system is established on the principle of separation of powers, their balance and cooperation" (The Lebanese Constitution, 1990). However, in the post-Taif period, the lines separating the branches of power were blurred and often overstepped. Sectarian leaders, under the auspices of Syria, wedged the notion of *muhasasa* in the judicial realm by subjecting the training and appointment of judges to sectarian balancing. By predetermining the sectarian distribution of judges and controlling when and how judges are relocated, sectarian leaders severely limit the independence and development of the judicial body.

Where there is separation of powers, the judiciary should safeguard individuals against oppression from authorities and promote the overall welfare of society by fostering a universal system that involves everyone. In the Lebanese context, the judiciary can play different roles, depending on its assigned function and level of independence. It may either function as a tool in the hands of elites to protect the sectarian system, or it can act as a force to regulate justice in a system marked by conflicting sectarian interests. In the former case, judges are treated as instruments serving the interests of sectarian elites. In the latter case, judges are considered objective and fair reference points that seek to protect the rights and freedoms of all citizens. The role that the judges play is determined by a number of factors, including the hierarchal structure of the judiciary, sectarian considerations, guarantees granted to preserve the independence of judges, the nature of the judicial function and the ability of superior authorities to override a judge's ruling.

To understand how the judiciary in Lebanon has been entangled in the sectarian system, and how it stands as an obstacle to the emergence of a post-sectarian orders, it is important to examine the role of the Supreme Judicial Council, and how it serves as a primary gateway for political elites to sectarianize the judiciary (Alawieh, 2022a; Charbil, 2021). The following section will demonstrate how sectarian leaders in the post-Taif period intervened in the judicial system to shield themselves from being held accountable and thus prolong their sectarian rule. Sectarian elites leverage the judicial system to impede the process of desectarianization. They do that not only by appointing client-judges, but by controlling the process that produces judges and the process that appoints judges. We will examine those two processes in that order.

Becoming a judge

There are two routes to enter judicial service, either through enrolling in the Lebanese Institute of Judiciary Studies, or by passing a test made available only to people with extensive experience practicing law (e.g., lawyers, public servants, judge assistants). Matriculating in the Institute is the primary mechanism for people that want to become judges, but admission is very competitive and fraught with lack of transparency and partiality (Legal Agenda, 2018c). In addition to meeting general conditions that are questionable, like being of good health and being proficient in English or French, applicants must compete in a written test that the ministry of justice organizes periodically, according to its perceived need for new judges. By leaving the task of determining the number of judges to be hired up to the Minister of Justice, rather than have it determined based on assessed need and vision planning, the size and effectiveness of the judiciary is placed at the mercy of the Justice Minister, who is appointed in a cabinet

according to sectarian apportionment (i.e. muhasasa) (Alawieh, 2022b). This has typically led to many judicial vacancies left unfulfilled, and a "strangulation" of the judiciary system because of insufficient number of judges to handle the growing number of cases. Since judicial appointments must be signed by the minister of finance, in addition to the president and minister of justice, this gives the minister of finance veto power over the sectarian distribution of judges (Diab, 2020) This is especially problematic when the minister of justice and the minister of finance belong to different sects, which is frequently the case.

To qualify for taking the admission written-test, applicants must sit for an interview conducted by the Supreme Judicial Council. The Council must approve applicants, but it is not obligated to justify its decisions. The Council's selection process lacks objectivity and transparency, which has allowed the Council to disqualify applicants without disclosing the reasons, but which reportedly revolve around issues of sectarian belonging and political orientation. In 2009, for instance, more than 60 per cent of applicants did not pass the interview to qualify for the written test (Institute of Judicial Studies, n.d.). More recently, the Council instituted an oral test to follow the written test. By assigning the oral component a weight of up to 25 per cent of the final grade, the Council created a mechanism to help it identify and raise the score of desired candidates if they did not do well on the anonymized written test (Legal Agenda, 2018d). Successful candidates are then granted permission by the Justice Minister and the Supreme Judicial Council to commence their studies. Those that finish their studies must wait to be appointed by a decree, which creates another conjunction that enables ruling elites to selectively appoint apprentice judges.

On the other hand, experienced candidates and those that have earned a Juris Doctorate degree are exempted from enrolling in the Institute of Judiciary Studies. Depending on their experience and qualification, they may be required to take a written and/or oral test. These tests are scheduled roughly every three years, and the outcome has been observed to rely on issues unrelated to qualification or competence, but to nepotism and sectarian identity. By adding the number of judges appointed between 1994 and 2017, and aggregating the numbers according to their method of appointment, the data shows that there is marked difference in sectarian makeup based on the method of entry. Empirically, while results of the admission tests to the Institute of Judiciary Justice were in favor of Muslims, and Shiites in particular (206 Muslims vs. 174 Christians; 94 Shiites vs. 92 Sunnis), appointments bypassing the Institute yielded the opposite results (66 Christians vs. 46 Muslims; 24 Sunnis vs. 17 Shiites). These results have prompted observers of judicial appointments to conclude that the appointment methods that bypass the Institute are typically used to correct any sectarian

imbalance that admission tests to the Institute produce (Legal Agenda, 2018b). In other words, the number of Christian and Muslim or Sunni and Shiite judges in the judicial system is calibrated to near equilibrium through a range of unregulated appointment mechanism. That mechanism is co-managed by the justice minister and the Supreme Judicial Council. The Council, like the position of the Prime Minister, submits to non-formal sectarian apportionment that is not legal but customary (Saghia and Shorkallah, 2020).

What the process of becoming a judge demonstrates is that it is controlled by sectarian leaders through formal and informal structures. Sectarian elites use the law and the *muhasasa* principle to create a sectarian balance in the judicial body and preserve the status quo. In addition, by controlling the admission process, sectarian leaders reduce the matriculation of non-partisan judges that may one day hold sectarian leaders accountable and shatter their image of being untouchable. If a non-partisan candidate ends up becoming a judge and poses a threat to sectarian elites, sectarian leaders counter that threat through the Supreme Judicial Council, to which we now turn.

The Supreme Judicial Council

As we have seen, the Lebanese constitution is somewhat paradoxical. It calls for abolishing sectarianism, and promotes equality of rights and duties among all citizens without discrimination. At the same time, the constitution makes an exception for confessional representation in parliament and in grade one posts, albeit as a way of transition. Constitutional experts made several attempts to resolve the apparent contradiction, but no interpretation has put the issue to rest (Kliemous, 2019; Lahham, 2019; Ismail, 2019a; Elias, 2019). Yet, where the constitution is unequivocally clear and leaves no room for interpretation is in recruitment to public posts outside the top tier. Article 95 firmly stipulates that “the principle of confessional representation in public service jobs, in the judiciary, in the military and security institutions, and in public and mixed agencies shall be cancelled in accordance with the requirements of national reconciliation; they shall be replaced by the principle of expertise and competence”. While it is clear that sectarian representation in the judicial realm is to be abrogated, when it comes to forming the highest judicial authority in the land, the Supreme Judicial Council (SJC), sectarian calculations and consensual customs remain key determinants. Allegedly, sectarian distribution supersedes expertise and competence in terms of importance .

The SJC is tasked with ensuring proper functioning of the judiciary, its dignity, its independence, and the proper functioning of the courts and their related important decision-making (Lebanese Judicial Law, 1985). By considering how it is composed, it becomes clear that

the SJC lacks independence and is collectively an arm of sectarian elites in the legal sphere. The SJC is composed of ten members selected according to three different criteria. The first three judges are predetermined as the president of the Court of Cassation, the Attorney General at the Court of Cassation, and the President of the Judicial Inspectorate. The first two serve as president and vice president of the SJC respectively, and all three judges remain in their position for as long as they can fulfil their role. Five members of the SJC are appointed by a decree upon proposal from the Minister of Justice for a period of three years that is unrenewable: one judge chosen from among the Chamber Presidents of the Court of Cassation; two judges chosen from among the Chamber Presidents of the different courts of appeal; one judge chosen from among the Chamber Presidents of the first instance courts; one judge chosen from among the presidents of tribunals or heads of departments of the Ministry of Justice. Finally, the last two judges are elected for a period of three years that is unrenewable (link). In other words, eights members of the SJC are appointed directly or indirectly by the Council of Ministers, which, as pointed out already, is a product of *muhasasa* power sharing amongst the sectarian elites. What follows is that the eight judges are appointed according to a sectarian quota, regardless of their qualifications or experience (Shalhoub, 2004). Filling those few positions agitates inter-sectarian and intra-sectarian power struggle where sectarian leaders compete to get their favored candidate to the SJC. This often leads to significant delays in filling vacancies in the SJC, and subsequently stifles the cycle of training and appointing new judges (Legal Agenda, 2018e). As a result, the efficiency of the legal system is impacted and its ability to reform itself suffers.

That only two out of ten judges could potentially be free from the reigns of political authorities leaves little room for an independent legal system. Not only is the number of "independent" judges inconsequential to make a difference in the decision-making and orientation of the Council, the mechanism by which these two candidate are nominated and elected is finetuned to yield results that respect the Council's sectarian balance. For starters, only the Chamber Presidents of the Court of Cassation can be nominated, which is only ten judges in total (Mansour and Daoud, 2010). Of those ten, customs oblige Sunni judges to abstain from nominating themselves because the SJC already has two Sunni judges: the Attorney General at the Court of Cassation, and the President of the Judicial Inspectorate. Furthermore, nominations to fill a seat that is made vacant in a given mandate period can only be accepted from judges that belong to the same sect of the departing judge. In many cases, that means that there is only one nominee that wins by acclamation. Narrowing down the list of candidates so drastically may still yield unpredictable results. To minimize that risk, voting is reserved only to members of the Court of Cassation, barring judges from across the legal system who are directly

impacted by the decisions of the SJC from being represented. Essentially, only less than ten per cent of all the judges can cast a vote (Legal Agenda, 2018f). In summary, the customs and means that govern the composition of the SJC strip it of independence, and render it a tool in the hands of the sectarian elites that use it to protect their interests and preserve the sectarian order.

When it comes to appointing judges, there are established customs that are committed to sectarian parity across the judicial body. These customs are deliberately left unwritten and informal in order to avoid scrutiny and regulations (Mortada, 2020). However, there is a degree of flexibility that is embedded in these customs. While senior and sensitive posts are subject to strict sectarian distribution, there is room for negotiations in filling less critical positions. For instance, a sectarian community may get less judges in one judicial branch but make up for the difference in another branch. This flexibility in filling non-sensitive positions enables elites to maintain a sectarian structure that can adjust to unforeseen variables and inter-sectarian balancing.

Moreover, analyzing judicial compositions reveal that sectarian elites are not only keen on preserving the status quo by holding on to key judicial positions that they have traditionally occupied, but by claiming those positions in their spheres of influence (Botros, 2017b). The electoral law in Lebanon divides the country into electoral districts.[2] The number and size of electoral districts has changed at least four times since Taif. This impacts the number of MPs that represent each district, and because parliamentary elections must comply by a strict sectarian quota, lawmakers were able to divide Lebanon into sectarian spheres of influence based on the sectarian identity of prospective MPs (Arnous, 2018). These acts of gerrymandering, under the guise of new electoral laws, enable elites to appease the general public by permitting minor changes to election results, but effectively these laws redraw the representation of powers of the same ruling class (Macaron, 2018; Atallah and El-Helou, 2017). By mapping the sectarian identity of appointed judges on top of their geographic placement, there appears a pattern of distribution that is similar to sectarian distribution of parliamentary seats (Legal Agenda, 2018a, 2018b). For example (Harb, 2019), the top positions in the Court of Public Prosecution and the six chambers of the Court of Cassation are distributed amongst major confessional communities according to where each community is dominant. That is, the two positions reserved for Maronite judges are allocated to Mount Lebanon and the North districts, where Maronites have most of their parliamentary seats (28 out of 34); two Sunni judges are allocated to Beirut and the North districts, where Sunnis pick up 17 out of a total of 27 seats;

[2] For a map of electoral districts and sectarian distribution, visit: https://www.executive-magazine.com/cover-story/visualizing-the-voting-process-new-2017-elections-law-lebanon

three Shiites judges are allocated to the Beqaa, South, and Nabatiyeh, which are overwhelmingly Shiite districts that yield 22 MPs out of a total of 27. Similar observations can be made about Druze, Catholic and Orthodox judges. This sectarianization of judicial compositions and geographic distribution ultimately bereft judicial institutions of independence.

The Lebanese constitution emphasizes in Article 20 that independence of the judiciary means independence at the court level, which means that judges are independent in exercising their functions. The constitution speaks of prescribing necessary guarantees that safeguard judges from manipulation. The idea is that when it comes to matters related to a judge's career affairs (such as appointments, dismissal, discipline, promotion, transfer, etc.), these matters would be decided by a judicial council that is independent from the Executive and Legislative authorities. However, sectarian elites managed to distort the discourse about independence of the judiciary so that it refers to independence of the Supreme Judicial Council (Charbil, 2021). The problem is that members of the SJC are appointed by sectarian elites in the executive branch. Sectarian elites use their authority to promote judges that are loyal to them, while judges that work against the interests of sectarian elites are transferred to remote jurisdictions to deter them and limit their judicial power. Thus, judges become motivated to serve the interests of sectarian elites in order to protect their position in the judicial system. By sectarianizing the composition of the SJC and occupying it through their loyalists, sectarian elites instrumentalize the judicial system to guarantee their exoneration from any legal charges, which prolongs their tenure in office and consequently the sectarian order.

Agency of religious leaders

Sectarian leaders typically justify sectarianization, not least in judicial appointments, by purporting to abide by principles of sectarian parity and fair distribution amongst Lebanon's communities (Botros, 2017a). Be that as it may, what if there is an alternative legal way that ensures sectarian communities are fairly represented and their interests are constitutionally protected, but without intensifying sectarian tension? And what can independent religious leaders do to bring that about? Lebanon's first constitution, which was promulgated in 1926, decreed the establishment of two legislative bodies (bicameralism): The House of Deputies and the Senate. According to Article 22, the Senate was composed of 16 members, and it was the body where sectarian communities were officially represented. However, among the amendments that were introduce to constitution in 1927 was the suppression of the Senate and the transfer of its 16 members into the House of Deputies (Al-Hayik, 2019). At Taif, lawmakers reworded and reinstated Article 22 as a desectarianization measure aimed at cancelling political

sectarianism in the enlarged parliament (Al-Hayik, 2019). Article 22 states: "With the election of the first Chamber of Deputies on a national, not sectarian, basis, a Senate shall be formed and all the spiritual families shall be represented in it. The Senate's powers shall be confined to crucial issues" (The Lebanese Constitution, 1990). This article, in the context of the Taif Accords, acknowledged that sectarian identities are important, but they can cause divisions. The Senate was imagined as a fail-safe mechanism. Senate members would oversee the interests of sectarian communities and assess perceptions of existential threats. That arrangement would enable the House of Deputies to focus on legislating, without being stifled by sectarian power struggles, whereas the Senate would be the legal and designated body for addressing sectarian concerns (Ismail, 2020).

The formation of a Senate that ensures sectarian representation and protects the interests of sectarian communities can facilitate desectarianization, but as it is documented in the Taif amendments, the concept is full of ambiguity. Lebanese University Law Professor Mary Al-Hayik explores the utility of the Senate to solve the problem of sectarianism in Lebanon. In her study (Al-Hayik, 2019), Al-Hayik points to a large number of important questions that the constitution leaves unanswered. Some of these questions are: Will Senate members be elected or appointed, and according to what mechanisms? What parameters are considered for the Senate composition: sectarian, regional, demographic, gender, age…etc.? What period are Senate members elected for? Is it renewable? How does it overlap with parliamentary elections? What powers will the Senate possess? Can they suggest laws, or do they serve as a consulting capacity? Will the Senate have veto power? Will the Senate exercise authority over the executive and judicial branch of the governments? Will the senate chairperson have a predetermined sectarian identity? This is a sample of the critical questions that must be asked to shield the Senate from turning into a sectarian battleground. Left unanswered, these important questions create a structure of ambiguity that impedes the process of desectarianization.

Sectarian leaders are surely familiar with Article 22 and its inherent ambiguity. During the civil war period, discussion on the formation of the Senate ebbed and flowed with the rhythm of escalating tensions. The establishment of the Senate would have provided a tangible and promising way of removing sectarianism from daily political life (i.e., political sectarianism). Efforts to establish the Senate, however, were torpedoed by dissenting sectarian zu'ama, most notably by Walid Jumblatt who insisted on perpetually appointing a Druze notable as the chairman of the Senate (Lahham, 2016). After Taif, some of the ambiguities were resolved, such as interpreting the crucial issues that the Sente was confined to address, which are described in Article 65: The amendment of the constitution, the declaration of a state of emergency and its

termination, war and peace, general mobilization, international, long-term comprehensive development plans, the appointment of employees of grade one and its equivalent, the reconsideration of the administrative divisions, the dissolution of the Chamber of Deputies, electoral laws, nationality laws, personal status laws, and the dismissal of Ministers. Nonetheless, sectarian leaders reduced the formation of the Senate to a bargaining chip; When it suits them, they restart negotiations on its formation, but if one or more disagree on the specifics, they walk away from the negotiation table and the subject is buried in the parliament's drawer for another season (Ourabi, 2016). From that perspective, sectarian leaders impede the process of desectarianization by controlling structures that have the potential to unlock a post-sectarian order.

Recognizing this is useful for exploring the agency of individuals to challenge the sectarian system. As desectarianization actors, non-partisan religious leaders can organize themselves and lobby sectarian leaders to establish the Senate. Two objections are raised. First, non-partisan clergymen are a numerical minority with little resources. They cannot form an effective pressure group. That may be true at the moment, but the deteriorating situation in Lebanon might encourage more clergymen to operate independently. At the same time, independent clergymen can coordinate with other activists to mount a united front that demands the establishment of the Senate. The significance that clergymen bring is in the symbolism that they carry as community gatekeepers. This is akin to the mobilization that Imam Musa Sadr carried out in the 1960s and 1970s. Al-Sadr created a movement that united people against the Shiite zu'ama' s feudalism and abuse of power (Ajami, 2012a). "Imam Musa al-Sadr was an exceptional leader. He is the product of his generation and time era. I don't think we can produce leaders like that by our own might. Those leaders are sent by God according to his own timing" (Interviewee 10). Nonetheless, further research needs to be done to determine what conditions facilities the emergence of another Sadr-life figure. Secondly, there is no guarantee that the Senate would resolve the problem of sectarianism. The zu'ama may basically co-opt the Senate and project their influence and power from that arena. That is likely, but this shift in space will introduce new actors in parliament. Religious leaders can anticipate that moment and coordinate with new forces on the ground and in the House to put clear limits on the jurisdiction and prerogatives of the Senate members.

Conclusion

The process of desectarianization is fraught with many challenges. These challenges emanate from the intransigence of sectarian leaders to perpetuate a sectarian order that gives

them legitimacy, power, and protection. Sectarian elites perceive attempts that seek to regulate life according to non-sectarian principles as a threat to their rule. To guard themselves against such attempts, sectarian elites look for ways to solidify their sectarian rule and entrench themselves in power. A primary way to do that is by leveraging state sponsored structures. These structures exist or are created by sectarian elites to regulate the life of citizens. These structures create an order and relative stability that chiefly serves the interest of ruling elites. A system of patronage develops where people are forced to seek support from sectarian leaders, instead of the state, if they want to prosper or advance their interests, which ultimately reproduces sectarianism.

Sectarian elites manipulate formal and non-formal structural arrangements found in the Lebanese constitution to enforce a system of *muhasasa* that sectarianizes the distribution of state resources. By filling government positions with their loyalists, sectarian elites control the levers of power in the state, which enables them to thwart or diffuse any desectarianization effort. Additionally, sectarian elites created a market economy that creates dependency on them to provide and safeguard material interests of their sectarian communities. Sectarian elites use state resources to accumulate great wealth for themselves and to bestow privileges on their constituents. By weakening the capacity of state institutions to provide for all citizens equally and indiscriminately, and by supplanting them with clientelist networks, sectarian elites creates structures that prolong the life of the sectarian system in Lebanon. Moreover, to guarantee their escape from any incrimination that might hurt their legitimacy and shorten their tenure, sectarian elites co-opted the judicial system. Sectarian elites infiltrated the judiciary by sectarianizing judicial appointments and judicial transfers. As a result, judges are not independent in their courts, but are subject to a higher authority in the SJC which is composed of members that serve the interests of sectarian leaders.

By creating and instrumentalizing legal, economic and judicial structures to secure their rule, sectarian elites perpetuate sectarian order in Lebanon. Desectarianization efforts that seek to introduce a new order that is not organized around sectarian identities must confront these structures, and consider how to circumvent them. Religious leaders can offer a counter narrative that dismantles the securitization discourse of sectarian leaders. They can also hold sectarian leaders accountable and pressure them to introduce structures that limit the reproduction of sectarianism. The agency of religious leaders, however, is limited not only by domestic structures but by geopolitical factors as well. The following chapter will explore power balancing structures in the Middle East that impede the process of desectarianization in Lebanon.

Chapter 4: Geopolitical Impediments to Desectarianization

Introduction

In addition to domestic structures that reproduce sectarianism, there is a broader context in which sectarian identities operate. The transnational nature of sectarian identities invites co-religionists from around the world to identify with their community members across state borders. External actors, whether foreign governments or non-state actors, can express solidarity with their community members through political backing, military assistance, or economic aid. By supporting one sectarian group over other competing groups, regardless how the latter groups identify, external actors exacerbate sectarian relations. From that perspective, geopolitical factors play a significant role in fueling sectarianism. This implies that desectarianization projects that aim to deconstruct sectarianism in a local context, must contend with geopolitical structures that surround that context, and which instrumentalize sectarian identities for political gain.

In the Lebanese context, sectarianism is subject to regional forces animating dynamics in the Middle East. In the Middle East system, defined geographically to encompass the Arab states plus Turkey, Iran and Israel, politics is continuously shaped and reshaped by domestic, regional, international and transnational pressures (Fawcett, 2016). States and non-state actors perceive threats differently, giving relevance to a range of material and ideational factors (Darwich, 2019). In response to endogenous and exogenous pressures, actors form alliances in a bid to dominate the system, or at least in order to resist being co-opted by stronger actors (Kausch, 2017). Competition between two or more actors over enlarging their spheres of influence creates rivalries that have destabilizing effects across regional systems.

At the beginning of the 21st century, two rivalries stimulated affairs in the Middle East more than any other: the Saudi Iranian rivalry and the Israeli Iranian regional power competition (Beck, 2020). These two conflicts are very significant because for more than four decades they have severely impacted the political lives, economic realities, and security calculations of citizens and regimes in the Middle East. The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is a struggle for supremacy in region, which involves a quest for regional influence and a competition for Islamic legitimacy (Mabon and Wastnidge, 2022). This struggle gave rise to sectarian mobilization of militant groups across the region, but “not every time and with mixed results” (Phillips, 2020, p. 10). Both states utilized proxy actors at different times and in different locations, which contributed to the militarization of the region, and increased sectarian violence (Gause, 2020).

Similarly, the rivalry between Israel and the Islamic Republic adds another layer of complexity to regional politics. Iran is ideologically opposed to the existence of Israel and has been supporting anti-Israeli groups to fight Israel. On the other hand, Israel securitizes Iran to a regional and global audience, and strategically launches attacks against Iranian facilities and pro-Iranian groups (Beck and Richter, 2020). The existential struggle between Israel and Iran increases the risk of an arms race in the Middle East and direct military confrontation, especially as Iran continues to develop its nuclear weapons capability (Harley, 2023; Kiyaei, 2022; Rezaei, 2019).

At the intersection of the Iran-Saudi competition and the Iran-Israel rivalry stands Lebanon as an "irreplaceable arena" for counterbalancing the influence that each state exerts in the system (Kalout, 2022). Lebanon's geostrategic value stems from its proximity to Israel, which is Iran's archenemy, and to Syria, which is Iran's closest state ally in the Middle East. With the help of Hezbollah in Lebanon, Iran established the axis of resistance and is able to acquire robust deterrence against Israel. Hezbollah's Shiite identity, Lebanese roots, and armed resistance entangles Lebanon, and Shiites in particular, in the regional and religious struggle that involves Israel, Iran and Saudi Arabia. This is the context that desectarianization actors must grapple with when exploring ways to reverse sectarianization in Lebanon.

This chapter will discuss geopolitical impediments to desectarianization in Lebanon by exploring how regional power competitions agitate sectarian tensions in Lebanon and consequently reproduce sectarianism. The chapter will first focus on the competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and will highlight how the relationship between the two states changed from amicability to hostility following transformation in Iranian governance and shifting regional dynamics. Riyadh and Tehran both sought to expand their influence in the region by sponsoring Sunni and Shiite sectarian groups, respectively. This had the effect of deepening sectarianization in Lebanon and fragmenting society. Plus, Saudi and Iranian backing of openly sectarian groups in Lebanon adds to the legitimacy of sectarian leaders and cements a structure that requires foreign powers to engage with sectarian leaders as de facto rulers. This was made obvious, for instance, after the 2020 Beirut port explosion when French president Emmanuel Macron met with Lebanon's leaders to press them for enacting reforms. On one hand, Macro's uninvited gesture was welcomed because it came with promises of financial aid to lift Lebanon from economic ruin. On the other hand, the move was condemned because it gives Lebanese political elites and their sectarian power sharing system a lifeline at a time when the entire establishment seemed to be teetering on collapse (Hassan, 2020).

In the second half of the chapter, the discussion will turn to the rivalry between Iran and Israel and its ramification on sectarianism in Lebanon. The establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 radicalized Arabs and Muslims. When Palestinian freedom fighters sought to liberate their homeland from Lebanese territory, they entered a clash between Lebanese sectarian leaders over Lebanese sovereignty. That clash became more sectarianized following the emergence of Hezbollah as an Iranian-backed paramilitary group. The chapter will outline how Hezbollah's ideology towards Israel, which is inspired by the fervor of the Islamic revolution and its Shiite jurisprudence, entangles Lebanese Shiites in an existential struggle against Israel. This raises the fears of Lebanese communities that do not espouse Hezbollah's anti-Israel narrative. As tension between Hezbollah and its opponents escalate, sectarian rhetoric is evoked to draw communal solidarity and confront the rising challenge. What the chapter highlights is that "ontological dissonance" (Lupovici, 2012) between Iran/Hezbollah and Israel provokes sectarian mobilization, and complicates the process of desectarianization.

4.1 Saudi-Iran Power Struggle

Relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran changed as regional dynamics shifted. During the cold war era, Riyadh and Tehran's quest for regional leadership was conditioned by a number of factors, but most importantly the foreign policies of successive US administrations to curb Soviet influence, control over oil production and associated revenues, the threat and consequences of Arab nationalism and Nassirism, and demarcation and independence of the Trucial States (Keynoush 2016). Threat perceptions and interest calculations saw the relationship between the two states oscillate between rivalry and cooperation. For example, Mohammad Reza Shah of Iran (reign 1964-1979) and king Fasil of Saudi Arabia (reign 1964-1975) did not perceive each other as threats (Keynoush, 2016, pp. 85–105). Monarchial rule in the Middle East was facing a lot of criticism from nationalist and communist groups in the region. So, by tolerating each other, the shah and the king bolstered the legitimacy of their reign, and of other monarchical orders (Cooper, 2012)

That, however, was about to change after an Islamic revolution in Iran, led by Ayatullah Rouhollah Khomeini, toppled the Shah regime, and declared Iran an Islamic republic (Rubin, 2014). Khomeini considered the revolution to be a starting point that would spark an Islamic revival across the Muslim world (Aarabi 2019). He was unequivocal about Iran's role in bringing that about. In one of speeches in 1980, he declared: "We should try hard to export our revolution to the world, and should set aside the thought that we do not export our revolution, because Islam does not regard various Islamic countries differently and is the supporter of all the

oppressed people of the world" (Anon, 1980). The Islamic revolution and Khomeini's rhetoric deeply worried neighboring Muslim states, especially Saudi Arabia. Khomeini vilified the House of Saud as illegitimate leaders of the Muslim world and unworthy custodians of Islam's two holy places in Mecca and Medina (Shihabi 2015). He considered overthrowing the Saudi monarchy as a stepping stone towards claiming leadership of the Muslim world for himself and his movement (Nasr 2006a). Khomeini perceived the Saudi royal family as illegitimate rulers and are only in power because they are supported by American imperialism (Ghattas, 2020). Unsurprisingly, this alarmed Saudi elites and soured the relationship between Riyadh and Tehran.

Saudi rulers saw in the conception and aspiration of the Islamic Republic of Iran a threat to their rule and legitimacy (Mabon, 2020b) . In the late eighteenth century, the House of Saud came to rule regions of the Arabian Peninsula through their alliance with Islamic Wahabi movement (Potter 2017). It was a partnership between a religious and a secular figure, where sons of Mohammed Ibn Saud provided "secular" leadership of the state, while sons of Mohammed Ibn Abdel-Wahhab provided religious leadership. In 1932, Abdulaziz ibn Saud consolidated his control over present-day Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and embarked on state building measures, funded by new oil wealth. He oversaw the development of administrative systems and infrastructure projects that were requisite for modern state building. By maintaining close relationship to Wahabi ulema, Ibn Saud ruled in the name of Islam and modernization. Subsequently, the Saudi monarchy maintained the same commitment towards modernization and Islamic heritage as the means for sustaining its legitimacy (Quamar, 2015). Gradually, the state institutionalized the religious establishment, and as a result was able to co-opt the ulema and control the religious sphere (Kostiner, 1993).

The House of Saud leveraged their relationship over the ulema in two primary ways (Mouline, 2014; Niblock, 2006). First, they relied on clerical forces, both institutional and popular, to bestow legitimacy on the rulership of House of Saud. Loyal *ulema* employed religious rhetoric and politically-motivated reasoning to affirm the royal family's entitlement to the throne. Second, the House of Saud leveraged the religious establishment to deflect criticism against the royal family. Criticism could be from Saudi adversaries or from external foes. For example, Saudi grand mufti declared in 2016 that Iran's leaders are not Muslim signaling that they are enemies, or at least that they could not be trusted (BBC News, 2016). In exchange for their allegiance to the House of Saud, religious leaders were privileged and embedded in the state. This was most evident in how much freedom clerics were given to enforce Wahabi social codes, through the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, better

known as the religious police (Ayoob and Kosebalaban, 2008). The ulema facilitated an order that grants legitimacy to the rule of House of Saud such that opposition to their authority is tantamount to opposition to the state and to God (al-Rasheed, 1996). The symbiotic relationship that Saudi kings cultivated with Wahabi Islam was useful, but it made them vulnerable to secular ideologies, and more grievously, to alternative readings of Islam. That is the reason that Saudi kings perceived the Islamic Revolution as an existential threat to their dynasty.

From before 1979, the House of Saud were aware of that vulnerability (Nevo, 1998). So, to fortify their legitimacy and authority, they promoted Wahabi/Salafi Islam around the world, which accommodated monarchical rule (Al-Rasheed, 2007). The Saudi state, as well as donations from devout Saudi citizens, funded transnational institutions, charitable organizations, mosques and religious schools that endorsed Salafi Islam and produced a global following that identified with the Salafi worldview. The ability to attract and indirectly lead multitudes of Muslims across the world gave Saudi Arabia religious soft power (Mabon and AlRefai, 2021; Mandaville and Hamid, 2018). The House of Saud wielded this power strategically to legitimize their rule and enlarge their influence. In a similar fashion, Khomeini advanced a nuanced understanding of Shiite Islam, and when he consolidated his power in Iran, he worked to export the revolution to neighboring states and unite the Muslim umma under his leadership, albeit in different ways than Saudi (Ostovar, 2016). This would have ultimately rendered unto the supreme leader of the Islamic revolution considerable soft power, which had largely been monopolized by Saudi Arabia in what appeared to be a zero-sum endeavor.

The point to highlight here is that there exists an ideological incongruence between Saudi Arabia, as an Arab Wahabi state, and Iran, as a predominantly Persian Shiite state. This incongruence offers each side the ability to agitate ethnic and sectarian tension in the other state, causing internal security dilemmas. To resolve these dilemmas or preempt their escalation, each state tries to guard against the infiltration and entrenchment of external ideologies that destabilize the ruling regime's grip on power. This ultimately causes an external security dilemma between Tehran and Riyadh, animated by competition for soft power (Mabon, 2013b, p. 201). This implies that the longstanding rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran cannot be reduced to merely a geopolitical competition. There are contextual factors as well as ideational dimensions that must be considered when exploring the rivalry and its impact on desectarianization in Lebanon. The religious divide between the two countries fuels tensions between the two countries and has played a significant role in shaping their respective foreign policies and alliances. The struggle for dominance between these two regional powers has had ripple effects throughout the wider Muslim world, with various groups and governments

aligning themselves with one side or the other based on their own interpretation of Islamic identity and material interests (Mason and Mabon, 2022).

Despite their acerbic rhetoric in denouncing each other, Saudi Arabia and the Iran have managed so far to avoid open military confrontation. Instead, they have opted to face off against each other in different arenas through their support of rival groups (Hiro, 2019). The selection and utilization of these groups is shaped by the political climate and builds on networks that are often, though not exclusively, constructed along sectarian lines (Mabon, 2019d). That is, Tehran can be seen to generally support Shiite groups and to a lesser extent anti-imperial forces, while Riyadh backs Sunni groups, and more broadly monarchic orders, and Western-aligned regimes. In their struggle for supremacy in the Middle East and the wider Muslim world, Saudi and Iran casually harness their religious ideologies to construct sectarian narratives that advance their interests and entangle their opponents in security dilemmas.

It is important to emphasize that just as it is oversimplistic to cast the rivalry between Iran and Saudi in pure power balancing terms, by the same token, it is reductionistic to frame the Saudi-Iran rivalry as a Sunni-Shiite struggle (Keynoush, 2016). The rivalry is not constant, but it fluctuates in response to domestic pressures, regional events, and external interventions (Cooper, 2012). For instance, the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 created a power vacuum in Iraq that had the effect of spoiling the détente between Saudi Arabia and Iran. As Iran was better positioned to extend its influence in Iraq, this unsettled Saudi Arabia. Relations between the two regional powers worsened as a result, which was manifested in Tehran and Riyadh supporting opposing factions in Iraq (Royle and Mabon, 2022). The assassination of Rafic Hariri two years later created a similar power vacuum, but this time in Lebanon. Tension between Riyadh and Tehran escalated as Iran-backed Hezbollah came to dominate Lebanese politics after Syria's military withdrawal. Furthermore, the perception that proliferated in 2006 of Hezbollah being the victor of the war against Israel endangered Saudi's "ontological security" (Darwich, 2019), and intensified tension between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia was failing to contain the rise of Iran's power in the region (Gause, 2011). The shift in the balance of regional security kept the rivalry aflame. When the Arab Uprisings erupted, it was an occasion to agitate the rivalry. For instance, Saudi accused Iran of fomenting unrest against the king in Bahrain. At the same time, the rivalry was responsible for prolonging conflicts where violence broke out, such is in Syria and Yemen.

In summary, the Saudi-Iran rivalry simultaneously shapes and is being shaped by regional dynamics. This has direct implications on political dynamics in Lebanon and the prospects of

desectarianization. Desectarianization efforts must take into consideration the Saudi-Iran power struggle. Therefore, it is important to understand how Saudi Arabia and Iran engage with sectarian dynamics in Lebanon. A good starting point to do that is the Lebanese civil war. The war provided ample opportunities for both states to extend their influence. As the next sections show, both Iran and Saudi made great headways in Lebanon, though by radically different means, and to diametrically opposite ends.

Saudi-Lebanon Relations

From the outset, the Lebanese civil war was more than a conflict between local factions. One of the preeminent belligerents were Palestinians that were mainly associated with the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), although there were other Palestinian fighting groups. After being evicted from Jordan in 1970, the PLO setup its headquarters in Beirut and launched strikes against Israel from South Lebanon. At the time, Palestinian resistance received wide support from Arab and Muslim states and individuals. The fight against Israel was considered a legitimate existential Arab issue, and accordingly Arab regimes competed for championing the Palestinian cause (Barnett, 1998). The PLO became very powerful and operated as a state within the Lebanese state (Brynen, 1990). When fighting between Lebanese and Palestinians ignited the war, Arab regimes faced a predicament. They wanted to honor the sovereignty of Lebanon and preserve its territorial integrity, but they could not be seen opposing Palestinian armed resistance because that would question their Arabism and hurt their legitimacy at home (Barnett, 1998). The Saudi Kingdom had an irreconcilable policy towards Lebanon during civil war period. On one hand, it demanded respect for Lebanon’s sovereignty, but on the other hand it supported Palestinian armed struggle against Israel (Sayigh, 1997a).

Saudi leadership wanted to prevent another Arab military confrontation with Israel, but did not want to forgo leadership of an inter-state Arab order or leave that in the hands of revolutionary forces(Rieger, 2106, pp. 179–195). For that reason, Riyadh concentrated its effort to resolve the Lebanese conflict through mediation (Raj, 1981). The Saudi rulers played a key role in bringing the warring factions to the negotiating table. The Kingdom hosted Lebanese MPs in the city of Taif to reach a settlement that would end the war. The resulting agreement, named after the host city, called for the disarmament of militias, the withdrawal of foreign forces, the restoration of Lebanese government authority, and amendments to the constitution that would distribute power more equally among Lebanon's sectarian communities. Although the Taif Agreement did not completely resolve all of the underlying political and social tensions in Lebanon, it was a significant step toward ending the civil war.

At the helm of Saudi mediation in Lebanon was Saudi-resident Lebanese expatriate, Rafic Hariri. Hariri was penniless when he moved to the Kingdom for work in the late 1960s, but within a decade he became a multimillionaire (Iskander, 2006). He made his wealth from fulfilling construction contracts for the royal family and later the Saudi state. Over time, Hariri was able to form a close relationship with King Fahad, and in a rare gesture he was granted Saudi citizenship. It followed that he was formally appointed as Saudi's envoy for mediation in Lebanon after 1982 Israeli invasion of Beirut (Neal and Tansey, 2010; Nizameddin, 2006). Moreover, he used his vast personal wealth as well as Saudi funds to enlarge his influence in Lebanon, and to get the trust and cooperation of the country's political elites and warlords. Gradually, he became the main conduit of Saudi funds in Lebanon, which increased his value as a negotiator (Blanford, 2006b). Rafic Hariri spoke on behalf of the king and that gave him authority and legitimacy. His hard work and personal charm won him the favor of the Saudi royals, but also that of Lebanese leaders. At a time when Beirut was demarcated as Christian East Beirut and Muslim West Beirut, Hariri transcended sectarian politics and cultivated working relationships with leaders and groups from all backgrounds. He built a wide network of contacts, not least with members of the Syrian regime, which contributed to the breadth of his power. By lavishing gifts and money on people in positions of authority, Hariri navigated his way to the top of the decision-making hierarchy, which enlarged his personal agency.

It is simplistic and unhelpful to reduce the foreign policy of any state to the improvisation of a single person (Cf. Brighi, 2006). Much like desectarianization processes, there are structural factors, social conditions, and historical events that prevent the personalization of foreign policy. Having said that, it is difficult to overstate the role that Hariri played in constructing Saudi policy towards Lebanon. In his biographical work, *Citizen Hariri,* Hannes Baumann observes that:

> Hariri had been an important but junior player in the Saudi mediation efforts between 1983 and 1984; senior princes and King Fahd had held the reins of Saudi Arabia's Lebanon policy. This changed in 1984, when top US and Saudi decision-makers turned their attention to the Iraq-Iraq war. Hariri thus gained greater leeway for mapping the path of Saudi policy in Lebanon (Baumann, 2017b, p. 37).

Hariri became Saudi's most influential man in Lebanon; the voice of King Fahad. Incidentally, this elevated him to the status of a Sunni *za'im*. Hariri, however, did not make use of that privilege until he decided to contest elections (Baumann, 2017b). The *zu'ama* were militia leaders at that point still, and Hariri was charting a different course. As Hariri directed the Beirut post-war

reconstruction effort and introduced neoliberal policies, he gained more power and his relationship with the Kingdom was bolstered. King Fahad valued Hariri's ability to negotiate settlements between the various Lebanese factions and the Syrian suzerain. Since he facilitated economic growth and restored political stability to Lebanon, he, and by extension his enterprises (e.g., Hariri Foundation, Saudi Oger, Solidere), became instrumental to Riyadh's relationship with and policy towards Lebanon. This had the effect of consolidating Sunni power in Lebanon, and affiliating it more visibly to Saudi patronage. Prosperity in Lebanon under the Sunni leadership of Hariri was enjoyed by other sectarian communities, but Hariri's growing influence unsettled Damascus. According to Syrian opposition leaders Firas Tlass, son of the of defected Syrian defense minister Mustafa Tlass, the Syrian regime considered Hariri an enemy because both Hafez and Bashar al-Assad strongly believed that al-Hariri was planning to become a Sunni Arab leader over Syria and Lebanon (Bell, 2021).

The assassination of Hariri disturbed the civil co-existence between sectarian communities in Lebanon. The eventual withdrawal of Syria from Lebanon opened the door for Saudi Arabia and Iran to affirm their influence there, which raised the tension between sectarian communities. Before analyzing how Iran and Saudi Arabia repositioned themselves in Lebanon, and the ramifications of that on sectarianism and desectarianization, it is important to understand Iran's evolving perception of Shiites in Lebanon.

Iran-Lebanon Relations

Since Lebanon's independence, Iran's relations with the Lebanon varied based on who was in power in both countries. In the 1950s and early 1960s, the Shah supported conservative Christian groups that stood against Pan-Arabism. By the 1970s, as opposition to the Shah's rule was fomenting inside and outside Iran, many Iranians took refuge in Lebanon and received military training from the PLO. The Shah, through his secret police organization (SAVAK), courted Christian and Shiite elites to get intelligence on Iranian dissidents (Samii, 1997). The Shah was eventually overthrown in 1979, and consequently Iran's relationship with Lebanon was upended. Soon after, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) was established as an independent security force and tasked with protecting the clerical regime that took power, as well as preserving the ideals of the Islamic revolution (Udit, 2015). The IRGC effectively replaced the SAVAK as the Islamic Republic's main mechanism for foreign intervention (Sinkaya, 2015).

Many of Lebanon's sizeable and hitherto disenfranchised Shiite population were receptive to Khomeini's revolutionary ideology (Siklawi, 2012a). Moreover, the ongoing civil war in Lebanon, the military infrastructure of the PLO, and the post-1982 Israeli occupation of that

country offered the IRGC an exceptional opportunity to directly work towards its strategic and moral goal of liberating Palestine (Ostovar, 2016, p. 11). It should be noted, however, that exporting the revolution to Lebanon was a divisive issue that split the Khomeinist movement between moderates and radicals (pg. 102-110). The radical group eventually had its way and managed to send Iranian volunteers to join the ranks of the PLO and AMAL in the fight against Israel. Yet, disillusionment with AMAL's secular stance and the PLO's impious character prompted radical Iranians and Lebanese to setup an independent fighting group that abided by the principles of the Islamic revolution. Thus, with the help of the IRGC and acquiescence from Syria, an Islamic (Shiite) resistance was established in 1985 and became known as Hezbollah, or the Party of God (Norton, 2009b)

Ideologically, Hezbollah committed to Khomeini's theory of *Wilayat al-Faqih,* which is a form of Islamic governance that advocates "an Islamic state led by a qualified jurisconsult who would ensure that Islamic rulings are adhered to and implemented within the broad outlines and general principles of shari'a" (Mavani, 2013, p. 209). The IRGC provided material support and arranged for religious indoctrination to assist Hezbollah in its recruitment and training of Shiite fighters. With organizational and financial assistance from Iran, Hezbollah became an organic extension of the Islamic revolution, pledging allegiance to Iran's supreme leader and encouraging Shiite militarism (Khashan, 2019b). Hezbollah's growing popularity and exclusive operations posed a threat to Syria's military control over Lebanon and its cooptation of Shiites that had formed the ranks of AMAL and most leftist groups. While Damascus sought cordial relations with the new regime in Tehran, it did not want to jeopardize its posture as the lead Arab defender of the Palestinian cause or allow Hezbollah to provoke Israel into an open warfare. After heavy inter-Shiite fighting in Lebanon, the foreign ministers of Iran and Syria met in Damascus in November 1990 and agreed to a power sharing deal between and through Hezbollah and Amal. At the time, Iran's relationship with Hezbollah was burgeoning, and it viewed the group as a "platform from which it could launch its struggle against the 'evil' represented by the West" (Gharbieh, 2007, p. 71).

Hezbollah's influence over the Shiite community increased on the back of a range of services that it offered, which were funded by Iran (Flanigan and Abdel-Samad 2009). These services include medical care, educational institutions, vocational training, microloans, financial support for injured fighters and family of martyrs (Flanigan and Abdel-Samad, 2009). Over time, the provision of services earned Hezbollah the loyalty of Shiites. Subsequently, Hezbollah amassed great power over the social, political, and security life in Lebanon through its organization and mobilization of a large segment of the Shiite population. This reinforced

Hezbollah's "religio-political identity" and made it a strategic partner to Iran and Syria, leading to a relationship of "interdependence" between the three actors (Saouli, 2018, p. 209).

Saudi-Iran tug of war in Lebanon

In the opening decade after the civil war, the policies of Iran and Saudi Arabia towards Lebanon were non-confrontational, underpinned by a period of rapprochement between the two states (Bahgat, 2000). Riyadh and Tehran had their interests served through utilization of their respective Lebanese clients. Saudi harnessed its strategic relationship with Hariri and his Future Movement to bring economic stability to Lebanon and preserve the power balance in the Levant. Iran, on the other hand, was looking to recuperate from its costly war with Iraq but without abandoning its ideological commitments. To that end, it leveraged Hezbollah and its skirmishes with the IDF as part of its unrelenting attack on imperialism and Israeli occupation. That Iran and Saudi had a common understanding towards Lebanon is supported by the amicable relationship between Rafic Hariri and Hezbollah's General Secretary, Hassan Nasrallah. As one of the attorneys at the Special Tribunal for investigating the death of Hariri observed, "relationship between Prime Minister Hariri and Hassan Nasrallah was special at the personal and political levels. The two men respected one another deeply" (Anon, 2020). Realistically, however, the relationship between the two leaders was conditioned by geopolitical considerations. Israel's disproportionate attacks against Lebanon during the 1990s generated a lot of sympathy and support for the resistance amongst the Lebanese, and Hariri was no exception (Murden, 2000). More importantly, amicable relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran underpinned communal peace in Lebanon. During the 1990s, Iran and Saudi Arabia experienced a period of rapprochement, under the leadership of Iran's reformist president, Mohammad Khatami, and the emergence of Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah (Wastnidge, 2016). This era witnessed reciprocal trips by Khatami and Abdullah to each other's capitals, collaborative engagement in international organizations related to Islamic and oil affairs such as the OIC and OPEC respectively, and the establishment of stronger trade and security ties between the two nations (Mabon and Wastnidge, 2022). Dialogue and cooperation between Riyadh and Tehran encouraged trust between the two states and reduced the need to confront each other's influence in the region, which kept the sectarian balance that was established at Taif in check.

Relations between Saudi and Iran worsened after the US-led War on Terror, which altered the structure of worldwide politics. Following the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the regime in Iran felt threatened by American overture to remake the Middle East (Fraihat, 2020). The conciliatory approach Riyadh and Tehran had towards Lebanon hit a roadblock in 2005 as a

result of the assassination of Rafic Hariri. The Syrian regime and Hezbollah were framed as the primary suspects of the hit on Hariri. Although there is no evidence to suggest that Iran sanctioned or was aware of the plot, Iran was implicated in the crime because of its direct sponsorship of Hezbollah, and close relationship to Syria. Riyadh condemned the killing of Hariri, but did not openly blame any party. Nevertheless, in the context of post-Saddam Iraq, it is not unreasonable to imagine Saudi Arabia worrying about Iran trying to take advantage of the disorder to enlarge its influence in Lebanon. Whilst commemorating Hariri's murder 15 year later, Saudi Arabia's Vice Minister of Defense Prince Khalid bin Salman publicly accuses "Iranian militias" for the killing, a remark that reflects royal perceptions (Aldroubi, 2020). Saudi fears of growing Iranian influence were amplified, after Hezbollah emerged undefeated in the 2006 war against Israel. Hezbollah received great acclamation from people across the Arab and Islamic world for its valor. That Hezbollah had become a formidable paramilitary force and social phenomenon that is loyal to Iran, deeply troubled Saudi Arabia and widened the schism between Tehran and Riyadh (Darwich, 2019).

The Kingdom increasingly perceived Hezbollah as a dangerous proxy of Iran (Anderson and Clarke, 2017). The stronger Hezbollah got, the more it diminished the clout of Riyadh's allies, which threatened Riyadh's posture in Lebanon. This must be seen against the regional backdrop of rising tension between Riyadh and Tehran (Aarts, 2007). In the aftermath of the 2003 US war on Iraq, the de-Bathification of Iraq created a power vacuum that was filled by Shiite groups that were associated with or receiving backing from Iran (Mako, 2019; Terrill, 2012; Takeyh, 2008). Saudi Arabia felt threatened by Iran's interference on the side of Iraqi Shiites, which it calculated could encourage the mobilization of Shiite groups across the region, not least in its oil-rich Eastern province (Nasr, 2006b). Saudi's apprehension was vindicated in May 2008 after Hezbollah took control of Sunni strongholds of west Beirut by force and destroyed Hariri's Future Movement offices. This highly symbolic move signaled that Hezbollah, and by extension Iran, had usurped central power in Lebanon and contained Saudi influence there. Riyadh was witnessing the isolation of two Arab capitals, Baghdad and Beirut, from its sphere of influence. At that point, prospects of rapprochement between Riyadh and Tehran disintegrated, and Lebanon fell in the middle of a bitter rivalry between the two regional powers.

Relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran deteriorated further in the wake of the Arab Uprisings as sectarian provocations proliferated across the region. Authoritarian regimes sought to suppress protests that demanded regime change by, among many methods, stoking sectarian fears (Abdo, 2016a). In Syria, the embattled Assad regime pressed a narrative that it was facing a sectarian jihadist foe (Phillips, 2015a). Assad sought assistance from Iran and its network of

paramilitary actors. Hezbollah troops were fighting in Syria as early as August 2012 (Deeb, 2013b), and they played a crucial role in preempting the fall of the Assad regime (Sullivan, 2014). Hezbollah justified its participation in the Syrian war as defensive move to protect Shiite shrines, as well as prevent *takfiri* terrorism from reaching Lebanon (Isakhan, 2020). Hezbollah's direct involvement in Syria on the side of Assad ran contrary to its proclaimed ethos of resistance against Israel. This antagonized a large segment of the Lebanese population, not least Sunni elites, because it risked an overspill of the conflict from Syria, and because it was perceived as a sectarian alliance (Wahab, 2021; Assi, 2018). Riyadh condemned Hezbollah's intervention in Syria and its endorsement of Houthi attacks on the Kingdom. Riyadh tried to restrain Hezbollah by putting pressure on its Lebanese Sunni ally, Rafic's son Saad Hariri, to confront Hezbollah. When it appeared that Hariri could not use his premiership to restrain Hezbollah, he was abruptly summoned to Riyadh and forced to resign on live television. This insulting move exposed the extent of Riyadh's limit to restrain Hezbollah, and from behind it Iran (Makdisi, 2017a; Shavit and Guzansky, 2017)

Subsequently, Saudi Arabi's sponsorship of Hariri waned, evidenced by the government's non-payment of billions of dollars in contracts to the Saudi Oger conglomerate that Rafic Hariri founded and of which Saad was a beneficiary (Sadler, 2020). Saudi Arabia had a vested interest in limiting Iran and Hezbollah's influence in the country. However, it was becoming clear that Saudi could not mobilize Sunni identity to organize a formidable opposition to Hezbollah. Plus, any military solution had little chance of deterring the battle-hardened Hezbollah. By withdrawing its support from the most preeminent Sunni za'im in Lebanon, the Kingdom signaled its dissatisfaction with the sectarian status quo in Lebanon. The absence of a strong Sunni pole to counter Hezbollah raised fears of totalitarian Shiite domination. This coincided with economic deterioration, which was accelerated by the October 2019 uprisings. Saudi Arabia, which had historically bailed out the Lebanese economy on several occasions, watched from a distance and did not move to rescue Lebanon. The Kingdom saw in Lebanon's self-inflicted financial collapse an opportunity to increase pressure on Hezbollah and its allies (Abu-Nasr *et al.*, 2019). Riyadh, as well as other international donors, refused to bail out Lebanon before the enactment of serious reforms, including the disarmament of Hezbollah. According to Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir, Lebanon is suffering as a result of Hezbollah's activities that are supported by Iran, and Lebanon will only survive or prosper if Hezbollah is disarmed (Reuters, 2017). From that perspective, Iran has military power in Lebanon through Hezbollah, while Saudi has influence in Lebanon through its enormous financial wealth.

The relationship of Iran and towards Lebanon did not always revolve around sectarian identity. That development sprouted during the civil war and was solidified in the post-war period. For decades Saudi Arabia and Iran invested heavily in propping Lebanese sectarian leaders, which reflects their consent to the sectarian power sharing arrangement. The drawback is that their support of sub-state actors contributed to diminishing the power of the central state, and prolonged the sectarian status quo. While Saudi's relationship to Lebanon was shaken following Rafic Hariri's murder, Iran's relationship to Lebanon deepened as a result of Hezbollah's rapid increase in power. In their struggle to balance against each other, Iran and Saudi supported opposing factions, March 8 and March 14, that were spearheaded by Hezbollah and Hariri, respectively.

The point to highlight is that the structural organization of the Lebanese state permits external actors to intervene in Lebanese affairs. While this is useful in times of crisis when Lebanese need external mediators to help them settle their differences, that structure leave the door open for external patrons to intervene whenever and however advances their interests. Lebanon's geopolitical importance for Tehran and Riyadh pushed them to enlarge their influence there, and they did that through mobilizing sectarian identities. In other words, domestic structures within the Lebanese state, and the structure of the Middle East state system are conducive for external actors to counter their rivals in the system by mobilizing sectarian identities, while Lebanese sectarian leaders maneuver to make themselves more beneficial to local and external allies (Mabon, 2023). The more power and popularity that sectarian leaders accumulate, the more crucial, and thus more valuable, they became to regional powers. The opposite is also true. As power of sectarian leaders wanes, they become more easily replaceable, as seen by Sa'd Hariri's recent withdrawal from politics (Chehayeb, 2022).

Agency of religious leaders

Provided that the competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia continues, and Lebanon does not lose its geopolitical and symbolic significance, Lebanon will remain a theatre for power balancing. It is thus important to consider the agency of individual actors to limit the effect of the Iran-Saudi power struggle on sectarianization in Lebanon. In particular, what can Shiite religious leaders do, in their capacity as desectarianization actors, to confront Tehran and Riyadh's sponsoring of the sectarian status quo. Obviously religious leaders cannot force a détente on the two regional powers or influence their foreign policy. Yet, what non-partisan Shiite clergymen can do is help create a pathway for Lebanese Shiites that does not entangle them in the Saudi-Iran power struggle. That is, independent Shiite clergymen can advance

alternative political and religious ideologies that are not wedded to Iran's *Wilayat el Faqih* or subject to the Hezbollah-Amal power structure. The idea is to open space for the flourishing of a Lebanese Shiite identity that is indigenous (not hinged to Iranian dogma), and independent (not caught up in the clientelist dealings of the sectarian system). This is what Sheikh Mohammed (Shiite from South Lebanon) meant when he said "we must not let our beliefs and values be dictated by external powers or political agendas. We have a rich history filled with respected Lebanese ulema and scholars that we can go to for theological foundations" (interview 6). As another sheikh explained, "Jabal Amel stood for centuries as a beacon for Shiite Islam, and as the training ground for many ulema. We have a huge heritage that we can tap into (Interviewee 2). What the sheikh was implying is that Lebanese Shiites have deep and local roots, which enables them to establish, or more accurately, re-establish, South Lebanon as a center for theological learning, which reduce dependence on and influence of Qum and Najaf.

By developing a theological framework for Shiite identity that is independent of Iran's Wilayat el Faqih and the Hezbollah-Amal power structure, these leaders can create an alternative vision that is rooted in Lebanon's unique history and context. This can help to counterbalance the influence of external powers and foster a sense of agency and self-determination within the Shiite community. In other words, one way to neutralize the effect of the Saudi-Iran competition on sectarianism in Lebanon is by cultivating confessional communities and religious identities that are not so amenable to the sectarian discourse of Riyadh or Tehran. Religious leaders can encourage dialogue and collaboration within their own faith communities to help build a more inclusive and diverse understanding of religious identities, which can in turn make these communities less susceptible to the divisive narratives advanced by Riyadh and Tehran.

Indeed, there's a nascent but growing Shiite community in Lebanon that does not pledge fealty to Hezbollah or Iran (Interview 2). They are not anti-Iran nor pro-Saudi. They simply do not want to identify with the dichotomy that has been imposed on Lebanon by the regional power's clients. There is a widening recognition that "politics of the [sectarian] parties damage the country because it is exclusionary and divisive, and when it appears conciliatory it is invariably at the expense of the people" (Interview 2). Traditional parties in Lebanon cannot be considered totally independent (Interviewee 1,2,5,11,12). They rely to a large degree on ideological framing and financial backing from their external patrons. From that perspective, creating and endorsing political projects that are not loyal or subordinate to Iran or Saudi Arabia help circumvent one of the main regional impediments to desectarianization. And this is where independent Shiite religious leaders and their cultivation can play a pivotal role.

The expansion of an independent Shiite community requires the development of an intellectual framework that allows people to maintain their Shiite rootedness but at the same time decouples them from Iran and Hezbollah's political projects. "Many people (i.e., Shiites) are against the Shiite duo (i.e. Hezbollah and Amal). They reject their characterization of Shiite identity. People want to distance themselves from the two parties, but they do not want to alienate themselves. Hezbollah and Amal provide the main narrative of what it means to be a Lebanese Shiite. It is difficult to challenge that without any backlash from your neighbors and relatives" (Interview 14). The challenge is real, but not insurmountable. Independent Shiite clergymen can promote a Shiite identity that is rooted in historical Shiite legacy. This would not be a fictitious identity. For centuries, Lebanon's Jabil Amil (South Lebanon) was a major center of learning for Shiite scholars, and a hub for training and sending Shiite teachers throughout the Islamic world (Shanahan, 2011). For example, Grand Ayatollahs Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah promoted a more inclusive and less sectarian vision of Shi'a Islam. Fadlallah challenged traditional sectarian narratives and advocated for a more politically engaged Shi'a community that is focused on issues of social justice and political reform rather than sectarian identity (Baroudi, 2013). Moreover, Jabil Amel has a rich history of resisting foreign occupations by words and deeds (Siklawi, 2014). Notable Jabil Amel scholars had also contributed to Shiite wide debates on reforming the office of the *Marja'iyya* (rank of legal exemplar among Twelver Shiites) (Abisaab, 2009). In other words, independent Shiite religious leaders can find in their Lebanese context the elements needed to advance a Shiite identity that is not predicated on Iranian doctrine and thus less susceptible to Iranian meddling.

It is expected that Hezbollah and Amal will undermine any public campaign to construct a Shiite self-awareness that does not conform to their postulates. Still, religious leaders must endeavor to challenge the mainstream narrative incrementally. One way to do that is through establishing more *hewza*s (Shiite seminaries; law colleges) in Lebanon to offer young men nuanced religious training locally. The trend over the last two decades has been to see students go to Qum or Najaf for religious training. Hezbollah allegedly controlled who receives admission to study abroad (Al-Ajami, 2021). If true, this could be interpreted as a move by Hezbollah to control the evolution of Shiite identity; those loyal to Hezbollah are granted acceptance and given a chance to earn their credibility from one of the prestigious institutions, while those not espoused to Hezbollah's ideology are forbidden from earning a religious recognition that could later be leveraged to challenge Hezbollah's authority.

At any rate, establishing local and sustainable *hewza*s is one way that religious leaders can exercise their agency. The establishment of independent *hewzas* can be seen as a form of

resistance to the sectarian discourse that emerges from traditional centers of religious learning in Qum and Najaf. By establishing their own centers for religious training, independent religious leaders are able to provide a more diverse range of religious teachings and interpretations, which can help to promote a more inclusive and less sectarian vision of Shiite Islam. Jabal Amel has a rich history of *hewza*s that graduated some of the leading Shiite scholars at a time when the context was hostile to Shiites (Abisaab, 1999). Contemporary religious leaders can find inspiration in that and learn from the experience of their predecessors how to navigate unsupportive environments.

4.2 Anti-Israel Axis

When exploring desectarianization in Lebanon, another key issue to consider is relations and attitudes towards the state of Israel. The issue of Israel is central to ongoing conflicts and sectarianization in Lebanon. Israel is a small but highly controversial country that has polarized Middle East politics since its establishment in 1948. The establishment of Israel as a homeland for the Jewish people was supported by the United Nations, but it was vehemently opposed by Arab regimes, which saw it as an illegitimate colonialist project that was taking land from the Palestinians (Khalidi, 2020). The establishment of Israel led to a series of wars between Israel and its Arab neighbors, including the 1948 Arab Israeli War, the 1956 Suez Crisis, the 1967 Six-Day War, and the 1973 Yom Kippur War. These wars were resulted in significant territorial gains for Israel, including the capture of the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Sinai Peninsula, and Golan Heights.

The ongoing conflict between Israel and its Arab neighbors creates structures that polarize Middle Eastern societies, which facilitates the process of sectarianization. For starters, the conflict led to the formation of two axes: one consisting of countries that support Israel, such as the United States and some European countries, and another consisting of states and non-state actors that oppose Israel, such as Iran, Syria, Hamas. This division has been fueled by political, economic, and military alliances, as well as religious and ideological differences (Anderson, 2020), which led to the emergence of radical groups such as Hamas, Hezbollah, and Islamic Jihad. These groups have contributed to the radicalization of politics in the region by launching violent attacks and promoting extreme views against Israel. As more countries in the Middle East shift alliances and normalize relations with Israel, members of the resistance axis perceive this as a recalibration of the regional order and a threat to their coalition (Fulton and Yellinek, 2021). As a response, anti-Israel groups retaliate to reassert their position and preserve the status quo.

They do that by different means, including sectarianization, which flares up relations between sectarian communities in countries with religious diversities, like Lebanon.

Furthermore, conflict with Israel led to the displacement of millions of Palestinians, who have become refugees and have been denied basic human rights, such as the right to return to their homes and lands (Pappé, 2006). This created anger among Palestinians and has fueled anti-Israel sentiment amongst neighboring Arabs and Muslims. Countries bordering Palestine received most Palestinian refugees. As Palestinian groups sought to liberate their homeland from neighboring Arab territory, they clashed with ruling authorities who felt threatened by the growing might of the Palestinian resistance movement. The ongoing plight of Palestinian refugees and failure to establish peace between Israel and countries of the Middle East, makes relations with Israel a contentious issue that animates regional dynamics and conditions regime-society relations (Barnett, 1998).

Lebanon was drawn into direct conflict with Israel thanks to a shared border that it has with Palestine. While Lebanon was involuntarily implicated in the war, it emerged as a belligerent and a key member of the resistance axis. This section will show how regional order in the Middle East, conditioned by Israeli aggression and anti-Israeli sentiments, creates a structure of insecurity in Lebanon. This insecurity structure acts an enabling condition for the proliferation of sectarianization moves, which ultimately intensifies insecurity and sectarianization in a vicious cycle (Del Sarto, 2021). Thus, desectarianization effort, and the capacity of religious leaders to contribute to that, must contend with structural issues born out of Israel's occupation of Palestine, and complexity arising from Israel as Jewish ethno-religious state.

Lebanon as a battleground

Lebanon shares its southern border with Palestine. After the end of the British mandate in Palestine in 1948, the state of Israel, backed by international powers, immediately declared its establishment on Palestinian territories. As a result, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were forced out of their homes, and took refuge in neighboring Arab states, including Lebanon. The fate of Palestine galvanized Arabs en masse. Arab publics sympathized with the dispossession of the Palestinians, while Arab governments made several attempts to remedy the situation (Khalidi, 2020). Israel, however, managed to fortify its position through military conquests and diplomatic maneuvering. Nonetheless, avenging Palestinians and restoring refugees to their homeland remained a soft spot for majority of Arabs. Arab rulers manipulated the plight of Palestinians to boost their legitimacy domestically and compete for leadership

regionally (Barnett, 1998; Brynen, 1991; Kazziha, 1985). The Israel-Palestine conflict spawned several movements that sought to resolve the crisis, often through conflicting approaches and competing means, which deepened divisions in neighboring states.

In Lebanon, the question of how to deal with the ramifications of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict aggravated sectarian tension. Broadly speaking, Christians who held the reins of power felt most threatened by the influx of Palestinian refugees. Wealthy and learned Palestinians entered the Lebanese marketplace with big capital and an outsider's determination to survive. Their rapid success in Lebanon's liberal economy unsettled the commercial/financial oligarchy which was mainly composed of Christian families (Tarabulsi, 2012, p. 115). Moreover, Christians had a grave concern about the possible naturalization of Palestinians. As Palestinians were mostly Sunni by confession, granting them Lebanese citizenship would alter the delicate sectarian balance in favor of Muslims, which Christians feared could invoke a reformulation of the power sharing formula that had privileged them. Even if Palestinians could not get a permanent or legal status in Lebanon, Christians, as well as other communities, opposed Palestinian presence because it had severe destabilizing effects on demographic factors (El Khazen, 1997).

After the Arab-Israel war in 1967, the Palestinian resistance movement was forced to launch its operations from exile (Sayigh, 1992). The Cairo Agreement in 1969 granted the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) official recognition and authority to run its operations from Lebano (Brynen, 1989). This involved launching attacks against Israel from South Lebanon, as well as training and recruiting fighters, including many Lebanese Muslim volunteers. Palestinians' rapid rise in military and political power established the PLO as a state within the Lebanese state (Brynen, 1990). Palestinians violated Lebanon's sovereignty by breaking Lebanese laws without being brought to justice and by imposing their own security in areas under their control. They were able to do that by bearing arms and setting up dispersed check points. From time to time, Palestinian patrols interrogated Lebanese and non-Lebanese citizens on the true or false pretext of having posed a threat to the Palestinian revolution (Joumblatt, 1982).

This antagonized the Maronite-dominated central government and the army. Repeated Israeli invasions of South Lebanon aimed to crush armed resistance, but also had the effect of exploiting the struggle between the PLO and right-wing ruling groups (i.e. Christians) over Lebanese sovereignty. The civil war, which was triggered by the Phalangist retaliation on a bus loaded with Palestinians, exasperated the security situation. During the first years of the war,

Christians groups had the upper hand, largely due to direct support from the Assad regime that wanted to put a check on the rising power of the PLO. Still, the PLO did not cease its attacks on Israel, which ultimately provoked the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) to invade Lebanon again in 1982 and besiege Western Beirut. This invasion, dubbed "Peace for Galilee", was coordinated with the Phalange militia who had planned to take control of Eastern Beirut, and force the election of Maronite charismatic leader Bashir Gemayel as president of Lebanon (Parkinson, 2007). The new president would then presumably terminate the PLO, sign a peace treaty with Israel, and restore Western/Christian character of Lebanon (Collins, 1983). Gemayel, however, was assassinated few months after the Israeli invasion, and the plan was foiled. In the aftermath, fear and suspicion between Christians and Muslims solidified after Christian militias committed a massacre against Palestinians, and the news of cooperation between the Phalangist and Israel proliferated. Christian elites framed their struggle to preserve their political power as an existential fight for Christians' presence in Lebanon, and more broadly the Middle East. By conspiring with the Zionist regime, they effectively securitized their Muslim co-citizens.

While all PLO fighters and leaders were eventually evicted from Lebanon, and Israeli forces retreated to the South Lebanon security belt, conflict with Israel continued. The Palestinian question remained unresolved, and Israel still occupied vast swathes of Lebanese countryside. Leading the armed resistance at that point were no longer Palestinian freedom fighters, but Lebanese citizens that had witnessed first-hand the brunt of Israeli oppression (Meier, 2015). Given its adjacency to Israel, South Lebanon experienced most of the destruction and humiliation wreaked by the Israeli war machine. Unsurprisingly then, inhabitant of South Lebanon, which are overwhelmingly Shiite by confession, constituted the ranks of the burgeoning Lebanese resistance. It was Imam Musa Sadr who organized and launched the Lebanese Resistance Brigades, also known by the Arabic acronym Amal (Ajami, 2012b). Sadr conceived Amal as the military wing of the Movement of the Dispossessed, which he launched a decade earlier to represent Shiite rights (Norton, 1987b). Amal absorbed many of the Lebanese Shiites from PLO ranks, and fought against Palestinians for control of the south and the charge against Israel. With help from the Syrian regime, Amal gradually increased in prominence, and more forcefully after the PLO's departure from Lebanon. This militarization of Lebanon's Shiites, after a long history of marginalization and disenfranchisement, revitalized Shiite identity and emphasized intra-sectarian solidarity (Saad-Ghoryaeb, 2003). Israel's security concerns were amplified after it engendered a Lebanese resistance movement. That this movement had an overwhelming Shiite character prompted Israel to enforce security in the areas it occupied through a Christian-led surrogate (Anon, 2000). This widened the rift between Christians and

Muslims, and intensified sectarianization. Suspicious and distrust between sectarian communities intensified after resistance against Israel had more a pronounced Islamic identity.

Between 1948 and 1970, Israel caused a major refugee crisis that undermined Lebanon's sovereignty and deepened divisions between the country's confessional communities. In the absence of a strong national army, sectarian militias proliferated to defend their zones of influence from Israeli aggression or from other sectarian groups. Although Lebanese hostility towards Israel predated the Islamic Revolution, it was manifested in extreme ways following the emergence of Hezbollah on the scene. As part of its mission to expand the revolution, Iran founded Hezbollah as an Islamic resistance movement between 1982 and 1985. The political environment in Lebanon was receptive for that considering that Israel's occupation of West Beirut radicalized many Lebanese, including Shiite residents of Beirut's southern district and the Beqaa, who opposed negotiating any settlements with Israel. This came at a time when the PLO's presence was extirpated, and Amal was more interested in winning domestic politics than resisting Israel (Nir, 2011). It is worth mentioning that Amal's religious irreverence led to a split in the movement and the establishment of a more zealous subgroup (Avon *et al.*, 2012). From that context, Hezbollah arose as an Islamic (Shiite) resistance that conformed to the doctrines and ideology of the supreme leader in Iran. This development bridged Shiite identity in Lebanon with external and revolutionary forces. Iran's creation of Hezbollah linked sectarian identity with regional political projects.

Hezbollah emerged as an outcome of a transnational Shiite identity reawakening. This meant that the goals and objective of the group reached beyond domestic Lebanese politics. Consequently, Hezbollah's entry on the Lebanese stage served to internationalize the Lebanese crisis further. While resistance to Israeli occupation of South Lebanon constituted Hezbollah's *modus opernadi*, Saad-Ghorayeb (2002) highlights that Hezbollah's opposition to Israel stem from a wider struggle. That is, Hezbollah has an existential conflict with Israel because the latter occupies historic Palestine and desecrates Jerusalem, the heart of the Arab and Muslim world. In other words, even if Israel withdraws from all Lebanese territories, Hezbollah will maintain its antipathy for Israel, and will not feel compelled to recognize the legitimacy of the Israeli state (pg. 134) Israel is founded on the political ideology of Zionism, which Hezbollah perceives as an aggressive expansionist project that seeks to supplant Arab and Muslim identity (pg. 140). For Hezbollah, Zionism is the dominant worldview in Israel and that worldview negatively controls Israeli governments. Therefore, Hezbollah perceives Israel as an existential threat to Lebanon and the wider Islamic Umma. Israel is quintessentially harmful and will never allow its neighbors to live in peace (pg. 162). Hezbollah's posture towards Israel is necessary for its ideology of

resistance. From that perspective, not only is there no prospect of rapprochement with Israel, eradicating the "Zionist entity", as Hezbollah refers to it, is the only way to avoid being eradicated by it.

Hezbollah's political and ideological antagonism towards Israel undergirds sectarianism in Lebanon. Hezbollah's religio-political doctrine steeps Shiite identity in an resisting oppression, which manifests itself in an existential struggle against Israel. This has the effect of undermining the authority of the Lebanese state and raising the fears of people that do not see eye to eye with Hezbollah. By insisting on fighting Israel at any cost, anywhere, and under any conditions, Hezbollah implicates Lebanon in a regional power struggle and opens the possibility of turning Lebanon into a theater of war. While Shiites affiliated with Hezbollah may accept the risk that underlies such posturing, the same cannot be said about other confessional communities that have different views on how to counter Israeli threats. For example, Al-Tayyaer, which is one of the biggest Christian parties and a close ally of Hezbollah has no ideological problem with Israel; Lebanese Foreign Minister Gibran Bassil said in an interview: "Israel has the right to safety. All we care about is for people to recognize one another" (Al Arabiya, 2017). And so, by irrevocably tying its existence and future to the annihilation of an external actor, Hezbollah drags Lebanon into a regional conflict where its co-citizens may not want to go. By acting independently, Hezbollah undercuts the authority of the Lebanese government, and raises the ante for communities that do not share Hezbollah's ideology. Given the sectarian divisions in the country, Hezbollah invariably provokes the distrust of other sectarian groups, and inevitably raises sectarian tension.

Hezbollah's attitude towards Israel, and Israel's refusal to offer any concessions creates an open hostility structure that agitates anti-Israeli sentiments and demonize actors that are tolerant of normalizing relations with Israel. When this is mapped on top of competition between sectarian communities in Lebanon, it deepens inter-communal distrust and complicates the process of desectarianization.

Anti-Israel Culture

Lebanon suffered tremendously because of Israeli aggression over several decades. Formally, the two states are still at war with each other, and some parts of South Lebanon remain occupied by Israel, though the ownership of those territories is disputed and could be considered Syrian, not Lebanese (Kaufman, 2002). Lebanese law forbids travel to or communication with Israel. Any interaction with the enemy state, outside military-led engagement, is considered treason and punishable by law. Despite official and popular hostility

towards Israel, the magnitude of aversion towards Israel varies. Not all Lebanese share Hezbollah's deep-seated aversion towards Israel. In other words, not all Lebanese wish for the eradication of Israel.

While some of the tolerant positions towards Israel originate from a willingness to end strife, others are driven by pragmatism. Israeli war machine indeed wreaked havoc on Lebanon and caused great losses, but so did other nations and states. In the 1960s and 1970s, Palestinian freedom fighters undermined the sovereignty of the Lebanese state because of their military operations to liberate Palestine from Lebanon. This prompted Maronite elites, who were in the power at the time, to solicit the help of Syria to crush the PLO (Hinnebusch, 1986). In response, Syria sent thousands of troops that helped stabilize the country and restore the supremacy of Christians. Subsequently, Syria found it geostrategic to maintain troops in Lebanon and accordingly launched a massive military incursion into Lebanese territory (Lawson, 1984). This, however, angered Maronite leadership. Tension between Maronite leadership and the Syrian regime intensified and eventually turned to open conflict. At that point, Maronites were looking for assistance to terminate the PLO completely and drive the Syrians out of Lebanon. In an adaptation of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend", Maronite leader, Bashir Gemayel, sought assistance from Israel to drive out Palestinians and neutralize Syria, but he was killed. The point to highlight here is that Lebanese disagree on who or what poses the biggest threat to Lebanon. In particular, Syria, due to its history of biased intervention in Lebanon, is generally viewed with suspicion by many Christians, Sunnis and Druze. Yet by declaring that Israel is the root evil in the region, and thus the primary threat to confront, Hezbollah effectively drew a friend-foe spectrum for Lebanon that does not take into consideration the history and context of other communities. And by framing its enmity to Israel and its friendliness to anti-Israeli actors in normative terms, it distances itself from its co-citizens and fans the flames of sectarianism.

South Lebanon incurred more destruction than the rest of the country on the hands of Israeli forces. That is because most attacks were launched from South Lebanon against settlements in the north of Israel. Israel retaliated by bombarding South Lebanon and levelling many villages, causing a massive exodus of Palestinian refugees and Lebanese citizens northward. Nonetheless, attacks against Israel persisted. To neutralize threats against its northern border, Israel eventually sought to establish a security zone in South Lebanon (Sheffer and Barak, 2010). In the process of establishing and administering that security zone, the IDF wreaked havoc on inhabitants of the South, regularly employing collective punishment against entire families for suspected acts committed by their relatives. A report by the Jerusalem-based B'Tselem human rights watchdog documents Israeli violations against Lebanese civilians in South

Lebanon (Lein, 2000). The report documents how the IDF, directly or indirectly through its proxy South Lebanon Army (SLA), committed atrocious acts that devastated the South and its residents. The main conspicuous violations described in the report include: use of severe torture against detainees during their interrogation, abduction of individuals and holding them as hostages in Israeli prisons, expulsion of forcible transfer of residents, arbitrary restrictions on freedom of movement, forced conscription of residents, including minors, into the SLA, indiscriminate firing during military attacks leading to the death of hundreds of civilians, and unjustifiable killing of civilians by use of weapons prohibited by the laws of war (pg. 91). The physical and psychological damage caused by Israel against South Lebanon severely antagonized the region's inhabitants, which are overwhelmingly Shiite. It is thus logical to posit that Shiites harbored more antagonism to Israel than the other Lebanese faith communities.

There is no reason to believe that Israel targeted Shiites specifically in the South. The Druze-dominated village of Hasbayyah was not spared Israeli aggression and many of its residents were expelled from their homes because of their opposition to Israeli occupation. Although an argument can be made that the Christian-dominated village of Marjayoun did not feel the heavy hand of Israeli forces because it served as the headquarters of the SLA, this does not mean that Shiites were discriminated against. Rather, it indicates that some Christians willingly cooperated with the IDF. Shiites historically settled in large numbers in the Jabal Amel area of South Lebanon, and that put them in the crossfire between the Israeli forces and Palestinian and leftist militias. Shiites initially fought on the side of the Palestinians, but circumstances later changed, and they fought against Palestinian armed groups, mostly under the banner of Amal. At that time, Shiite hostility towards Israel did not cease, but it was overshadowed by hostility towards Palestinian fighting groups (Siklawi, 2012b). By the end of "the war of the camps" (1985-1987) between Amal and Palestinian factions, 452 Palestinians were killed, 861 wounded and between 32,000 and 144,000 displaced (Sayigh, 1997b, p. 495).

To Shiites in Amal, Israel did not stop being the enemy, but in a manner similar to how most Maronites felt towards the Syrian regime a decade earlier, Amal revised its strategy. It toned down its anti-Israel rhetoric in order to confront a more immediate threat from the PLO. Following the Israeli invasion in 1982, Amal's leader Nabeeh Berri joined the National Salvation Committee, which was a presidential initiative that brought key sectarian leaders to form a consensus vis-a-vis Israeli invasion (Nir, 2011). That the National Salvation Committee was backed by the US and was understood to be geared towards a peace deal with Israel demonstrates how enemies are not static but are chosen by actors in accordance with what serves their respective interests. It was strategic for Amal at the time to end Palestinian military

activity in Lebanon, and for that it was willing to put aside its original hostility towards Israel and join other Lebanese leaders that were prepared to negotiate a peace treaty with Israel. Berri later objected to a draft peace settlement with Israel, but the damage to Shiite solidarity was done already. A group of conservative Shiites led by Berri's deputy, Hussein al-Musawi, split from Amal and formed Islamic Amal, which constituted the nucleus of Hezbollah.

Hostility between Amal and Hezbollah evolved from ideological posturing to violent confrontations following the dissolution of the PLO. Hezbollah occupied key strategic locations in Beirut and South Lebanon that were vacated by Palestinian fighters. This unsettled Amal, which was trying to consolidate its power in those areas after it had paid heavy casualties to achieve that. The leadership of Amal and Hezbollah had opposing views over the future of Lebanon, and the role Shiites play in bringing that vision to reality. At the heart of the matter was the doctrine of vilayet el-faqih advanced by Khomeini. Summarily, the doctrine assigns chief executive power over the Muslim community to a leading *faqih:* a jurisprudent of Islamic law (Mavani, 2011). The faqih has ultimate authority in governance, administration, and execution of the law, and to him Muslims owe the utmost loyalty (Rizvi, 2012). From the outset, Hezbollah pledged allegiance to vilayet el-faqih and the supreme leader in Iran, even though it modified its understanding of the concept as the movement grew and its context was changing (Wimberly, 2015). This resulted in material and ideological support from Iran.

By contrast, Amal was a secular resistance movement seeking to defend Shiite villagers and advance their political status in the Lebanese system. Unlike Hezbollah, it accepted consociationalism in Lebanon and had no intention of replacing the existing regime with an Islamic one. It received material support from Damascus, but was not bound by a transnational ideology with Syria. Given their different origins and trajectories, Amal and Hezbollah fought over confronting Israel and over co-optation of the Shiite community. The different visions for Lebanon that the two groups espoused pitted them against each other. This was underpinned by an ambivalent relationship between Syria and Iran over influence in Lebanon (Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, 1997, pp. 123–138). With Iran seeking to mobilize Lebanese Shiites, Syria perceived Iran to be encroaching on its traditional sphere of influence. Bloody conflicts between Amal and Hezbollah (1988-1989) cost the lives of 2500 people, reflected a wider geopolitical struggle (Mroue, 2020). Hostility between the Shiite brothers did not end until a multilateral agreement was reached between Amal, Hezbollah, Syria and Iran (Hinnebusch, 1998b; El-Husseini and Crocker, 2012). As it later transpired, the agreement reserved armed resistance against Israeli occupation to Hezbollah, while Amal focused on championing domestic politics.

By allowing Hezbollah to lead the charge against the occupation, armed resistance against Israel became infused with religious undertones. Hezbollah's resistance and recruitment strategy hinges on Islamic concepts, such as *Jihad* and *Umma*. Hezbollah situated its fight against Israel in pan-Islamism, not Arabism or nationalism, where the ultimate goal of defeating Zionism is the restoration of Jerusalem as a Muslim epicenter (Rabasa *et al.*, 2006). This continues to be the case as Nasrallah frequently reminds his audience that the day is soon coming when they shall pray in Jerusalem (Haidar, 2020, Anon, 2014, Anon, 2021). Although Hezbollah has been constantly adapting and evolving for the duration of its existence, it never abandoned its Islamic roots (Gabrielsen, 2014). It receives assistance from the secular Baath regime in Syria, but its fighters are indoctrinated with teachings of the Islamic Revolution.

Following the demarcation for roles between Amal and Hezbollah, the latter had a monopoly on armed resistance against Israel. This enabled Hezbollah to shape the mainstream discourse on the struggle against Israel, and fame it within its ideological framework. Hezbollah was in an ideal position to do that for while Beirut was recovering from the civil war, South Lebanon remined occupied, and it was Hezbollah fighters that retaliated against Lebanon’s enemy. The Lebanese army had been dissolved during the civil war, and when it was reestablished, Syria cultivated it into a subservient pro-Syrian institution (Nerguizian, 2018). Hezbollah’s credibility as a paramilitary group and anti-Israel propaganda machine increased substantially after it forced the IDF to withdraw from Lebanon in 2000. By liberating Lebanese territories from Israeli forces, it proved that its resistance is legitimate, and its anti-Israel rhetoric is trustworthy. This became more pronounced after Hezbollah emerged undefeated from the July 2006 war with Israel. Having imposed an exceptional strategy of mutual deterrence against Israel, Hezbollah earned additional leverage over molding anti-Israel public opinion in Lebanon, and beyond. Hezbollah accumulated immense soft power over constructing Arab and Muslim perception of Israel. It fiercely protects that power by censuring non-hostile treatment of Israel, and by charging it proponents with soft normalization (Nilsson, 2020b).

While Hezbollah refrains from directly couching its battles and victories against Israel in sectarian terms, the group’s Shiite identity and unwavering position on not normalizing relations with Israel (Al Manar, 2020) establishes a sectarian link that complicates the process of desectarianization in Lebanon. Hezbollah cannot compromise on its enmity towards Israel. Resistance is the main pillar of its existence and the glue that binds the Lebanese Shiite community, not least Hezbollah’s constituents (Nilsson, 2020b). Hezbollah’s normalization of resistance, and the establishment of a dynamic resistance society (*mujtama’ al-muqawama*) convolutes the prerogatives of Shiites in Lebanon’s consociational system of governance. By

grounding Islamic resistance in Shiite ideology and tying it to a larger geopolitical project, Hezbollah effectively grants its community extra-national privileges. This has drastic consequences for national unity and for desectarianization because it raises the fears and suspicion of groups that oppose Hezbollah's response to Israeli threats.

Hezbollah's refusal to negotiate or failure to reach an agreement with its countrymen on who Lebanon's friends and enemies are, and how to deal with them, creates a fundamental division between citizens. In that context, sectarian leaders draw on sectarian identities to bolster their position in the face of each other. This agitates sectarian tension, and hardens division between sectarian communities, which ultimately reinforces sectarianism. Furthermore, by embedding opposition to Israel in Shiite ideology, Hezbollah opens itself and its national context to regional and international meddling that widens sectarian cleavages and increases inter-communal tension. As a matter of fact, this has been the case since 2013 after Hezbollah opted to intervene in the Syrian war. By going to Syria to prevent the collapse of its ally, the Assad regime, Hezbollah acted against the Lebanese government's adopted policy of disassociation (Tınas and Tür, 2021). While Hezbollah returned from Syria triumphant, its image as the underdog championing the cause of the downtrodden was irrevocably changed. Hezbollah's status was elevated to a formidable regional actor in the anti-imperial resistance axis. Predictably, this raised Sunni, Druze and Christian fears of a Shiite/Hezbollah takeover of Lebanon. It also isolated non-Shiite supporters of Hezbollah, most notably the Maronite-led Free Patriotic Movement. From that perspective, Hezbollah faces a security dilemma in a sectarian context.

Agency of religious leaders

In the last three decades, Hezbollah took charge of defending Lebanon's southern flank, and managed to force a formula of mutual military deterrence against Israel (Kalout, 2015). The fact that Hezbollah, a non-state actor, has achieved this indicates that Lebanon's state institutions, in this case the army, are fragile or weak. The Lebanese army may be cooperating with or tolerating Hezbollah's military activities to some extent, but considering that the army is not showing increasing responsibility to protect Lebanon's borders suggests that there are forces that are impeding the army from performing its duty. This includes external providers of military arms, and may also include internal actors that do not want to see a strong and well equipped army obviate the need for Hezbollah. At any rate, it is important not to reduce confrontation of Israel to a private Hezbollah activity. Lebanon has been at a state of war with Israel since 1978, when Israeli forces invaded Lebanese territory in Operation Litani (Hussain,

2007). Since then, Israel repeatedly violated Lebanon's sovereignty and continues to do so. Lebanon's conflict with Israel predates the emergence of Hezbollah. It follows then that the war with Israel is a matter that concerns the entire nation of Lebanon, not just Hezbollah. Indeed, Israel holds the Lebanese government responsible for allowing rockets be launched from Lebanon (Harkov, 2021).

Enmity towards Israel is not confined to Hezbollah members or Shiites more broadly. Data from the 2021 Arab Barometer polls indicate that "only one-in-five Lebanese favor the peace agreements between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain, respectively, while just 14 percent favor the peace deal with Morocco" (Arab Barometer VI, 2021). In other words, 80 per cent of Lebanese do not support normalization with Israel; this presumably includes prospects of Lebanese normalization with Israel. What is notable is the finding that Lebanon's "Christian population is significantly more supportive of the Abraham Accords than the Muslim population (45 percent vs. 3 percent) (Arab Barometer VI, 2021). This is not all that surprising as it affirms previously held attitude by Christians towards Israel (Haddad, 2002a). The point is that while the majority of Lebanese perceive Israel as an enemy, there are divergent ways to deal with that enemy.

There are nuances when it comes to framing Israel as an enemy, which influence the nature of various Lebanese responses. For instance, in framing Israel as "pure evil", a "cancerous cell", and a "violator of Arab, Muslim and Christians rights" (Nasrallah, 2020), Hassan Nasrallah securitizes Israel and aims to eliminate it as a response. By contrast, framing Israel as a threat to national security (and not more than that) would generate a different strategic response. Similarly, the extent to which Lebanese actors frame Israel as a rational or irrational foe determines the degree to which diplomacy is sought to end hostility between the two states. In the current context of Lebanon, besides maintaining a balance of military power, Hezbollah's near-total control of the anti-Israel narrative and closely linking it to Shiite identity creates a structure that reinforces sectarianism by espousing a sense of shared struggle among Shiites. While not all people who hold anti-Israel views are necessarily motivated by sectarian mobilization, it is important to recognize that any desectarianization effort in Lebanon must contend with Hezbollah's power over constructing the anti-Israel narrative and how that entrenches sectarianism.

This is where Shiite religious leaders can play an instrumental role. Shiite ulema in Lebanon have a rich legacy of opposing Israeli occupation. Notable ulema include Sayyid Abdel Hussein Sharaf el-Deen, Imam Musa Sadr, Sayyid Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah, and Sheikh

Mohammed Mehdi Shams el-Deen. These ulema were instrumental in mobilizing resistance against Israel (Haider, 2000; Saleh, 2017a; Chamseddine, n.d.). In doing so, they constructed the image of Lebanese Shiite ulema as staunch opponents of Israel. Because of such ulema, resistance against Israel figures prominently in the collective and individual identity of Lebanese Shiites. This does not necessarily mean that all Lebanese Shiite ulema, past or present, share the same vehemence against Israel or agree on the nature of resistance against Israel. Instead, what can be said is that contemporary Shiite religious leaders are part of a group that is recognized for their opposition to Israel. As interviewee 10 explained "resistance against Israel is part of our core identity. We have fought against the Israelis for decades. They are the aggressors. They invade our lands and terrorize our people. How can we remain silent in the face of this oppression". Interviewee 11 concurred, "I teach my kids to speak the truth and stand for justice at any cost. This manifests itself in opposing the Israeli expansionist project". This legacy of Shiite resistance against Israel is tremendously valuable non-partisan Shiite clergymen because it enlarges their agency as individuals in that it provides them a generally trustworthy platform for contributing to the framing of Israel. Moreover, being part of the religious leaders class grants non-partisan clerics a measure of immunity against charges of treason that might be levelled at them by more radical actors. This is very useful in the Lebanese context where Hezbollah undermines anyone that does not conform to its brand of resistance against Israel (Amin, 2018; Tufayli, 2021).

From that vantage point, non-partisan ulema can leverage their unique position to help reconstruct Shiite identity, as alluded to earlier, but also to help reconceptualize resistance against Israel. Hezbollah's Islamic resistance is just one way to end Israeli occupation and aggression. The point is not for Shiite religious leaders to engage in geopolitical and regional security debates on how to confront Israel. Rather, the task at hand is for independent ulema to deconstruct sectarian narratives that sow hostility and divisions between Lebanese. Since that is intertwined with resistance against Israel, desectarianization religious leaders must be prepared to interact with those dynamics. The credibility that ulema generally enjoy as ardent supporters of the resistance enable non-partisan ones to call out sectarianization moves carried out by Hezbollah and Amal, and at the same time deflect charges of colluding against the resistance, which would hurt their credibility. In the words of one of the interviewed Shiite sheikhs, "I condemn and reject Israeli occupation and aggression as much as I condemn and reject sectarianism. But when you see that resistance against Israel is deployed in ways that agitate sectarianism, we have to re-examine our approach. Opposing Israel should unite the country, not fragment it" (Interview 3). It requires great bravery for any individual, but especially

a Shiite, to publicly critique the resistance in Lebanon. However, only Shiites with unquestionable commitment to Shiite identity, such as independent ulema, can faithfully lead that introspection for the sake of circumventing the structural insecurity created by the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Conclusion

Sectarianism in Lebanon is complicated by be geopolitical factors. Power struggles between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and between Israel and its neighbors produce structures of hostility that encourage and enable the mobilization of sectarian identities in the Middle East. The struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran for supremacy in the region involves balancing against each other by various means, including the use of sectarian rhetoric and support of groups that primarily identify by their sectarian orientations. This geopolitical context conditions relations between sectarian groups in Lebanon. Iran's formation and backing of Hezbollah as an armed group undermines Lebanon's sovereignty and enlarges Iranian influence in Lebanon. As Hezbollah's military power increases and its involvement in other countries intensifies, this raises security fears of non-Shiite groups who perceive Hezbollah as a proxy agent of Iran. Similarly, Saudi's explicit support of Hariri and other Sunni notables privileged Sunnis over other groups, which raises the suspicion of groups opposed to Saudi influence in Lebanon and the region. At the same time, Saudi and Iran's dealings with local sectarian groups in Lebanon reinforces patron-client relations that are structured along sectarian coalitions, which further entrench sectarianism. To reduce the impact of regional dynamics on sectarianism in Lebanon, conciliatory relations between Riyadh and Tehran must be restored. In the absence of rapprochement between the two regional powers, desectarianization actors must consider ways to promote and structure relations between Lebanese groups and foreign powers on non-sectarian basis.

Furthermore, the establishment of the state of Israel drove hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from their homes and force them to settle in neighboring Arab countries (Morris, 1987). This created a huge refugee problem for countries hosting Palestinians, like Lebanon. Palestinians' armed struggle radicalized groups that supported their cause as well as groups that opposed their paramilitary activities. In that polarized context, Hezbollah was founded as an Islamic resistance movement against Israel. Hezbollah's opposition to Israel is a response to Israeli occupation and indiscriminate attacks against Muslim lands Shiite dominated South Lebanon. Moreover, Hezbollah's anti-Israel stance is grounded in Shiite ideology that is inspired by the Islamic revolution. That ideology, however, is not shared by non-Shiites. Lebanese differ

over how to address the Palestinian crisis created by Israel. According to one of the interviewees (Interview 12): Sunnis sought to nationalize Palestinian refugees in Lebanon as a solution to the problem; Christians opposed that because it would empower Palestinian militarism and would alter the delicate demographic balance in the country in Sunni favor; Still, Shiites, spearheaded by Hezbollah, opposed nationalization because it would obviate the Palestinian's right to return to Palestine, which would consequently weaken the cause for resistance. From that perspective, divergence in threat perceptions vis-à-vis the Israel-Palestine crisis creates structural division between Lebanon's sectarian communities. Given the violent history that is connected to Israeli aggression in Lebanon, and the power and anti-Israel ideology of Hezbollah, unless a fair and sustainable solution is devised for the Israel-Palestine problem, it will continue to polarize Lebanese and provide opportunities for sectarianization.

Having looked at domestic and geopolitical structures, the next chapter will consider normative structures that perpetuate sectarianism and obstruct the process of desectarianization.

Chapter 5: Normative Implements to Desectarianization

Introduction

To advance desectarianization in Lebanon, it is important to address structures that entrench and reproduce sectarianism. Chapter three explored domestic structures that sectarian elites established through leveraging state institutions and government resources. Chapter four focused on regional politics in the Middle East and the contemporary power balancing structures that encourage sectarian instrumentalization. The following chapter will shed light on normative structures in the Lebanese context that prolong the sectarian status quo and stand in the way of ushering a post-sectarian order. By normative conditions, the chapter intends to explore immaterial social structures that condition the attitude and behavior of people towards their sectarian-kin and sectarian-other. These structures are created and sustained by leaders through the promotion of shared beliefs, norms, values, discourse and symbols that are passed down from one generation to the next (Wacquant, 2019; Haidt, 2012; Cialdini and Trost, 2008). These structures are often taken for granted and may be invisible to those who live within them, but they play a crucial role in shaping social interactions and shaping the way people experience the world and relate to each other.

IR scholars of the Middle East have long underscored the importance of immaterial factors in the making of the region's politics (Salloukh, 2017a; Uslaner, 2018). However, the emphasis has largely been on ideological factors that pose security threats. By contrast, this chapter will focus on normative structures that are particular to the sectarian context in Lebanon. These structures are not timeless, as to suggest an orientalist treatment of their origin and impact. Rather, these normative structures are the product of intrinsic and extrinsic forces that have interacted with each other over time. They are not permanent, but constructed by the interplay of events, circumstances, and a slew of actors. The chapter will investigate the most common normative structures as identified by field work done in Lebanon during the summer of 2019. Data from interviews with religious leaders from different backgrounds point to 1) lack of trust and 2) deficient citizenship as normative structures that obstruct the work of desectarianization. As one Shiite sheikh explained verbosely, "sectarianism is a collective problem. Everybody suffers from it, and everybody contributes to its continuity one way or another. Therefore, getting rid of sectarianism requires everybody's involvement. But how is that possible when people do not trust each other and are not willing to work together on a joint political project? And there is the crux of the matter! We cannot get rid of sectarianism because

we cannot agree on what to replace it with. We cannot agree on a framework that binds us. We do not have a common understanding of what it means to be Lebanese. We do not have the same understanding of citizenship" (Interview 9). What the sheikh was implying is that the prevalence of sectarianism in Lebanon cannot be explained exclusively by sectarian elites' manipulation of domestic and regional structures. There is a normative dimension that deepens sectarian differences and impedes the process of desectarianization.

While it is not possible to completely isolate normative elements from physical reality, since the two constitute each other (Berman, 2001), independently investigating normative structures that reproduce sectarianism is important because it opens the space for exploring the agency of individuals and the "symbolic and social capital" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2013)of the clergy to challenge sectarianization. Desectarianization actors must confront normative structures as well domestic and regional structures (chapter 4 and 5) that reproduce sectarianism. This chapter will explore in detail how the political establishment in Lebanon thwarts desectarianization by stifling processes that promote trust building and citizenship education. And in the same vein as the previous two chapters, this chapter will discuss how Shiite clergymen can circumvent those impediments and help pave the way for broader and more effective desectarianization.

5.1 Lack of Trust

Trust is intrinsic and fundamental to human interactions. It is the basis on which healthy relationships are established and groups are formed. People engage with each other based on the perception of others' goals and intentions. A trust relationship is established when a person believes that the person that he/she is dealing with has their interest in mind, and does not intend to harm him/her (Uslaner, 2018). Sectarianism damages inter-communal trust in that it raises suspicions about the agenda of others. It securitizes the sectarian-other and pits confessional communities against each other. While sectarian politics might strengthen solidarity amongst members of the same confessional community, it damages the social fabric of society by amplifying differences between faith groups. Moreover, trust is foundational for human contracts with institutional bodies. In that context, trust is the willingness of both sides to rely on each other to keep their respective commitments (Tonkiss et al., 2000).

Religious leaders play a pivotal role in facilitating trust. As gatekeepers of their faith communities, they occupy a strategic position in encouraging their flocks to trust others or withhold their trust. Their religious discourse can promote cooperating with others or demonizing them. This applies to trust in the state as well. "We have the power to indoctrinate

people” confessed one sheikh (Interview 2). Religious leaders do not possess that power exclusively, but what the sheikh meant is that through religious rhetoric and spiritual storytelling, he and his colleagues can influence people’s behavior with little to no material resources. Sectarian leaders, by contrast, need their patronage networks to maintain their influence and legitimacy.

It is important not to exaggerate the influence of religious leaders. There are many factors that shape people’s perceptions and condition their behavior. What distinguishes religious leaders is the legitimacy they draw from representing and interpreting transcendent sources, and their regular interaction with the masses. From that perspective, it is useful to investigate the capacity of religious leaders as desectarianization agents that promote inter-sectarian trust. This section will analyze the capacity of Shiite clergymen to play that role and challenge normative structures that encourage distrust. Before doing that, however, it is important to provide a framework for understanding trust, and to explore how the sectarian leaders and the political establishment in Lebanon undermine trust building.

Political and social theorists speak of two kinds of trust: social trust, commonly referred to as generalized trust, and political trust (Bauer and Freitag, 2017; Van der Meer and Zmerli, 2017; Uslaner, 2017). Social trust refers to trust between members of society. It points to trust between people who do not know each other. It is generalized in the sense that it is for a nonspecific purpose or situation (Kumagai and Iorio, 2020). Stated simply, generalized trust is about having confidence and faith in strangers. Far from being irrelevant, generalized trust is crucial for democratization and the establishment of a healthy undivided society (Uslaner, 2003). Christian Bjørnskov highlights empirical studies that point to generalized trust, or lack thereof, as a factor in explaining differences in economic growth, institutional development and quality, corruption, and subjective life satisfaction (Bjornskov, 2007). As a form of social capital, generalized trust improves the “efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions” ((Putnam, 1993, p. 167). In other words, generalized trust is a requisite for effective cooperation between citizens working towards a common goal. It follows then that generalized trust is an important condition for the formation and success of collective political projects that challenge the status quo. Desectarianization, as one such project, depends on a modicum of social trust between citizens, not least between members of different confessional communities where mistrust generally prevails.

In contrast to generalized trust, political trust is trust in the collective, not in individuals. Within the scope of this research, political trust is particularly defined as confidence in

governmental institutions (e.g., the executive, legislative, judiciary, the bureaucracy, police…etc.) to perform their duties satisfactorily. It is tantamount to citizens' evaluation of their government's performance and ability to deliver quality public services, respond to people's needs and demands, and manage social, economic, and political uncertainties (Kumagai and Iorio, 2020). In democratic societies, political trust is essential for domestic stability and economic prosperity. Moreover, political trust is crucial for safely navigating a country out of political deadlocks and financial crises. A decline in political trust can lead to lower rates of compliance with rules and regulations (OECD, 2013), which increases the propensity for civil conflicts and the potential of state collapse. For instance, failure of the Lebanese government to contain the financial crisis that erupted in October 2019 expedited national chaos and sectarian tension (Mizrahi *et al.*, 2020).

While the relationship between political trust and social trust is open for debate (Kumagai and Iorio, 2020), some studies have shown that in divided societies, a drop in political trust contributes to a reduction in generalized trust (Alijla, 2016, 2020). The ramifications are alarming for countries that struggle to implement reforms, like Lebanon. Governments that suffer from deficient levels of political trust will struggle to roll out national initiatives that impact the entire country. Political distrust prohibits wide civic participation and stymie governmental reforms. In the context of sectarianism in Lebanon, the general lack of trust in the political establishment means that any top-down desectarianization effort is viewed with suspicion. Over the years, Lebanese politicians proved unwilling or uncapable of containing sectarianism. This is not all negative because distrusting the government to eliminate sectarianism catalyzes grassroots groups to organize themselves and coordinate bottom-up desectarianization efforts. This is evidenced by the surge of NGOs over the last ten years that call for reform of the political and economic systems (Fawaz and Harb, 2020), which as chapter three explained are perceived as structures in the Lebanese context that reproduce sectarianism.

Trust, regardless of how it is earned, is not constant though. It could increase or decrease, and generally it needs to be maintained to remain at a given level. This is especially true in relationships beyond immediate family members. Trust can be an ambiguous concept because of the myriad factors that shape it. This makes it difficult to quantify trust. At the same time, social and political scientists have used ethnographic field work, surveys and opinion polls to measure trust and assess trustworthiness. Although the measurement of trust is a contested field, metrics on trust are helpful because they can support primary data gathered from

qualitative research. To that end, data from the Arab Barometer and SEPAD will be used to corroborate research findings.

The following sub sections will explore how political and social distrust evolved in Lebanon to form normative structures that facilitate sectarianism and undermine desectarianization initiatives. Each sub section will also consider the capacity of Shiite ulema to maneuver around those structure and strengthen trust between sectarian communities as a necessary step towards desectarianization.

Political Distrust in Lebanon

Examination of political and economic life in Lebanon over the last three decades reveals a high degree of insecurity and instability. Lebanese people went through extraordinary circumstances, including two wars (against IDF and ISIS), violent conflicts, a series of assassination episodes, popular protests, a refugee crisis, and a massive explosion that destroyed half the capital to name a few. During and in between those circumstance, successive Lebanese governments and elected officials failed to take measures that produces long term stability. While they periodically reached consensus on controversial issues like the election of a president or changing the electoral law, the quality of social and economic life keeps deteriorating. Instead of collaborating together to rescue the country from preventable financial anarchy, politicians demonstrate bizarre irresponsibility by creating fiscal and environmental conditions that ignite popular protests like YouStink in 2015 and the Oct-17, 2019 uprising (Barroso Cortes and Kechichian, 2020). The political establishment, which had regularly reproduced itself (Egan and Tabar, 2016; Kingston, 2013b), set Lebanon on a course of self-destruction. At the time of this writing (March 2023), the Lebanese state continues to languish in a deep economic and political crisis, with no exit in sight. As a result, citizens suffer and are humiliated daily. Many, including judges, doctors, academics, entrepreneurs, and other professionals are forced to consider leaving the country because of the failure of decisionmakers to work together and provide a rescue plan for the country (Bou Mansour, 2020; Diab, 2021; Reuters, 2020).

However spun, Lebanon's political establishment is directly responsible for the failure of the state to provide basic services to all its citizens, not to mention advance the country and lead it to prosperity. As elected officials, they have the legitimacy to rule, and to determine how to distribute the state's resources and to what end. They have legislative, executive and judicial powers that enable them to fulfil the vision they have for the country and to lead it out of difficult circumstances. Moreover, they have coercive means at their disposal to enforce their

plans, and bring about order. In other words, the political establishment manages the means and resources that are necessary for Lebanon to flourish. It is thus logical to conclude that ruling sectarian elites are primarily to blame for poor living conditions and lagging human development. Regardless of whether Lebanese elites lack the tools, political will or technical skills to lead the country effectively, their dereliction of duty and failure to protect vulnerable social groups implicate the governmental institutions that they represent. Aa a result, citizens' trust in the state and its systems and bureaucracies is damaged.

Data from the Arab Barometer help materialize the level of distrust that Lebanese people have towards the political establishment (Ceyhun, 2019). Amongst the 11 countries surveyed by the Arab Barometer, Lebanon had one of the lowest levels of trust in government, as low as 8 per cent between 2016-2017. Trust rose to 19 per cent the following year, which can be explained by President Aoun having had more time in office, after a 29-month presidential vacuum. Still, Lebanese trust in government was the second lowest compared to other citizens in neighboring countries. Trust in parliament tells a similar story. It dropped from 39 per cent in 2006 to 10 per cent in 2016. In 2018, trust in parliament rose to 18 per cent, but that should be seen in the context of Lebanon holding its 2018 general election just four months before the Arab Barometer fielded its survey. It is noteworthy that Lebanese parliamentarians elected in 2009 extended their own mandate twice, remaining in power for nine years instead of four. Such maneuvers discredit the integrity of the parliament and cause people to question its prerogatives.

Trust in the legal system in Lebanon is higher than trust in the government or the parliament, though still the lowest in the region, registering at 25 per cent in 2018-2019. However, that figure does not factor in the fallout from the Oct 17 protests and its aftermath. The Arab Barometer surveyed 1000 Lebanese people for their opinion on the Beirut port explosion of August 4 (Robbins, 2020). Of those, 41 per cent believe that investigating the cause of the explosion will be better handled by independent international experts, and 28 per cent prefer to assign that task to the army. Only 18 per cent said that Lebanese parties should handle the investigation, while 11 per cent believe that any investigation is useless. These figures reflect a popular belief that the Lebanese political and judicial system cannot be entrusted to conduct a thorough and transparent investigation. This hints at elites inclined to cover investigation findings, or judges reluctant to issue exacting verdicts. Either way, negligent handling of egregious incidents, like the port explosion, exacerbate the lack of trust Lebanese people have for the political establishment. The Arab Barometer's fourth wave (2016-2017) shows that 85

per cent of Lebanese people do not trust political parties because they think politicians are generally dishonest (Ceyhun, 2017).

Since 2019, Lebanon has been experiencing one of the world's worst financial crises in recent history. The Beirut Port explosion and the coronavirus outbreak have only made matters worse for the country. Most analysis point to government mismanagement as the cause, which explains why of all the nations examined by Arab Barometer, Lebanese nationals have the lowest level of trust in their governmental institutions. According to Arab Barometer Wave VII (2021-2022), only eight percent of citizens say they have a great deal or quite a lot of trust in the government (Arab Barometer Wave VII, 2022). Comparatively, 26 percent of Iraqis said they had a great deal or quite a lot of faith in their government, making it the nation whose residents had the next lowest level of trust in their government. The stark difference between Lebanese people's levels of trust and Iraqis' level of trust highlights how dissatisfied Lebanese people are with their government.

In summary, it is clear that the political establishment in Lebanon established a normative structure of distrust in the government. This has grave consequences for desectarianization, because any state-led desectarianization efforts, if found, will not be taken seriously. Lebanese ruling elites, from their various positions of authority, are notorious for publicly declaring their commitment to abide by the Taif Accords, which unambiguously includes bringing an end to political sectarianism. However, no consequential effort is made to move the country in that direction. As one of the interviewed sheikhs expressed, "sectarian leaders hold the levers of power in the country, and they thrive on keeping sectarianism alive. Not only will they abstain from fighting sectarianism, but they will utilize the institutions under their control to keep sectarianism alive. For if sectarianism dies, so will they (i.e., lose their legitimacy)". What this implies is that systemic lack of political trust dissuades people from leveraging state institutions for desectarianization purposes. In other words, citizens that are disillusioned with the state apparatus will end up reducing desectarianization to civic activism or anarchic acts. Their distrust in the government, parliament, and the judiciary, prompts them to disengage from political processes and democratic tools that are necessary for establishing a stable post-sectarian order in Lebanon. The loss of confidence in the ability of public institutions to bring about lasting change enforces the status quo and limits the prospects of top-down desectarianization.

Nevertheless, religious leaders have vested interest in establishing political trust amongst the citizenry, for that helps maintain social order. Shiite clergymen, amongst their

colleagues, can arguably contribute the most to building political trust, considering that one of the most divisive issues in Lebanon is related to national sovereignty and Hezbollah's arms. The question pertaining to the legitimacy of Hezbollah's arsenal and control over its deployment has polarized the country. "The real issue is with who commands the use of such a formidable artillery: a single sect-based party (i.e., Hezbollah) or a national entity that is answerable to elected officials (i.e., the Lebanese armed forces)? The former is extremely efficient, but has explicit ties to Iran and its regional agenda, and is thus accused of not being pure Lebanese. The latter is patriotic, but weak and fragile due to inherent sectarian tension and dependence on Western arms suppliers" (Interview 3). Significantly, in the discourse of both Hezbollah and anti-Hezbollah groups, the state and its institutions retrain a fundamental role in the political imaginary. The division is over whether the Lebanese state can measure up to that imagined role in the context of Saudi Iranian rivalry, Israeli threat, and American hegemony.

Although many Shiite clergymen support the stance of Hezbollah, there are dissenting voices. Those voices can play a mediating role between pro-Hezbollah and anti-Hezbollah groups. These religious leaders occupy a unique position in being recognized Shiite leaders but opposing to Hezbollah's politics. They have legitimacy in the eyes of their faith communities because of their religious standing, and at the same time they have credibility in the eyes of anti-Hezbollah groups because of their political convictions. Those leaders influence Shiite public opinion and can help ferment a movement that challenges the dominant pro-Hezbollah Shiite narrative, and ultimately the response to the question of Hezbollah's arms. "I am not trying to turn people against Hezbollah," said an openly anti-Hezbollah cleric (Interview 7). "That is not my aim. What I want is for the people [primarily Shiites] to be free from the notion that Hezbollah and Hezbollah's weapons are their only guard against internal and external threats. That attitude will keep them unhealthily dependent on Hezbollah. It will also unsettle non-Shiite in Lebanon and make them fearful of Hezbollah and who Hezbollah represents (Shiites)." The sheikh was convinced that as long as one sect is armed, other sects will feel threatened, and will feel an urgency to arm themselves. In that environment, the sheikh concluded, "do not even dream about ending sectarianism".

From that perspective, the Shiite clergy that do not subscribe to Hezbollah's political orientation can be strategic desectarianization actors. Unlike Shiite notables that may also oppose Hezbollah, this minority of clergymen is better equipped to counter Hezbollah's dispositions because they can reason on religious grounds. They not only oppose the political establishment for propagating sectarianism, but they are in a position to deconstruct Hezbollah's Shiite ideology, which underpins the Islamic resistance. "I disagree with how

Hezbollah employs the battle of Karbala and the martyrdom of Hussein in its political discourse. Hussein died to fight corruption and reverse the status quo, not to march to other countries and defend oppressive regimes" (Interview 5). Like all religious stories, the battle of Karbala is subject to various interpretation, and indeed it has been explained and used in different ways throughout history (Aghaie, 2001). The sheikh was insinuating that the legitimacy of Hezbollah's call for jihad and bearing of arms, which is a major source of sectarian contestation in Lebanon, could be theologically questioned and found wanting. As previously mentioned, the issue is not about eliminating resistance against Israel. None of the Shiite clergy interviewed want to forfeit the deterrence equation that Hezbollah enforced against Israel. What is at stake is how to preserve that deterrence without pushing the country deeper into sectarian conflict. Depending on their personal reputation and integrity, Shiite clergymen unaffiliated with Hezbollah can act as mediators that inspire trust towards the state and towards non-Shiites. However, that cannot happen in the absence of a political settlement that resolves tension around the question of Hezbollah's arms.

Social Distrust in Lebanon

Equally important to political trust and the process of desectarianization is social trust. Social trust is a multi-layered concept with various definitions. Kwon's definition, which extends the definition advanced by Coleman's social theory (Coleman, 1990), is helpful in this regard. Social trust, or interpersonal trust as Kwon refers to it, can be understood as "individuals' expectations of other members of society to act and behave in a way that is beneficial to these individuals or at least not detrimental to them. Interpersonal trust reflects people's subjective perspective of others' reliability without legal commitment, and involves a degree of risk and uncertainty" (Kwon, 2019, p. 22). Accordingly, interpersonal trust is the glue that binds societal relationships. Based on this definition, a distinction is often made between trust amongst members of a family, tribe or an in-group, and trust towards strangers (i.e., generalized trust). There is a reciprocal relationship between those two types of trust (Ermisch and Gambetta, 2010); Where there is strong in-group trust, people feel less of a need to interact with and trust outsiders. By the same logic, people who do not conform to in-group dynamics are sanctioned by the group, and they end up forming new relationship with strangers, leading often to an increase in generalized trust.

There are several factors that cause people to extend their trust to strangers or withdraw it. This could be understood by approaching trust either as an individual property, shaped by one's in-group socialization, or as a societal property, shaped by one's interaction

with society (Beilmann and Lilleoja, 2015). Either way, context plays an important role in developing trusting attitudes and behaviors. Kwon catalogues key determinants that cause trust variances: historical conflicts; living standards, equality, and fairness in society; national culture; prevalence of moral hazards; quality of governance systems; geography, and ethnic composition (Kwon, 2019, pp. 25–28). In the Lebanese context, many of these factors coalesce to engender ruinous structures of social distrust. The following sections will explore some of those factors in more details and will investigate the potential of Shiite clergymen to circumvent their damaging effect on trust building.

The Legacy of Conflict

The Lebanese civil war caused so much destruction and strife, it is difficult to overestimate its effects on society. Sect-based killings, abductions and forced displacement caused great division and mistrust between Lebanese inhabitants, not to mention the ostracization effect it had on Palestinian settlers (Malley, 2018; Sayigh, 1995). Although a ceasefire remains in effect (with few exceptions) since the end of the war, unresolved atrocities, a hasty amnesty law, and a lack of national reconciliation created an environment of mistrust as past injustices were left unresolved (Ghosn and Khoury, 2011). Post conflict reconciliation has never seriously been attempted in Lebanon (Schöne, 2012). This left the door open for generating conflicting and hostile war memories that harbor fear and evoke prejudice towards “the other” in the minds of the post-war youth generations (Larkin, 2010). Lebanese ruling elites adhered to a policy of “don’t mention the war” to avoid holding one of their own as responsible (Barak, 2007). Yet, trust cannot be established without a process of national reconciliation that acknowledges the horrors of the civil war, and serves a high standard of justice. Without coming to terms with the civil war, sectarian wounds will remain open, leaving interpersonal trust in scarce supply, and derailing desectarianization efforts. Failure to establish a commission that could investigate post-conflict truth and reconciliation led to the absence of sustainable peace and structural mistrust between sectarian groups.

Religious leaders can champion the cause of reconciliation and social healing. The main challenge is not confronting historical wounds, but healing those wounds. It is possible for any actor to put representatives of hurting communities in the same room, but bringing closure to historical wounds takes more than being transparent with one another. It requires restitution, but more fundamentally it requires “turning a new page”. During Lebanon’s civil war, sectarian militias vandalized villages and brutalized people that belong to other sects. Those incidents have been ingrained in collective memories, and they constitute “historical trauma” (Waldram,

2014). A sustainable path towards desectarianization cannot ignore those memories; it must not only acknowledge them but aim to heal them. This is where religious leaders come in. Every faith tradition in Lebanon includes in its dogma a teaching on forgiveness. Mercy and compassion are considered religious virtues, and people are encouraged to forgive and forget, often in exchange for heavenly rewards. Recovering from historical trauma is veritably a long and complex process (Kirmayer *et al.*, 2014), but what is important to highlight here is that clergymen are uniquely positioned to facilitate a national reconciliation movement. Examples from Northern Ireland (Brewer *et al.*, 2011) and South Africa (Maluleke, 2020) support this proposition, but it is essential to consider the agency of clergymen in the context of Muslim-Christians relations in Lebanon.

Lebanon produced a number of clergymen that won formidable respect for advocating inter-sectarian convergence during or after the civil war. This includes Sunni mufti Hasan Khalid (Bergout, 2022; Aliwaa, 2021), Druze Sheikh al-'Aql Mohammad Abu-Shaqra (Albaieni, 2017; Itani, 2022), Maronite patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir (Saad, 2018; Shqair, 2007), and Shiite Imam Musa al-Sadr (Ajami, 2012b; Nabulsi, 2013). Al-Sadr, in particular, proved an extraordinary example as he did not possess formidable institutional power. He started working at a local level, but within a short time span succeeded in mobilizing the Shiite masses and giving them a political identity. Al-Sadr was widely revered by Christians and Muslims alike for his modesty, intellect, public engagement and anti-Israeli stance (Ajami, 2012b). He challenged the feudal system that had prevailed in Shiite areas and which adversely marginalized villagers. This made al-Sadr very popular. Although he facilitated the politicization of Shiites, he was fiercely anti-sectarian. He confessed in one speech that he "accessed sectarianism only to destroy it" (Sadr, 2020). Shiites were systemically deprived. Al-Sadr believed that the way to reverse their fate was by giving Shiites a political voice and then to use that voice to dismantle the sectarian system from inside. However, the war broke out and three years later, al-Sadr disappeared and his whereabouts are unknown to this day. Al-Sadr left behind a remarkable legacy of challenging injustice and political oppression (Mahfouth, 2020). He acted as an interfaith peacemaker in the midst of extraordinary circumstances promoting the welfare of "the human" in Lebanon (Muzahim, 2016). "Al-Sadr left us with a tremendously powerful and practical example to follow. He was able to navigate sectarian tension with ease, through his great personality, diplomatic skills, and genuine character. He did more to end sectarianism in Lebanon that any other national figure" Interviewee 6). Shiite clergymen in modern Lebanon can look up to al-Sadr as an archetypal desectarianization agent. He offers reasoning, theology, and vision for deconstructing social and political norms that exacerbate sectarian differences. While the movement of the dispossessed

that al-Sadr founded evolved to be a prominent Shiite/sectarianism bulwark under the leadership of Nabih Berri (Nir, 2011), the point remains that grassroots Shiite clergymen have considerable agency to upset the status quo.

Living standards, equality, and fairness in society

Failure to bring closure to conflicts and apply justice not only betrays people's trust in the ruling system (i.e., political trust), but diminishes people's tendency to trust each other. Delhey and Newton observe that social conditions are one of the key elements in determining levels of interpersonal trust (Delhey and Newton, 2003). Perceptions of equality and fairness, for instance, are directly related to social trust. The more equally treated people feel to other members of society, the more they will trust each other. This partly explains low levels of social trust in Lebanon. Lebanon's excessive borrowing after the war exacerbated pre-existing socioeconomic inequalities (Salti, 2019). Accumulating fiscal and economic problems, which was accelerated by mismanagement of the Syrian refugee crisis (Cherri *et al.*, 2016), triggered the Oct 17, 2019 uprising, which ushered in an economic crisis without precedent in the country's history (ICG, 2020). Rapid currency devaluation and an impaired economic cycle, due in part to Covid-19 lockdown measures, caused massive inflation of prices, which translated to soaring unemployment rates and poverty levels. In August 2020, the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) stated that "more than half of the country's population is at risk of failing to access their basic food needs by the year's end" (Al Jazeera, 2020). In the opening months of 2021, food shortages put people in survival mode, leading to food hoarding and episodes of violence in supermarkets over subsidized goods.

As the economic crisis slides the country down to permeant poverty and wipes out the middle class (Vohra, 2020), inequality and injustice will intensify jealousy and conflicts, and subsequently lower interpersonal trust. The downward trajectory of socioeconomic conditions will further erode social trust. The increasing gap between upper and lower classes causes more divisions in society, which hurts the prospects of desectarianization. While a more economically polarized Lebanon will produce a larger impoverished class, that does not necessarily multiply interpersonal trust amongst the poor because, as already indicated, there are other factors that shape social trust. Also, ruling elites are keen not to squander their loyalists' trust in them. By offering material assistance and food rations, political parties keep people dependent on them for survival, which minimizes the need for cross-sectarian collaboration. This complicates the process of desectarianization because not only are the conditions not conducive for trust

building, but sectarian leaders are also capitalizing on the economic crisis to strengthen their networks and make themselves indispensable.

Grassroots religious leaders are limited in their ability to bring about equitable living condition and inspire social trust, but they are not powerless. They can contribute to upending the socioeconomic conditions that enable sectarianism by putting pressure on their home religious institutions to manage available resources at its disposal in ways that nurture cross-sectarian trust. For instance, the Supreme Islamic Shiite Council in Lebanon receives financial provision from the government's annual budget. In addition, it serves as the official custodian of many Shiite endowments (*awqaf)* that return considerable income. These funding sources are meant to finance the operations of the Shiite religious establishment (e.g. courts, salaries, mosque building and renovation…etc.). However, there is no transparency in how the funds are disbursed, and there is a great deal of controversary around how the *awqaf* are managed (Al Khyami, 2019). The Council suffers from systemic corruption and is under the control of Amal and Hezbollah (Interview 5). Despite the need for pressing reform, the Council stands as the official institution representing Shiite affairs in Lebanon. In theory, the Council functions as a neutral space for Shiite clergymen to improve inter-sectarian relations and call out sectarianism.

Non-partisan Shiite clergymen have an organic relationship to the council. They can leverage that connection to push for projects and activities that promote inter-sectarian dialogue and trust-building measures. This includes offering public lectures, hosting youth workshops, organizing summer camps, or running children's programs with the dual objective of introducing Shiite ideology that does not alienate the other, and learning about the other directly from other religious leaders. Shiite clergymen alone cannot inspire the trust that paves the way for desectarianization. They need their counterparts in other faith communities to invest in the process as well.

In addition, the Council provides non-partisan Shiite clergymen a platform to expose political interference in religious matters and vice versa. Political parties instrumentalize their constituents' dire living condition for their political advancement. They offer charitable assistance to alleviate people's suffering, and in the process, they win people's trust. While this is very helpful for communities in need, it leaves the root problem of inequality unresolved. Whether parties deliberately ignore addressing systemic issues or simply fail to create equitable living conditions, the result is the same: injustice lingers, and parties manipulate that situation to present themselves as their communities sole saviors. This inevitably comes at the expense of blaming other sectarian groups for the ill fate of the country. Non-partisan clerics can help

break that cycle. By holding political parties that represent their community to account, they can readjust their community's attitude towards other communities.

To minimize the effect that poor living conditions have on social trust, Shiites clergymen must be ready to confront Hezbollah and Amal when they fail to improve the socioeconomic conditions across the nation. They must not be content to see the Shiites' wellbeing improved temporarily, while the national situation is in regression. If equity does not spread across the country, political parties will continue to arouse sectarian tension. By holding Amal and Hezbollah accountable for not introducing reforms, non-partisan Shiite clerics will spur the two parties to stand up to scrutiny and ultimately act to improve wider living conditions. In addition, the clerics will challenge perceptions that all Shiites are subservient to Amal and Hezbollah. This will dissolve distrust that some people have towards Shiites in general because of their deep loyalty to sectarian parties.

National Culture

Moreover, Kwon points to the influence that national culture has on interpersonal trust. While it is impossible to comprehensively capture or evaluate any nation's culture, it is helpful to highlight key cultural elements that create structures of mistrust, and by extension impede desectarianization. One such element is the pervasiveness of a "culture of impunity" in Lebanon (ICTJ, 2014). In 1991, the Lebanese government issued a general amnesty for abuses committed by any armed groups throughout the years of the civil war. The absence of accountability for gross violations and the selective approach to criminal justice denigrated the rule of law, and signaled that crimes and abuses can be overlooked. Subsequently, blatant violations perpetrated by elites and their cronies proliferated and were never brought to justice (Wickberg, 2022). This facilitated an environment dominated by corruption, evading justice, and taking advantage of others (Barroso Cortes and Kechichian, 2020). In the self-incriminating words of Saad Hariri, a culture of total impunity had existed in Lebanon for more than 50 years (Chulov, 2014).

Egregious evidence of the level of impunity that plagues Lebanon can be seen in the failure of the Lebanese authorities to put behind bars officials responsible for the financial and monetary disintegration of the country since October 2019 (Makdisi and Amine, 2022). A similar observation can be made about failure to bring charges against anyone for the Beirut port explosion even after nearly three years from the blast (Saghieh, 2023). The idea that lawbreakers could easily get away with their abuses disincentivize people to respect the rule of law. Dysfunctional legal structures and dilatory law enforcement leave people fending for

themselves since there is no legal system to protect them. Apathy towards others and towards reforming the system subsequently intensifies. Under those conditions, individuals are less inclined to trust their co-citizens.

Another aspect of Lebanon's national culture that has bearings on interpersonal trust is religious identification. That religious identity, which underlies sectarianism, permeates Lebanese culture is a principal assumption that has been substantiated thus far by this dissertation. Summarily, religious/sectarian identities are very meaningful to many people, for they order people's social lives and color people's political decision making (Cammett, 2019). What is important to highlight at this juncture is that strong sectarian identities, in a multi-ethnic context, generally discourage interpersonal trust (Johnson *et al.*, 2012; Zak and Knack, 2001). As a social marker, religious identity provides an easy way for categorizing people into in-groups and out-groups. Members of an in-group are united by what they have in common. They develop social bonds that generate group solidarity. This result is favorable treatment for members of the in-group as a default position. What follows is that outsiders are looked on with suspicion and engaged with a higher dose of mistrust. Moreover, in-groups tend to exhibit prejudice toward out-groups in an effort to maintain a positive image of themselves (Dovidio *et al.*, 2017). What this means is that Lebanon's sectarianism, which reproduces itself in part by reinforcing religious identities, also reproduces inter-communal mistrust in the process. In other words, it is not illogical to say that Lebanese society suffers from epidemic distrust, which emanates from self-reproducing sectarianism.

A third feature of Lebanese culture that is worth highlighting in the discussion about mistrust relates to familial dynamics. In Lebanon, as in many Arab societies, family is the basic unit of society generating a predominantly kinship culture (Khalaf, 1971). As a social institution, family composition extends beyond conjugal family relations to include distant kin. In the Lebanese context, where the state is weak and national identity is nebulous, membership in families precedes membership in the state, and families can claim superior loyalty of their members over and above the state's claims to loyalty (Joseph, 2005). Suad Joseph's conceptualization of political familism in Lebanon is very helpful in this regard. By political familism, Joseph refers to "the deployment of family institutions, ideologies, idioms (idiomatic kinship), practices, and relationships by citizens to activate their needs and demands in relation to the state or polity and by the state or state actors to mobilize practical and moral grounds for governance based on a civic myth of kinship and a public discourse that privileges family" (Joseph, 2011, pp. 151–152). That is, formal and informal familial relations are a key determinant in structuring social and political life in Lebanon.

These unwritten “kin contracts” are built into the political fabric of the post Taif state and enforced by political practices such as family succession in political leadership. They are also supported by religious institutions sanctifying the stature of the family with the authority sacred sources. In addition, they are reinforced through the provision of social services and extralegal assistance to members of the family. In those circumstances, the cultivation of extended family ties could yield “amoral familism,” where people exclusively trust members of their kin, and expect others to behave the same way (Banfield, 1958). By that logic, this leads to not trusting non-family members, and not expecting to be trusted by outsiders either. More recent studies support this claim and empirically demonstrate that strong family ties are correlated with, and possibly "cause", lack of social trust (Alesina and Giuliano, 2011; Herreros, 2015). In sum, familial relationships in Lebanon are pervasive and they play a significant role in ordering society. As a side effect of that, interpersonal trust wanes and remains difficult to establish in the absence of a nation building project.

Data from the latest Arab Barometer wave validates the observation that Lebanon suffers from a severe and chronic case of interpersonal mistrust (Ceyhun, 2019). Between 2010 and 2011, only 17 per cent of Lebanese indicated that they trust non-family members. Between 2012 and 2013 that number dropped to 13, and then further down to 11 between 2016-2017. In 2018, a devastating 4 per cent only exhibited interpersonal trust! That is the lowest percentage across the surveyed Arab countries, including war-torn Yemen and Libya. Nearly all Lebanese citizens do not trust their fellow citizens. Notably, Sunnis are least likely to have interpersonal trust at only 1 percent, followed by Christians (4 percent), Shias (6 percent) and Druze (8 percent). These figures raise concerns about the stability of Lebanon, and the preparedness of Lebanese people to work side by side to move the country to a post-sectarian order. Lack of social trust means that it is very difficult to mobilize people towards a common goal. This is evidenced by the low number of people (18%) that participated in protests demanding political change in the wake of the Beirut port explosion (Robbins, 2020). There are several reasons that could explain that, but the point is that disasters or crises alone are insufficient to force a change in the status quo. Sectarianism is detestable by a large segment of the population, but reversing the process of sectarianization requires political trust, if indeed the political establishment desires to alter the status quo. Alternatively, considerable social trust must be established if a grassroots-led desectarianization movement is to take root and yield change.

The process of desectarianization involves tackling non-material factors that entrench sect-based tension. In this regard, clergymen have a crucial role to play in confronting elements

of the national culture that breed the mistrust that propagates sectarianism. In the Lebanese context, religious leaders are generally conceived as moral guides. They provide direction to their people on what is right and wrong. They do not rely on the law of the land to declare praise or judgement on certain conduct. Rather, they use their faith's traditions and standards to steer their community's behavior. From that perspective, religious leaders can use that authority to expose the unethical impunity corrupt elites enjoy. As one of the sheikhs interviewed explained, politicians get away with their corruption and their spreading of sectarianism because they defy the law, yes, but more importantly because society does not morally hold them to account (Interview 10).

While the clerics' judgement does not carry the weight of the law, meaning that it will not lead to punishing lawbreakers for their crimes, their judgment can still be damaging because it tarnishes the reputation of people in their community. This could have devastating effects on elected officials who need to maintain an upright image. While corrupt politicians can shield themselves from legal accusations by manipulating the judicial system (see chapter 3 for detailed discussion), they may have less influence over religious leaders. Just as religious leaders can bestow legitimacy on certain elites, they are in a position to withdraw that legitimacy. Independent clergymen can help restore social and political trust by holding up to scrutiny political leaders from their own faith tradition. For instance, non-partisan Shiite clergymen must be prepared to confront corrupt leaders associated with Hezbollah and Amal if they want to see trust in the state and in the Shiites community increase. They must be ready to expose actions of Amal and Hezbollah that sow distrust between citizens and encourage sectarianism. This task requires bravery and careful consideration of the consequence since it may lead to house arrest as in the case of former general secretary of Hezbollah, Sheikh Sobhi al-Toufaily; or it could lead to self-exile, as in the case of former top Hezbollah leader Sheikh Hasan Mshymesh; or it could lead to isolation, as in the case of Sheikh Zuhair Kinge; or it could lead to death, as in the case of sheikh Khodir Tlais in 1998 where Hezbollah members are counted amongst the suspects to have taken part in the assassination (Interview 4,6,8).

Moreover, religious leaders are key actors in the process of desectarianization because at the heart of sectarianism is the question about the scope of religious identity for ordering public life. As key architects of constructing religious identity, clerics cannot be absent from this debate. Religious identity cannot exist without religious leaders that define the nature and parameters of that identity. From that perspective, effective desectarianization must engage religious leaders. Failing to do so renders post-sectarian projects fragile and easily penetrable by disgruntled actors.

With that in mind, it is imperative to have Shiite clergymen that are committed to desectarianization speak up about a post-sectarian order that is in harmony with Shiite ideology. Hezbollah's doctrine of Wilayat al-Faqih, for instance, serves as a core belief of the party. It shapes the party's approach towards the state and the political order in Lebanon. It also colors the attitude that Hezbollah members have towards their sectarian other. Moving beyond sectarianism requires having a frank discussion about the Wilayt al-Faqih doctrine, and how it consecrates sectarianism in a religiously diverse society. That discussion must be led by well-informed individuals that understand Shiite traditions, history and concerns. While that could be handled by various learned individuals, non-partisan Shiite clergymen are better positioned to do that because they presumably have the interest of preserving Shiite identity in ways that non-practicing Shiites or non-Shiites generally could. In other words, non-partisan Shiite clergymen are critical desectarianization agents because they could generally enter into negotiations about the proper place for Shiite identity in structuring public life without having their motives questioned.

5.2 Deficient Citizenship

Another normative issue that hampers the efficacy of desectarianization relates to the concept of citizenship. Citizenship is a modern concept, and it describes state-society relations. It is about how citizens in a given state relate to each other and to their rulers. It is "the mechanism that binds together state authority and citizens under its jurisdiction" (Butenschøn, 2018, p. 2). Citizenship is widely perceived as a social contract between the ruler and the ruled. The contract explicitly, as in liberal democracies, or implicitly, as in some authoritarian contexts, defines the rights and responsibilities of citizens and rulers, and orders their interaction. Recent research demonstrates how citizenship is a dynamic construct, governed by contextual and material factors (Jones and Gaventa, 2002). Thus, it can be a positive concept that is attractive to individuals, for it enshrines personal rights and a collective identity and purpose. At the same time, citizenship can be a negative force if is founded on exclusionary politics or it is characterized by oppression, distrust and subjugation.

In the context of desectarianization, a healthy citizenship can help deconstruct sectarian structures by promoting what is common amongst the citizenry, and by employing that unity in the service of improving living conditions and raising national living standards. A healthy citizenship mobilizes people along professional identities and economic interests, and in the process weakens sectarian affiliations and tribal and informal networks (Jones and Gaventa, 2002, p. 10). That notion of citizenship subverts relations of powers that revolve around

sectarian leaders and their patronage network. It establishes an ideological basis that challenges and dismantles sectarian narratives. From that perspective, it is appropriate to conceive of advancing a healthy conception of citizenship, backed by structures that encourage and reward good citizenship, as an act of desectarianization.

Framework for understanding citizenship

In order to operationalize the notion of citizenship, and to help systematically evaluate its merits, this section will utilize Keith Faulks' seminal conceptualization of citizenship (Faulks, 2000). Faulks outlines three parameters that capture the morphology of citizenship: extent, content, and depth. Extent of citizenship pertains to membership and boundaries: who should be regarded as a citizen and based on what criteria. Discussion around this question is often closely connected to the exclusionary concept of nationality and the underlying state system. Yet to unlock the capacity of citizenship for facilitating social cohesion, Faulks argues for decoupling citizenship from the nation-state (2000, p. 19). This is where Faulk's second parameter, content, comes in. Content describes the rights, duties and obligations that substantially constitute citizenship. A rich sense of citizenship can only be achieved when the packaged content implies equality, justice and autonomy, and more importantly, contextual barriers that pervert those values are recognized and removed (2000, p. 24). Faulks here acknowledges the diversity found in postmodern societies and how that fragment traditional understanding of citizenship. As an alternative, he emphasizes increasing duties, such as the responsibility to vote or performing community service, as means to create conditions whereby legal obligations might be transformed into a sense of voluntary obligation between diverse individuals (2000, p. 164). This approach transforms citizenship from being a passive status to an active one. People can contribute to the best of their ability, and "by linking rights and responsibilities to an ethic of participation, citizenship can be reconceptualized as a *holistic* idea" (2000, p. 165 emphasis in original).

Faulk's third and final parameter for understanding citizenship is its depth. By this he means how demanding or extensive should our identity as citizens be, and to what extent should it take precedence over other sources of social identity and competing claims we have upon our time, such as family commitments or making a living? In this regard, Faulks leans on Diemut Bubeck's typology to contrasts thick and thin conceptions of citizenship (Bubeck, 1995). Whereas thin citizenship is built on rights and is therefore passive, thick citizenship is fashioned around rights and responsibilities and is consequently active. Thin citizenship perceives the state as a necessary evil, while thick citizenship considers political community, not necessarily the

state, as the foundation of good life. Thin citizenship encourages independence and freedom through choice, but thick citizenship encourages interdependence and freedom through civic virtue. In summary, thin citizenship is grounded in legal sanctions while thick citizenship appeals to virtue and morality. An important aspect of depth relates to the emergence of the public sphere and the rise of civil society (Meijer and Butenschøn, 2017). Societies that nurture thick citizenship facilitate the creation of spaces and organization where people can openly share their ideas and discuss matters of common interest.

With this framework in mind, it is possible to see how Lebanon suffers a crisis of citizenship. In terms of extent, Lebanon did not adjust its criteria for citizenship in light of demands and pressures from globalization. Since its independence, it clutched to the notion that citizenship is synonymous to nationality. Non-Lebanese people (e.g., Palestinian settlers) are legally prohibited from participating in public life (Stel, 2015), though that was frequently violated by powerful external actors. Like most of its Arab neighbors, nationality in Lebanon is inherited exclusively through paternal lineage, or granted exceptionally via presidential decrees. While this policy conspicuously hurts refugees and alienates migrant workers (Knudsen, 2009; Sater, 2013), it causes most damage to Lebanese women because it strips them of their right to pass down their nationality to their children (khatib, 2008).

The Lebanese law harshly diminishes the citizenship of Lebanese women in that upon marriage, women lose most of their civil rights, and they assume a subordinate legal position overshadowed by that of their husbands (Shehadeh, 2010). While this prejudice against women may be rooted in unchecked traditions or misogyny, it should not be ruled out that women's rights are curtailed as measure to maintain control over confessional balance in the country. If women that marry non-Lebanese are permitted to pass their nationality to their spouses and children, this would severely alter the demographic and sectarian balance on which Lebanon's political system is predicated. In other words, consociationalism not only reinforces sectarianism but it also hinders citizenship reform (Jaulin, 2014) From that perspective, to facilitate desectarianization, an expanded and thicker understanding of citizenship must be developed.; An understanding that traverses discriminatory social structures, and at the same time establishes order on inclusive and participatory parameters.

With regards to the content of citizenship, although Lebanon had more potential than its neighbors to offer a progressive understanding of citizenship, its descent into conflict intensified hostilities and deepened divisions between citizens. Historically, Lebanon's neoliberal economy flourished in a milieu where there is reasonable levels of individual freedom

and civil rights. Liberty and prosperity mutually reinforced each other and created an atmosphere that encouraged personal autonomy. However, economic growth does not necessarily mean a fair distribution of wealth. In fact, Lebanon's aggressive neoliberal policies produced a highly unequal order that concentrated wealth in the hands of few elites (Kardahji, 2015). Severe vertical and horizonal inequality created a disparate society that contributed to the outbreak of the civil war (Makdisi and Marktanner, 2009). Beyond that, war trauma and obstinate government attempts to revive elite-serving neoliberalism in the post-war period not only reproduced inequality, but intensified it (Salloukh, 2016; Taraschi, 2021). The 2019 protests accelerated the descent into extreme forms of inequality and widened the schism between those who have and those who do not. As a consequence, any semblance of social cohesion that remained was tattered and the prospects of fashioning citizenship on equality and justice suffered adversely.

It is important to highlight that inequality in Lebanon is mediated by the sectarian system. Although consociational power sharing was devised as a mean to increase equality of access to political and economic opportunities, it conversely had the effect of cementing initial inequalities (Makdisi and Marktanner, 2009). It was in the interest of sectarian elites to prevent a more just distribution of wealth, because that would keep the masses reliant on patronage networks that elites controlled (Baumann, 2016b). In summary, Lebanon's open and democratic society was well positioned to offer a rich conception of citizenship, but austere economic disparity, facilitated by a skewed political economy and enabled by a sectarian system, distorted Lebanon's liberalism and made the search for responsible citizenship more elusive.

Finally, Faulks talks about citizenship depth, and he contends that a thick citizenship permeates people's livelihood as well as positively informs their perspectives. Thick citizenship is desirable because it underpins the establishment of democratic practices (Grugel, 2003) In the case of Lebanon, thin citizenship is regrettably the norm. There is widespread disregard for collective moral responsibility. In the realm of civil life, people behave as independent actors seeking to maximize what they can extract from the state and their following citizens (Monroe, 2016). The notion of common good was dissipated at the hands of elites who entangle citizens in patronage networks that purchase their loyalty at the expense of loyalty to state institutions or projects (Ile and Mansour-Ille, 2021). Thus, a positive ethic emanating from inclusive and responsible citizenship failed to germinate.

According to the testimony of a couple of interviewed clerics, people do not feel like they belong to the Lebanese nation-state because the nation is fragmented, and the state is

fragile. As a result, there are little incentives for people to esteem citizenship or value their co-citizens. The state's failure to form and nurture active citizenship meant that citizens are less concerned about entering public life or allowing public life to influence their private life. This is not all that surprising considering how limited and narrow are the extent and content of citizenship in Lebanon. As a matter of fact, the absence of a congruous understanding of citizenship across Lebanon renders the concept sterile. The void created by the absence of a citizenship that binds people together in a cohesive collective was invariably filled by transnational religious ideologies (Salamey, 2021). Sectarianism became conflated with citizenship resulting in virtual cantons that are fortified by exclusive identities, and which deepen divisions between Lebanon's citizens. So long as sectarianism remains deeply rooted in Lebanon, inclusive and active citizenship will remain a thin veneer.

Having examined characteristics of citizenship in Lebanon, it is important to explore structures that impede the emergence of a healthy citizenship, for there lies the gateways to unlock desectarianization. Inclusive citizenship challenges the logic of othering that is embedded in sectarianism. By investigating reasons for active citizenship in Lebanon to remain so deficient, more light will be shed on the structures that impede desectarianization. The remainder of this chapter will discuss two key factors that stood in the way of promoting inclusive citizenship: dormant citizenship education, and disempowering NGO activities. The sections will also explore how Shiites clergymen can overcome those factors as desectarianization actors.

Dormant Citizenship Education

Thick citizenship evidently underpins vibrant democracies, but citizenship is not a concept to be taken for granted or assumed to exist perennially. Just as nation-states and civic responsibility are modern constructs, so is citizenship. Belonging and contributing to a wide community of people from disparate ethnoreligious backgrounds is not a natural instinct. Individuals are not born citizens. They must learn what that means, and what it entails. Through formal and informal socialization, individuals come to see themselves as part of a larger socio-political collective. They understand their rights and learn about their civic responsibilities. School curriculum, though insufficient on its own, is one of the key platforms for promoting citizenship (Pike, 2007). School aged children are at a formational stage in their lives, and introducing them to progressive understandings of citizenship has been shown to yield future generations of politically active and socially aware citizens (Jerome and Kisby, 2020). By contrast, failure to offer students a robust citizenship education distorts democracy, engenders inequality and develops ambivalent attachment to the nation-state (Banks, 2017).

Citizenship education has been the subject of worldwide inquiry recently (Akkari, 2020; Joris and Agirdag, 2019; Sant, 2018; Gaudelli, n.d.; Dorio et al., n.d.). This reflects the changing dynamics wrought by swift globalization and crisscrossing migration. Despite the global trend to revamp modern understanding of citizenship, and to advance postmodern citizenship education, citizenship education in Lebanon remains outdated, ineffective, and mired in contradictions.

As explained in previous chapters, there are several reasons that led to the breakout of the civil war. While the Lebanese educational system is not one of those reasons, post-war reflections point to how the country's education failed to promote a citizenship that could avert or minimize sectarian conflicts. This is evidenced by the Taif Agreement's commitment to reform the educational system and develop a new curriculum. The Agreement stipulates that public education should be reformed in order to respond to the country's arising needs, and it should be compulsory and made available to every person. In addition, the curricula should be revised to strengthen national belonging, fusion, spiritual and cultural openness. There should also be unified textbooks on the subjects of history and national education. To that extent, the government commissioned the Centre for Education Research and Development (CERD) to develop a plan and pertinent resources that would help build a united and coherent society.

CERD developed a plan that integrates input from different stakeholders (e.g., local educators, the public, and INGOs concerned with education). The team also developed a strategy for effective and efficient implementation. The curriculum was revised to accommodate students' different needs, while at the same time encourage them to take responsibility, moral obligation and dealing with others in a spirit of responsible citizenship (NCERD, 1994). Generally, the curriculum sought to form citizens that, amongst other things, feel proud and loyal of their country, understand their collective national history untainted by sectarianism, realize the importance of co-existence, interact and cooperate with their co-citizens in order to achieve a democratic and united society, and finally personify their spiritual heritage which is rooted in religion and attached to humanistic values and morals (1994, pp. 11–12). In 1995, the Council of Ministers approved CERD's "New Framework of Education in Lebanon", and a new curriculum and textbooks were introduced in 1997.

Although CERD offered a proposal that promotes a stable, peaceful and pluralistic society, it proved too ambitious to the point of being inapplicable. In the words of one CERD director, the proposal was

> …more idealistic than realistic or capable of being implemented. The principles of democracy have never been respected by those who contributed to their inclusion in the constitution and therefore in laws or any other legal document. The same could be said of social unity. The Lebanese government members have been the first to violate the law by manipulating their posts and using their authority for personal interests (Frayha, 2012, pp. 104–105)

In other words, the challenge with advancing an education that promotes social cohesion does not arise so much from difficulty in identifying appropriate educational policies and structures that promote democracy and active citizenship. Rather, the issue is with governments that fail to implement and enforce those designs. Public officials undermine citizenship education by violating the law and abusing their authority to block educational reform. In order words, for desectarianization through citizenship education to be effective, there must be structures that ensure accountability and equal opportunities before the law.

As a key architect of the New Framework of Education observed, the main challenge confronting social cohesion in Lebanon is political and it is related to the confessional system which divides people and prevents the achievement of national and civic goals (Assali, 2012). Lebanon's political system, with its emphasis on sectarian identity and utilization of patronage networks, discourage students, as much as older generations, from cooperating in the service of national unity and public interest. Lebanese political structures and governmental inconsistencies undermine equality and justice, which underpin social cohesion in conflict prone societies (Colletta, 2000). Citizenship education is not a panacea for sectarianism, but if it is to have a fair chance of reversing sectarianization, it must be delivered in a system where equality and justice can be enforced.

Non-partisan religious leaders have an important role to play in that regard. Remembering that thick citizenship appeals to virtue and morality, religious leaders can utilize the various platforms that are available to them (e.g., worship centers, print publications, media outlets, social functions…etc.) for the purpose of promoting ethical ways to live. Religious leaders' work is foundational for cultivating a milieu that can produce healthy citizenship that can restrain sectarianism. By promoting virtues such as tolerance, respect, honesty, and humility, religious leaders can hope to offset the division that sectarianism breeds. The sectarian leaders' historical record and power-sharing dynamics make them unfit and indeed incapable of nurturing qualities that curb sectarianism and pave the way for healthy citizenship, because

that would undermine their authority. Therefore, as long as sectarian leaders remain in control of government agencies and public institutions, it is futile to expect them to advocate for thick citizenship. Independent clergymen can help circumvent that obstacle. They can promote a moral economy that is activated by citizen cooperation and inter-sectarian collaboration, instead of a political economy driven by competition and profit maximization.

Without a doubt, religious leaders that take on this task will face opposition from their own class of clergymen that are loyal to the political establishment, not to mention opposition from the political establishment itself. For that reason, it is important to highlight that the work of establishing healthy citizenship requires a lot of effort and from different groups. Independent clergymen are well equipped and positioned in society to promote the morality and virtues that support thick citizenship. Their contribution is a critical component of a broad and multifaceted desectarianization project. Non-partisan clergymen cannot deconstruct sectarianism alone, but what they contribute towards citizenship education and towards sustaining a post-sectarian order few other actors can do.

On a related note, it is important to recognize that citizenship education in Lebanon has not passively fallen into neglect and disuse over time, but rather it was actively opposed by sectarian elites and their loyalists from the outset. The development of history textbooks is a case in point. Policymakers believed that history education can foster social cohesion by promoting an encompassing national identity that depends heavily on constructing a single account of history (Akar and Albrecht, 2017). Post-Taif governments supported the writing of a unitary national history textbook for public and private schools. The idea was to have students learn about the history of modern Lebanon, up to and including events of the civil war, from the same resource. This was aimed at creating a consensus amongst students and avoiding contested and sectarian-charged interpretations, even though there was a recognition that this would produce a tunnel vision on Lebanon's past (Frayha, 2012). Nonetheless, Lebanese society was very fragile at that point, and was looking for any measure that would help unite the country.

Eleven committees were commissioned to write eleven history books for students in grade two to twelve. Disagreement amongst committee members quickly surfaced and delayed the release of the textbooks. The delay came at a time when textbooks for other subjects had been approved by the parliament and used by public schools.[3] In 1998, when history textbooks

[3] Private schools are not obliged to use government assigned textbooks in public schools, except for the subject of history and civics.

for grade two and three finally came out, and the textbooks for grade four, five and six entered the printing stage. This was a cause for congratulations. It looked like Lebanese could finally agree about their nation's modern origin. However, that success quickly dissipated when a new government was formed and the education minister took the extreme measure of seizing the year two and three books, and halting the printing of the three other books due to what was considered a procedural misstep (Frayha, 2012). In reality, however, the issue that disgruntled the education minister was a chapter in the year three textbook, which insinuated that Arabs (particularly, Syrian forces in Lebanon) were like other invaders occupying Lebanon (Hourani, 2017, p. 7). Following this clash, a new committee of historians was formed to complete the curriculum. The committee managed to finish the textbook writing in 2005 and had it approved by the government. Yet, the book did not see the light as several religious leaders and political groups objected to the content and the concept of a unitary history curriculum (Daher, 2009; Hourani, 2017).

In total, four attempts to develop a national history curriculum failed (Shuayb, 2016). In 2010 a new education strategy for Lebanon was launched as a response for the failure of the 1994 reform. This new strategy only provided general recommendations and priority areas to work on (Shuayb, 2019). It lacked implementation details, and focused on making education available to all residents in Lebanon. While citizenship education was flagged as a priority, due to pressure from the World Bank which funded the reform, scant attention was paid to that area since it coincided with the onset of the Arab Uprisings. The influx of Syrian children in Lebanese public schools overwhelmed the system and created a volatile situation that threatened the entire education sector. Although citizenship education was critical for alleviating ethno-sectarian tension that arose from prejudice against growing Syrian presence, its importance was overshadowed by an urgency to respond to the Syrian crisis more holistically. At any rate, sectarian leaders were scarcely concerned about the status of citizenship education. It is in their interest to keep citizenship awareness low, sectarian tension high and history textbooks replete with contradictions. It is by exploiting those crevasses that they maintain communal distinctions and propagate their sectarian narratives which enable them to maintain their power and influence.

Disempowering NGO activities

Determining the content and extent of citizenship has traditionally fallen within the jurisdiction of the state. The state draws the boundary lines between who is a citizen and who is not. The state outlines the rights and responsibilities of the citizenry in a form of a social

contract. States that cultivate thick citizenship produce a cohesive society that is more resistant to fragmentation or foreign infiltration. From that perspective, states find it in their interest to raise awareness about citizenship and create structures and programs that strengthen the co-citizen bond (Meijer, 2014). Challenges arise, however, when the state's version of citizenship is contested. For instance, disagreement over where to draw the inclusionary/exclusionary boundary line, or over the distribution of civil or politics rights, or over the role that religious identity is to play in the citizenship discourse all give rise to opposition groups. Those groups of dissatisfied citizens gradually organize themselves and spawn `s that make various demands. As movements grow, they draw voluntary associations and gradually come to embody what scholars and development practitioners call civil society (Nagel and Staeheli, 2016). Civil society is a collective that operates in a decentralized fashion to bring attention to an important and underrepresented issue for the purpose of introducing societal and/or political change. In the context of citizenship, civil society, especially in the form of nongovernment organizations (NGOs)[4], plays a major role in democratization and citizenship awareness.

To be sure, nobody has a monopoly over citizenship education (Staeheli and Hammett, 2010). People are exposed to citizenship norms through formal and informal channels. Government programming, public and private schools, and religious studies contribute significantly to citizenship knowledge and awareness. In addition, people learn complex and dynamic understandings of citizenship in the course of dealing with their peers, family members, as well through relating to groups and communities that they engage with (Jeffrey and Staeheli, 2015). Still, while the sources of acquiring citizenship understandings are many and diverse, NGOs occupy a prominent position in shaping people's comprehension of citizenship, particularly in post-conflict societies (Nagel and Staeheli, 2016). Since the early 1990s, international development agencies in the Global North, under pressure from human rights activists and global market forces, mobilized local NGOs to support democracy, good-governance, and civic-participation initiatives (Basok and Ilcan, 2006). This led to a proliferation of citizenship programs delivered by the NGO sector. While this positively contributes to the expansion of civil society and encourages commitment to citizen participation, it raises questions about the assumptions that underpin those programs (e.g., individualism, secularism, liberal democracy…etc.) and about the capacity of the associated NGOs to contribute to desectarianization through citizenship education.

[4] Many researchers as well as practitioners of global governance treat civil society as synonymous with NGOs (Scholte, 2013).

As already noted, the construction of an agreeable or working understanding of citizenship in Lebanon is highly contested by the various confessional groups. This stifled state-sponsored citizenship education, but did not have the same effect over the NGO sector. International donors that invested in Lebanon's post-war reconstruction were keen on promoting democracy and ensuring domestic and regional stability (Carapico, 2002; Sadiki, 1998). The pouring in of foreign funds was accompanied by a surge in NGOs that campaigned for social reform and civic participation. Gradually, the NGO sector, anchored by UNESCO, became an increasingly visible component of civil society, and expanded the capacity of citizen activism (Nagel and Staeheli, 2016). Lebanon has thousands of NGOs registered under social development missions, with more than 400 of them functioning through donor funds (Akar, 2020). These organizations help educate people, mostly the youth, about their place and potential in society. They encourage tolerance, promote diversity, and provide training that enables young citizens to bring their future vision of a healthy society into reality. Nevertheless, these NGOs are confronted by limitations that put a check on their effectiveness to produce a citizenship culture that reverses sectarianism.

A comparative analysis of citizenship programs delivered by foreign-funded NGOs across Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya and Tunisia in the period that followed the 2011 uprisings, raises issues about the efficacy of these programs to enhance the political agency of citizens (Geha and Horst, 2019). The study found these programs to be deficient in at least three areas: They fail to integrate local organizations and institutions, such as religious leaders and faith-based entities, in the development of citizenship understanding and teaching, which hurt their credibility; the programs are based on Western political order and social values, which raise questions about their relevance; and finally, programs are divorced from political reality on the ground, which undermines their applicability.

In other words, NGO's general disregard for local contexts, their deployment of foreign concepts, and their lack of awareness of local political structures does disservice to citizenship education. Instead of transforming political culture and strengthening national solidarity, citizenship programs run by NGOs left engaged citizens more frustrated and disillusioned with their agency. This led the study's authors to observe that "current active citizenship programs seem to depoliticize civil society in the region through the introduction of technocratic language and by encouraging participation through formal political systems that do not exist, or do not function" (2019, p. 487). That is, imported citizenship programs promote civic activism through existing political structures, but those structures are co-opted by corrupt state elites and are invariably used to entrench themselves in power. If citizenship programs are not preceded, or

at least accompanied, by top-down government reforms, they will do more to maintain the status quo than to facilitate desectarianization.

Of course, there is nothing to prevent the emergence of local and independent NGOs that develop contextual, relevant, and credible citizenship education programs. As a matter of fact, those NGOs and programs exist in Lebanon, but paradoxically they compound the problem of sectarianism in at least two ways. First, it is important to remember that NGOs are not the exclusive domain of civil society. Sectarian elites have founded scores of voluntary associations that participate in the formulation of citizenship (Kingston, 2013b). Run as NGOs, these associations engage in redefining the meaning of citizenship and molding people's allegiances in direct and subtle ways. An eminent example of this is the network of organizations that are managed by or affiliated with Hezbollah. These organizations mobilize hundreds of Shiite volunteers to serve their community. They are extremely efficient and have played an instrumental role in constructing Shiite identity and in advancing Hezbollah's version of citizenship, which is grounded in resistance against Israel and against Shiite marginalization within Lebanese society (Flanigan and Abdel-Samad, 2009).

Similarly, NGOs founded or sponsored by the major political parties in Lebanon propagate a sectarian reading of Lebanese history, national identity, and civic virtue that entrench sectarian divisions. While paying lip service to coexistence, religious tolerance and national unity, they socialize with young people to pledge fealty to defend and champion the sectarian community's imagined prerogatives. This systemic indoctrination is most visible through the work of confessional private schools (Farha, 2012; Baytiyeh, 2017), scout associations (Tagliabue, 2015; Bray-Collins, 2016), and university political clubs (Parreira *et al.*, 2019; Sayf el-Deen, 2018). To conclude this point, sectarian elites derailed inclusive citizenship education by infiltrating civil society and establishing their own associations that counter citizenship programs organized by local and foreign NGOs. This is what helped elites produce a continuous flow of loyal sectarian subjects.

Furthermore, NGOs in the Lebanese context generally tend to extend the life of the sectarian system by virtue of their existence. At one level, NGOs exist because governments are not sufficiently responsive and reflexive. NGOs compensate for state weakness and failure, and in the process, they extend the rule of inept authorities. Organizations that advocate for inclusive society and healthy citizenship but voice their opposition from the sidelines of the political arena avoid confrontation with political leaders and forfeit an opportunity to beat them at their own game. To change the status quo, civil society must produce professional political

parties and political coalitions that are committed to inclusive citizenship and can campaign, and contest national elections based on that platform (Halawi and Salloukh, 2020).

There is a need and a place for apolitical activism, but it can be contended that the proliferation of NGOs, especially foreign funded ones, has the effect of discouraging people from entering the political race for democratic change (Nagel and Staeheli, 2015). In addition, uprooting the intransigent political establishment in Lebanon requires concentrated and coordinated effort to win in the ballot box battle. Incidentally, this observation is one of the major lessons of the October 17 protests (Khatib, 2022; Jeffrey and Majed, 2022; Khatib, 2023). Individuals and organizational leaders grasped that no real and sustainable change can occur in the absence of focused political organization. Merely petitioning and lobbying existing political actors will not usher in a post-sectarian order. There is an urgency to formulate professional non-sectarian political parties that can win elections. This explains the explosion in the number of grassroots political groups over the last five years (Vértes, 2020).

On another level, NGOs are complicit in legitimizing the sectarian system. On one hand, sectarian elites work through formal and informal channels to enlarge their influence. On the other hand, civil society groups reach a stage where they must make their presence legal in order to facilitate their operations. This involves registering their organization with the government. At that juncture, NGOs enter a phase where they are vulnerable to penetration and manipulation by sectarian elites that control state institutions (Nagle, 2018a). Through their patronage networks in the public sector, sectarian elites penetrate, besiege, or co-opt NGOs that pose a threat to the sectarian order (Clark and Salloukh, 2013b). But since formal NGOs cannot avoid relations with the state, they must acknowledge and respect sectarian leaders' authority and work within the space afforded to them.

NGOs that seek to challenge the sectarian order must consider how to navigate bureaucratic structures to gain recognition but without succumbing to the dominance of sectarian. Submission to sectarian "red lines" would hurt the credibility of the NGO, whereas vociferous rejection of those lines would threaten the NGO's very existence. Ultimately, sectarian elites "pursue their political and socioeconomic interests at the expense of CSOs [Civil Society Organization], and civil society actors seek to instrumentalize the sectarian political system and its resources for their own organizational or personal advantage. The result is the preclusion of any effective mode of cross-sectarian affiliation or political mobilization and the sabotaging of anti-sectarian initiatives in Lebanon" (2013a, p. 732). As such, the dynamic that

governs the relationship between NGOs and sectarian state elites puts a limit on the capacity of NGO's to engage in effective desectarianization.

The fact that many Lebanese NGOs have been co-opted, emasculated, or irrelevant does not mean that NGOs are ineffective facilitators of change. Rather, it means that the Lebanese sectarian context is truly very complex and well-protected by state and sectarian elites. Surely a lot needs to be done to recondition the civil society sector, considering that out of 8,311 registered NGOs, only 1,094 are proven to be active (Beyond Group, 2015). Still, that does not rule out the existence of several effective and efficient NGOs that serve as a catalyst for the reversal of sectarianism.

Non-partisan religious leaders working towards desectarianization would do well to partner with such NGOs. Seeing that most politically independent clergymen are shunned by their own religious establishment, uncompromising NGOs offer those leaders a wider platform to disseminate their thoughts and promote their activities. There is considerable synergy that comes from NGOs and religious leaders joining hands to rid their country of sectarianism. Adyan Foundation is a prime example of that. As an organization committed to promoting citizenship and peaceful coexistence and diversity management among individuals and communities, Adyan produced a number of publications, documentaries and training manuals in service of that mission. The voice of anti-sectarian clergymen forms a core part of Adyan's materials and activities. Religious leaders provide pragmatic examples as well as theological arguments from their own faith traditions that support inclusive citizenship. Adyan has grown in its scope and outreach since its founding in 2006, but without deviating from its emphasis on religious content provided by religious leaders. It is difficult to evaluate the impact of Adyan's contribution to desectarianization given the dynamic nature of sectarianization. However, a good indication that the work of Adyan is disturbing the sectarian status quo is the lack of support and opposition that the Foundation receives from politicians (Interview 15). This includes government withdrawal from a commitment to introduce in public schools a state-of-the-art curriculum on inclusive citizenship that Adyan produced.

Conclusion

Normative impediments to desectarianization refer to social or cultural structures that hinder or prevent the process of desectarianization. Like domestic and geopolitical structures, normative structures are maintained and instrumentalized by sectarian leaders to reproduce sectarianism and prolong their rule. According to interviewed religious leaders in Lebanon,

distrust and a narrow understanding of citizenship form such normative structures that undergird the sectarian order in Lebanon and prevent its demise.

Political and social trust refer to the level of confidence that people have in the government institutions and in each other, which is critical for building a cohesive and inclusive society. In the Lebanese context, lack of political trust emanates from failure of the political establishment to lead the country to prosperity and to create decent living conditions for all citizens. The Lebanese government failed to prevent the 2019 financial collapse and remains unable or unwilling to find a solution to the crisis. This severely depletes people's trust in the state. It also negatively impacts people's trust of each other as social trust is tied to living standards, as well as to the legacy of conflict and national culture. After the Lebanese civil war, war militias ruled the country and escaped judgement. Instead of initiating a process of social healing and reconciliation, country leaders exonerated war criminals and reinforced sectarian identification. The lack of justice and the war mentality of sectarian alignment deepened distrust amongst Lebanese citizens.

Furthermore, the absence of a progressive understanding of citizenship stood as another obstacle confronting desectarianization. While any boundary markers are inherently exclusionary, the notion of citizenship in Lebanon did not evolve to correspond to changing local and global dynamics. Citizenship in Lebanon lacks the extent, content and depth to erode sectarian hostilities and usher a post-sectarian order. Sectarian leaders sought to preserve sectarianism by torpedoing attempts to standardize and promote citizenship education. Sectarian leaders also sought to coopt NGOs that advance citizenship awareness. At the same time, NGOs themselves share some of the blame for the absence of organized political parties that could challenge the sectarian system through elections and other institutional means.

Lack of trust and deficient citizenship operate as normative structures that impede desectarianization in Lebanon. In response, religious leaders can play an instrumental role in circumventing those structures by promoting values of unity, tolerance, and respect for diversity. Through interfaith dialogue religious leaders can foster a culture of dialogue and mutual understanding between the different sectarian communities. By engaging in interfaith dialogue, religious leaders can launch truth and reconciliation commissions, address misconceptions about religion, encourage respectful communication, and promote shared values to promote inclusive citizenship. Moreover, religious leaders can work towards desectarianization by promoting social justice. By advocating for the rights of all marginalized groups, not just in their own communities, religious leaders strengthen inter-sectarian bonds

and camaraderie in the fight against sectarianism. In parallel, religious leaders must speak out against corruption, especially in their own religious establishment. By exposing corruption in their communities and holding their sectarian leaders accountable, religious leaders demonstrate their commitment to equity and coexistence in Lebanon. They can speak out against discrimination, prejudice, and violence and work towards creating a more equitable society.

Shiite religious leaders have a unique contribution to make towards desectarianization by confronting matters related to one of the most powerful actors in Lebanon, Hezbollah. Non-partisan Shiite religious leaders are in a better position to negotiate matters related to Hezbollah's arms, which is a very controversial topic and an issue widely believed to be underlying corruption in Lebanon (Khatib, 2021). They understand Hezbollah's resistance ideology, they share concern for the Shiite community, and because of their political non-alignment, their motives presumably will not be questioned by Shiites or non-Shiites. As one of the interviewed shikhs in *Hey el-Solom (*part of the Beirut's Southern district) explained, "They [Hezbollah and Amal] do not like it when we speak up against they system and against the state, because it implicates them. They do not want us to awaken people's conscience because they know people will eventually turn against them. But we are not against them or anybody specific. We are against injustice and corruption. When we criticize this party or that party, it is because we have a vendetta against anyone. We are compelled by our conscience to speak the truth and to stand with the oppressed, even if it may cost us our lives". Non-partisan Shiite clergymen will no doubt face opposition from Hezbollah and alienation from superior Shiite authorities for questioning the status quo. For that reason, it is important to recognize that successful desectarianization does not hinge on Shiite religious leaders, or any one group. It will take a lot of time and diverse members of society to reverse sectarianism, but the point to highlight here is that non-partisan Shiite clergymen constitute a core part of that desectarianization force.

Conclusion

Overview

Sectarianism is a multifaceted and dynamic socio-political phenomenon that has been associated with political, economic, and social life in Lebanon. Lebanon's power sharing system of governance, which allocates parliamentary seats and key government positions based on religious sect, has fostered a political environment where sectarian identities are emphasized and exploited by sectarian elites. This system has led to the formation of sect-based political parties and alliances, which deepen social divisions and encourage clientelism. As a result, people prioritize the interests of their sectarian communities over those of the nation, contributing to a lack of national cohesion and undermining the development of a unified Lebanese identity. In that environment, access to state resources, economic opportunities, and government services is based on political allegiance rather than merit or need.

The sectarian system in Lebanon has had devastating effects on the country. It exacerbated economic inequality, fostered corruption, and hindered the development of a robust economy that could provide equal opportunities for all Lebanese citizens, regardless of their sectarian identity. The financial and monetary collapse that the country is experiencing since 2019 has its root causes in the patronage networks and cronyism that sectarian leaders sponsor. Over time, sectarianism has fostered social divisions amongst Lebanon's religious communities, and distrust in the institutions of the state. From that perspective, addressing the underlying causes of sectarianism, and working towards a more inclusive and equitable system will be critical in reversing Lebanon's downward trajectory and ensuring a more stable and prosperous future for its people.

To that end, this thesis investigated the mechanics of sectarianization in Lebanon and factors that impede the process of desectarianization in the country. The thesis firstly identified structural factors that reproduce sectarianism, and secondly explored the agency of religious leaders to circumvent those structural impediments. Given the complexity of sectarianism, the thesis adopted a multidisciplinary approach to investigate sectarianism in Lebanon by looking at domestic, geopolitical, and normative structures. Adopting a multidisciplinary approach was useful because it allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the underlying factors that contribute to the persistence of sectarianism. By focusing on these structures, it became possible to identify areas where intervention by religious leaders may be most effective to disrupt the cycle of sectarianization. The thesis focused on the agency of non-partisan Shiite

clergymen as desectarianization agents that challenge the primacy of sectarian identities in regulating public life.

Domestically, three of the most significant structures that perpetuate sectarianism in Lebanon are the Lebanese constitution, the neoliberal economy of Lebanon, and judicial appointments and transfers in Lebanon. The Lebanese constitution enshrines a power-sharing arrangement that allocates top government positions according to sectarian affiliation. While this arrangement ensures that political power is shared between the different religious communities, it effectively reinforces sectarianism by institutionalizing sectarian identity as a key determinant of political representation. The task of deconstructing sectarian tension is complicated by sectarian elites and the religious establishment obfuscating sectarianism and political sectarianism. Grassroots religious leaders may have different interests and face more restrictions than their superiors, but they still possess agency to challenge legal structures. They can push for constitutional reform, addressing root causes of sectarianism through the adoption of a non-sectarian electoral system, a civil code for personal status law, or a more decentralized governance structure. Moreover, by exposing corruption within their own religious communities, these leaders can undermine the cohesion that sectarian leaders try to project, which can either lead to reform or the distancing of people from religious institutions and gradually sectarian affiliation.

The neoliberal economy of Lebanon is another domestic structure that reproduces sectarianism in the country. The country's economic postwar policies prioritized the interests of sectarian elite and their associates, resulting in widespread poverty and inequality. The policies were influenced by sectarian elites' rent-seeking behavior, which weakened the state and created dependencies that are fulfilled by sectarian patronage networks that ultimately perpetuate sectarianism. Religious leaders lack the material resources and financial expertise to save Lebanon's from its economic collapse, but they can advance a discourse that facilitates desectarianization by promoting transparency and accountability within their communities and the broader political system. By advocating for anti-corruption measures and supporting efforts to hold political leaders accountable, they can foster a culture of integrity that helps break the cycle of sectarian patronage. Independent Shiite clergymen have the agency to serve as desectarianization actors by withholding their trust from corrupt sectarian parties and by supporting non-sectarian parties that demonstrate transparency and accountability.

Lebanon's judicial system is the third domestic structure that perpetuates sectarianism. Disregarding separation of powers, the appointment and transfers of judges in the system is to

a large extent based on sectarian affiliations, rather than merit or qualifications. Judges who defend sectarian elites and prioritize their interests are promoted, but judges that do not are transferred to less desirable positions or they are not promoted. By interfering in judicial affairs, sectarian elites use the judicial system to prolong their sectarian rule. Independent religious leaders can challenge the sectarian system by organizing and lobbying sectarian leaders to establish the Senate, which would represent all religious families, as per the Taif agreement. While there is no guarantee that the Senate would resolve the problem of sectarianism, religious leaders can anticipate this moment and coordinate with other actors to put clear limits on the jurisdiction and prerogatives of the Senate members.

Shifting to geopolitical structures, competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran, two regional powers with opposing political and religious ideologies, has had a significant impact on sectarian mobilization in Lebanon. The rivalry has reinforced existing sectarian divides in the country, particularly between Sunnis and Shiites. Saudi Arabia has historically supported Sunni groups, while Iran has backed Shiite groups, leading to a polarized political landscape. The Lebanese sectarian system makes it easy for Tehran and Riyadh to balance against each other in Lebanon by mobilizing sectarian identities. In parallel, Lebanese sectarian leaders maneuver to enhance their usefulness to external and internal allies, which perpetuates sectarian rule in Lebanon. To limit the effect of this geopolitical competition on sectarianization in Lebanon, independent Shiite clergymen can develop a theological framework for Shiite identity that is not dependent on Iran's Wilayat el Faqih or the Hezbollah-Amal power structure. By promoting an alternative Shiite identity that is indigenous and independent, non-partisan Shiite religious leaders can create a more inclusive identity and at the same time less susceptible to the external sectarian mobilization.

The conflict between Israel and its neighbors creates another regional security structure that contributes to instability in the Middle East and the perpetuation of sectarianism. Hezbollah's ideological commitment and determination to eliminate Israel is viewed by many Lebanese with a sectarian lens, seeing that Hezbollah’s anti-Israel stance serves Iran’s expansionist agenda in the region, more than it serves Lebanon. By grounding Islamic resistance in Shiite ideology and tying it to a larger geopolitical project, Hezbollah reinforces Shiite identity which automatically distinguishes other sectarian identities, thus reproducing sectarianism. Non-partisan Shiite religious leaders can play a role in deconstructing sectarian narratives that sow hostility and divisions between Lebanese people by reconceptualizing resistance against Israel. Shiite religious leaders have a legacy of opposing Israel. They can leverage that to call out

sectarianization moves carried out by Hezbollah and to deflect charges of collusion against the resistance.

Furthermore, the reproduction of sectarianism in Lebanon is closely tied to normative structures that reinforce sectarianism. Normative structures refer to the social norms, values, and expectations that shape people's behavior and interactions within society. A key normative structure that reinforces sectarianism is lack of trust. In Lebanon, successive governments have failed to implement measures that ensure long-term stability, but instead they led the country into a deep economic and political crisis. This resulted in a lack of political and social trust, where people do not trust state institutions or people outside their in-group. There are several factors that help explain this lack of trust, but the fact of the matter is that the absence of trust creates a sense of disillusionment and frustration among people. This can deepen sectarian divisions, as people feel more secure and looked after amongst their families and faith community. Religious leaders can play a crucial role in confronting structures that breed mistrust and sectarianism. They can promote reconciliation and healing caused by historical trauma to reestablish social trust. They can use their symbolic capital to hold corrupt leaders and members of their religious establishment accountable in order to restore trust in political institutions. Importantly, non-partisan Shiite religious leaders have an important role to play in leading discussions with Hezbollah about the proper place for Shiite identity in structuring public life.

Finally, the absence of a progressive understanding of citizenship serves as a structure that maintains sectarianism. With little emphasis on their identity as collective citizens of a nation, children in Lebanon develop their main identity around family and sectarian affiliation. The lack of emphasis on national identity and civic responsibility in schools means that sectarian prejudices and stereotypes are passed down from one generation to the other. Sectarian elites actively oppose the development of a unified citizenship education in order to maintain their power and sectarian rule. While a number of international NGOs play a major role in promoting civic participation, their citizenship programs often fail to integrate local institutions and values, and they tend to depoliticize civil society by not encouraging participation in organized political parties. Sectarian elites also co-opt NGOs that promote civic participation and use their own NGOs to cultivate sectarian loyalties. Non-partisan religious leaders can play a crucial role in promoting thick citizenship by promoting virtues such as tolerance, respect, honesty, and humility, and by encouraging citizen cooperation and inter-sectarian collaboration. Religious leaders can also partner with selected NGOs to promote inclusive citizenship and peaceful coexistence.

Claims to originality

Having examined the intricate dynamics of sectarianization in Lebanon, this thesis made a number of valuable contributions to the existing literature on sectarianism and desectarianization:

- The main contribution lies in the nuanced approach to confronting sectarianism, which involved categorizing the structures that perpetuate sectarianism and hinder the process of desectarianization into three distinct but interconnected categories: domestic structures, geopolitical structures, and normative structures. Examining these three categories of structures in tandem provided a framework that allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of sectarianism, and provided a roadmap for discussing desectarianization in a holistic manner. This framework recognized that sectarianism is not solely a product of one-dimensional factors but rather a complex interplay of various elements embedded within different spheres of influence. By delineating these three categories, the thesis moved beyond simplistic explanations and sought to accommodate the intricacies involved in addressing sectarianism and desectarianization.
- This thesis contributed to theoretical understanding of desectarianization by viewing desectarianization as an ongoing process rather than a finite goal. By considering the Cedar Revolution, the YouStink movement, and the Oct-17 protests as interconnected parts of a larger desectarianization wave, this study recognized the continuity and interdependence of these protest movements in challenging sectarian divisions. This approach aligns with the understanding that sectarianism is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that involves continuous social and political adjustment. Furthermore, the use of empirical field research and publicly available data sets strengthened the thesis's analysis of desectarianization in Lebanon. By incorporating firsthand observations and data analysis, this research provided a grounded understanding of the multifarious factors shaping the desectarianization process. This empirical approach enhanced the originality, credibility and robustness of the study's findings, contributing to the advancement of knowledge in the field of desectarianization.
- This thesis expanded the discussion on desectarianization by recognizing normative impediments to desectarianization, alongside internal and external structural challenges. While previous research has predominantly focused on structural factors such as internal power dynamics, institutional frameworks, and geopolitical power balancing, this study emphasized the importance of normative impediments. Normative barriers encompass

social and cultural norms, traditional beliefs, and religious dogmas that sustain sectarian divisions. By highlighting these normative impediments, this research underscored the need for a comprehensive understanding of the factors that reproduce and perpetuate sectarian mobilization. This nuanced focus broadens the perspective on desectarianization, urging researchers and policymakers to consider not only traditional domestic and geopolitical factors but also the deeply ingrained social structural barriers. Addressing these normative impediments becomes crucial in developing effective strategies for desectarianization since they shape individuals' attitudes and behaviors, thereby impacting the overall trajectory of desectarianization.

- Finally, this thesis made a significant contribution to the existing literature on desectarianization by adopting a unique lens of analysis that centers on the agency of desectarianization actors. In particular, this research extended the boundaries of inquiry by focusing on the agency of Muslim clergymen, specifically Shiite ulema as desectarianization actors within the context of Lebanon. This emphasis on the agency of religious leaders as agents of change sets this study apart from previous research, which often portrays Muslim clergymen in the Middle East as part of the problem that reinforces sectarian divisions. This research challenged this perspective by exploring the capacity of religious leaders to circumvent domestic, geopolitical, and normative obstacles that hinder desectarianization efforts.

Answers to the research questions

This thesis set out to answer two interrelated research questions: what are the structural factors that reproduce sectarianism and hinder desectarianization in Lebanon? And what agency do religious leaders, primarily non-partisan Shiite clergymen, have as desectarianization actors to circumvent those structures? Having identified and explored the key structural factors, this research provided various ways for religious leaders to overcome those structures. Religious leaders can advance desectarianization by advocating for constitutional reform. They can draw attention to how certain legal elements reinforce sectarian structures, and they can then call for their removal or modification. For example, they can advocate for the adoption of a non-sectarian electoral system, the establishment of a civil code for personal status law, or a more decentralized governance structure that reduces the importance of sectarian affiliation. By addressing structural factors, grassroots religious leaders demonstrate their readiness to confront the root causes of sectarianism and not just the symptoms. They can also work towards ensuring that new structures are inclusive, and respecting the rights and freedoms of religious communities.

Additionally, religious leaders, especially lower-ranking clergymen, can expose corruption within religious establishments. By doing so, they undermine the cohesion and integrity projected by sectarian leaders and the religious establishment. Exposing corruption within religious institutions can lead to a sense of shame and disassociation among individuals associated with that community, thereby driving a wedge between religious identity and sectarian belonging. By promoting transparency, accountability, and ethical business practices, religious leaders can hold sectarian elites accountable, thus dismantling clientelist networks that fuel sectarianism. By organizing awareness campaigns, religious leaders can also educate their followers about the virtues of ethical living and the negative impacts of corruption, nepotism, and cronyism on society. Such campaigns raise awareness about the inequalities and sectarianism perpetuated by sectarian leaders, creating pressure for change and promoting collective responsibility among sectarian communities to demand more inclusive and accountable governance structures.

In the Shiite community, independent Shiite clergymen can serve as desectarianization actors by discouraging support for sect-based parties and endorsing non-sectarian groups or programs. By laying the blame for the country's collapse on all sect-based parties, rather than a specific sectarian party, they could weaken ties between Shiites and the main political parties representing them, Hezbollah and Amal. Furthermore, by publicly endorsing openly non-sectarian groups, Shiite religious leaders normalize supporting political projects that are not affiliated with Hezbollah and Amal, thus indirectly encouraging their adherents to do the same. By weakening political loyalty to Hezbollah and Amal, Shiite clergymen contribute to the establishment of an order that is not controlled by sectarian elites. Shiite religious leaders must navigate the politically charged context carefully to protect their independence and avoid accusations of traitorship. Given how the October 17 protests and the Beirut explosion intensified anti-sectarian sentiments and gave rise to new cross-sectarian parties and coalitions, this provides conducive conditions for religious leaders to advance their messaging.

Furthermore, the agency of Shiite religious leaders is crucial in limiting the effect of the Iran-Saudi power struggle on sectarianization in Lebanon. While religious leaders cannot directly influence the foreign policies of regional powers, independent Shiite clergymen can play a significant role in creating a pathway for Lebanese Shiites that is not entangled in the Saudi-Iran power struggle. By advancing alternative political and religious ideologies that are not tied to Iran's Wilayat el Faqih or subject to the Hezbollah-Amal power structure, independent Shiite clergymen can open space for the development of a Lebanese Shiite identity that is both indigenous and independent. This helps counterbalance the influence of external powers, and

it promotes agency and self-determination within the Lebanese Shiite community. Another avenue through which Shiite religious leaders can exercise agency is by establishing local and sustainable *hewzas* in Lebanon. By establishing their own centers for religious training, independent religious leaders can provide a more diverse range of religious teachings and interpretations, promoting a more inclusive and less sectarian vision of Shiite Islam.

In the context of Lebanon's conflict with Israel, religious leaders can play a crucial role in reshaping the narrative surrounding resistance against Israel. Shiite ulema in Lebanon have a legacy of opposing Israeli occupation and aggression, and this opposition is deeply ingrained in the collective and individual identity of Lebanese Shiites. Non-partisan religious leaders can leverage their unique position and credibility to deconstruct sectarian narratives and reconceptualize resistance against Israel. By calling out sectarianization moves carried out by Hezbollah and Amal, independent ulema can help unite the country against Israel's aggression rather than fragment it. This requires bravery and unwavering commitment to Shiite identity, allowing religious leaders to lead introspection and circumvent the structural insecurity created by the Arab-Israeli conflict.

In the normative realm, Shiite religious leaders have the potential to be strategic desectarianization actors by utilizing their unique positions, moral authority, and influence amongst their faith community to promote political trust, mediate reconciliation, and challenge cultural factors that contribute to sectarian divisions. Firstly, they can help build political trust by facilitating dialogue between pro-Hezbollah and anti-Hezbollah groups, challenging the dominant narratives that demonize each group. Secondly, religious leaders, including Shiites, can facilitate a national reconciliation movement, drawing on teachings of forgiveness and compassion inherent in their faith traditions. They can acknowledge and address historical trauma resulting from the civil war, promoting healing and closure among communities. Lastly, religious leaders possess a moral authority that enables them to confront elements of the national culture that perpetuate sectarianism, and hold corrupt elites accountable for their unethical actions. Their judgment can damage reputations and diminish the legitimacy of those in power, contributing to the restoration of social and political trust.

Finally, independent religious leaders in Lebanon can help reverse sectarianization by promoting thick citizenship. Through the development of inclusive citizenship education, and by utilizing various platforms at their disposal, like worship centers and media outlets, religious leaders can promote virtues and ethical values that support inclusive citizenship, such as tolerance, respect, transparency, and the common good. By emphasizing these principles, religious leaders nurture a sense of shared identity and belonging among diverse communities, and counteract the division caused by sectarian structures and sectarian elites. To strengthen

their impact, religious leaders must collaborate with NGOs that actively promote citizenship, peaceful coexistence, diversity and inclusion.

Generalizability beyond Lebanon

While Lebanon's historical developments, socio-religious demographics, and governing structures are unique, certain principles and dynamics underlying the country's sectarianism are applicable across different contexts in the Middle East. Fundamentally, Lebanon's power-sharing system underlies the country' political fragmentation and polarization along sectarian lines. By allocating key government positions based on sectarian identities, with major roles reserved for specific religious groups (Maronites, Sunnis, Shiites and Druze), Lebanon's *muhasasa* often leads to fierce competition and violent struggle for political dominance amongst the groups sharing power. This dynamic is observable in other Middle Eastern countries where sectarian identities play a significant role in politics. In Iraq, for instance, a similar *muhasasa* system was formalized in 2003, which distributes power in accordance with the relative political weight of competing sectarian groups and factions. Subsequently, party loyalists were selected for high-ranking governmental positions, akin to political appointees in Lebanon. The Muhasasa system provided economic power to parties that advocate for ethno-sectarian divisions (Dodge, 2019). The problem is that those appointees were unqualified, or even worse, were placed in those positions primarily for enriching their patrons through illicit means (Al-Mawlawi, 2023). From that perspective, it becomes clearer that the power sharing system that characterizes Lebanon, and has come to dominate post-invasion Iraq, perpetuates a cycle of sectarianism and exacerbates divisions, hindering genuine national unity and progress.

Moreover, sectarianism in Lebanon has facilitated the proliferation of clientelism and patronage networks in ways that pose significant challenges to political stability, economic development, and social cohesion. Political elites establish and maintain support through the exchange of favors and resources with constituents, often based on personal connections rather than ideological alignment. This also involves the distribution of resources and benefits to sectarian group members, often in exchange for political loyalty. This pattern can be seen in other Middle Eastern countries where political leaders exploit sectarian identities to maintain power and control resources. For example, in Bahrain, the ruling Sunni monarchy instrumentalizes sectarian divisions to consolidate its power and suppress Shiite dissent (Jones, 2016). By utilizing patronage networks to reward loyalists and co-opt potential opposition, al-Khalifa regime inadvertently generates waves of protests and unrest (Shehabi, 2016). Another example of sectarianism facilitating the proliferation of clientelism and patronage networks can

be found in the case of Yemen. In Yemen, the country's political landscape is shaped by sectarian undercurrents dividing between the Sunni majority and the Zaidi Shia minority, particularly in the northern regions of the country. Saleh's regime manipulated those sectarian differences to justify authoritarian measures and suppress dissent (Durac, 2022). By framing political opposition, particularly from Zaidi groups such as the Houthis, as threats to Sunni dominance, Saleh consolidated support among his base and marginalized dissenting voices. In conclusion, the intertwining of sectarianism with clientelism and patronage networks presents formidable obstacles to political stability, economic progress, and social harmony.

Furthermore, sectarian dynamics in Lebanon is frequently exploited by external actors aiming to advance their geopolitical agendas. Regional powers like Iran and Saudi Arabia have historically competed for influence in Lebanon, leveraging their ties with Shiites and Sunni communities, respectively. They provide support to political parties, militias, or religious groups aligned with their interests, thereby exacerbating sectarian tensions and perpetuating instability to advance their geopolitical agendas. This pattern is observable across the Middle East, where regional powers and international actors exploit sectarian fault lines to project influence and pursue strategic objectives. For example, regional powers have intervened in the Syrian conflict to support their respective allies. Iran swiftly backed the Alawite-led Assad regime, while Turkey supported Sunni rebel groups opposing the regime. Other actors, like Saudi Arabia and Qatar supported different factions that serve their purposes for the region. The result was the deepening of sectarian divisions and widespread violence that caused immense human suffering and destabilization of the entire region.

In summary, sectarianism in Lebanon is perpetuated, amongst other factors, by power sharing dynamics, kleptocratic clientelism and external interference. These factors find resonance in other Middle Eastern contexts where political elites exploit sectarian identities to consolidate power and maintain control over resources. To address these challenges effectively, nuanced research is imperative. Understanding the unique historical, socio-political, and economic conditions in a given context is crucial for developing sustainable ways to move beyond sectarianism.

Further research

Sectarianism in Lebanon is a multifaceted and deeply ingrained issue that permeates the country's social, political, and economic landscape. Decades of conflict and power struggles among the various sectarian communities have resulted in a fragile state system, where sectarian identities regulate life and deepen divisions. The complexity of sectarianism in

Lebanon demands a comprehensive, multilayered approach to desectarianization, encompassing a wide range of actors, institutions, and perspectives. In this context, it is essential to explore different questions and research avenues to better understand the intricacies of sectarianism and identify effective desectarianization.

This thesis has focused on the agency of Shiite religious leaders as desectarianization agents. Independent Shiite clergymen in Lebanon have the potential to play a significant role in moving beyond sectarianization, although their influence may be constrained by various factors. While Hezbollah and Amal indeed hold considerable power and influence within the Shiite community, several independent Shiite clerics who have demonstrated their ability and willingness to engage in efforts aimed at promoting unity and de-escalating sectarian tensions, via running for political office, partnering with NGOs that promote inclusive citizenship, or through their own writings and public speaking. To maximize their impact, it is important to examine various aspects of their engagement in the Lebanese context. A crucial aspect of religious leaders' effectiveness in promoting desectarianization is their ability to remain independent or non-partisan. It is challenging for religious leaders to remain independent, as their legitimacy and influence are often tied to their religious establishment, but the establishment is under the influence of dominant political parties. For that reason, it is important to explore in more details the structures and factors that hinder religious leaders from achieving independence, including political pressures, financial dependencies, and historical legacies. Understanding these challenges can help identify ways to support the agency of religious leaders, ultimately contributing to desectarianization efforts.

Another key area for further research that pertains to the agency of religious leaders as desectarianization agents is their ability to cooperate with each other across sectarian lines. This is because such cooperation can initiate grassroots desectarianization efforts from within each sectarian community. It would be useful to explore instances of cooperation between religious leaders from different sects and to examine the conditions and mechanisms that enable such collaboration. By identifying successful cases and analyzing the factors that contribute to their success, the research would provide insights and recommendations to policymakers on how to equip and engage religious leaders as desectarianization agents.

Moreover, additional research is needed to investigate the role of religious education in promoting desectarianization in Lebanon. As religious leaders often hold significant influence in shaping religious education curriculum, they have the potential to include material that promotes tolerance, understanding, and acceptance of different beliefs and practices. Additional research is needed to examine the current state of religious education in Lebanon,

evaluate the extent to which it contributes to sectarian divisions or fosters coexistence, and explore how religious leaders can leverage educational opportunities to promote desectarianization effectively. By assessing the impact of religious education on young minds, the research can empower religious leaders to acts as desectarianization agents in Lebanon.

By addressing these questions, amongst many others, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities religious leaders face in their efforts to combat sectarianism in Lebanon and contribute to a more inclusive and cohesive society.

Appendix A: Profile of Interviewees

Interviewee #	Sect	Political Orientation	Interview Location
Interviewee 1	Shiite	Non-partisan	Beirut
Interviewee 2	Shiite	Non-partisan	Beirut
Interviewee 3	Shiite	Non-partisan	Beirut
Interviewee 4	Shiite	Non-partisan	Saida
Interviewee 5	Shiite	Non-partisan	Beirut
Interviewee 6	Shiite	Non-partisan	Tyre
Interviewee 7	Shiite	Non-partisan	Saida
Interviewee 8	Shiite	Hezbollah	Beirut
Interviewee 9	Shiite	Amal	Nabatiyeh
Interviewee 10	Shiite	Loyal to Islamic resistance	Nabatiyeh
Interviewee 11	Shiite	Loyal to Islamic resistance	Saida
Interviewee 12	Sunni	undisclosed	Saida
Interviewee 13	Maronite	undisclosed	Beirut
Interviewee 14	Greek Orthodox	undisclosed	Beirut
Interviewee 15	Protestant	undisclosed	Beirut

Appendix B: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. What motivated you to enter the religious sphere?
2. Did you envision any political role as part of your spiritual vocation? Did that change over time?
3. How do you characterize sectarianism in Lebanon? What is your experience living in a sectarian system?
4. How do you understand sectarianism? Is it static or dynamic? What affects it?
5. Why is sectarianism so dominant in Lebanon?
6. What does a post-sectarian Lebanon mean to you?
7. How would you describe the social/political role of religious leaders, if any?
8. What impedes/incentivizes religious leaders to be socially/politically active?
9. How would you describe the relations between religious leaders and politicians?
10. What role do Lebanese state elites play in advancing/ending sectarianism?
11. What role do external actors play in advancing/ending sectarianism in Lebanon?
12. What other factors help advance/end sectarianism in Lebanon?
13. What role do religious institutions play in advancing/ ending sectarianism?
14. Are you aware of any top-down or bottom-up efforts to reduce the dominance of sectarianism in Lebanon?
    - If yes, describe them? Do you think they will make a difference?
    - If no, why do you think no major efforts emerged? Are you hopeful?
15. What identities/ideologies might replace sectarian identities?

Appendix C: Key words and themes from interviews

#	Interviewee 1	Interviewee 2	Interviewee 3
1	corruption	Assad regime	banks controlled by politicians
2	cronyism	banking system	blind followers
3	clientelism	Taaif	broken system
4	fragmented communities	clientelism	corruption
5	grassroots activism	deep state	court corruption
6	ideological differences	fear of other	education for tolerance
7	Israel	follower-mentality	Greed
8	no national identity	hopelessness	inter-sectarian conflicts
9	Palestine	identity politics	Israel
10	patronage	manipulation	lack serious reconciliation efforts
11	no trust	Palestinian freedom	no sovereignty
12	regional rivalry	political patronage	Poverty
13	religious courts	poverty	religious education
14	sectarian elites	power balancing	sectarian leaders
15	no accountability	lack of awareness	sectarian mentality
16	sectarian mentality	refugees	sectarian propaganda
17	Tribal allegiances	sectarian culture	Them not us mentality
18	violence/war	Socioeconomic disparities	US
19	zu'ama	spheres of influence	zero accountability
20		tribal politics	Zu'ama
21			proxy actors

#	Interviewee 4	Interviewee 5	Interviewee 6
1	civil war	civil war	change is difficult
2	conflicting ideologies	colonial legacy	Christians vs. Muslims
3	economy	despair	civil war
4	external interference	exploitation	education
5	government resources	external interference	external interference
6	Hezbollah	external sponsorship	Hezbollah-Amal powerful
7	Israel	Hariri	intra-sectarian conflicts
8	Aoun-Geagea	history	Israel
9	lack of awareness	Israel	lack of trust
10	law not enforced	need better training for emerging leaders	one person cannot make a difference
11	no accountability	people don't think critically	peacebuilding
12	political manipulation	politicians control money and power	power sharing
13	power sharing = power hungry	regional politics	sectarian rhetoric
14	proxy conflict	religious establishment	skewed economy
15	religious institutions corrupt	sectarian mentality	Supreme Islamic Shiite Council
16	sectarian mentality	sectarianism in education	
17	sectarian spheres of influence	suspicion	
18	Them not us mentality	systemic corruption	
19		Taif	
20		UN	

#	Interviewee 7	Interviewee 8	Interviewee 9
1	broken system	civil war trauma	broken system
2	clientelism	communal tensions	civil war
3	constitution	East vs. West mentality	clientelism
4	corruption	Israeli attacks	corrupt judges
5	cultural mosaics	Kataab	factionalism
6	divisive narratives	mistrust	fragmented Christian community
7	government salaried clergy	Palestinian question	Israel
8	ideology	political prisoners	lack of trust
9	Iranian backing	power hungry	no national identity
10	Israel	puppet government	power balance favoring politicians
11	lack of trust	Rafic Hariri	power sharing
12	leave Lebanon alone	religious courts	resources mismanagement
13	muhasasa	sectarian mentality	Saudi-Iran
14	Palestinian rights	sectarian zu'ama	sectarian culture
15	religious hierarchy	system benefiting select groups	sectarian leaders
16	Revolutionary guard	Ta'if	Stolen economy
17	Sectarian clashes	militia rule	Taaif agreement
18	sectarian mentality		US hegemony
19	suspicion		weak state
20	US		

#	Interviewee 10	Interviewee 11	Interviewee 12
1	banks	clientelism	banks
2	civic education	colonial legacy	civil war
3	civil war	corruption	clientelism
4	colonialism	divisive narratives	constitution
5	constitution	Israel	corruption
6	defending the sectarian community's rights	no national identity	deep state
7	history books	sectarian mentality	different cultures
8	hope in youth	sectarian propaganda	education for tolerance
9	Israel	socioeconomic conditions	Hariri
10	power sharing	US hegemony	Iran
11	sectarian culture		lack of trust
12	sectarian elites		no sovereignty
13	system discourages trust		Palestinian freedom fighters
14			problem with regime
15			religious education
16			religious hierarchy
17			resources mismanagement

#	Interviewee 13	Interviewee 14	Interviewee 15
1	Assad regime	Aoun-Geagea	change is difficult
2	civil war memories	broken system	constitution
3	communal tensions	cultural mosaics	corruption
4	defending the sectarian community's rights	education	despair
5	external interference	external interference	East vs. West mentality
6	Israel	fragmented communities	economy
7	Greed	lack of awareness	factionalism
8	Hezbollah	law not enforced	legal system broken
9	intra-sectarian conflicts	people don't think critically	political patronage
10	need better training for emerging leaders	proxy conflict	politicians control money and power
11	power sharing = power hungry	raise awareness	proper training
12	proxy actors	sectarian clashes	religious institutions corrupt
13	refugees	sectarian culture	sectarian blood
14	religious courts	sectarian elites	sectarian leaders
15	sectarian zu'ama	spheres of influence	sectarian political parties
16	sectarian mentality	system discourages trust	sectarianism in education
17	suspicion	Taif	Syria
18	Taaif agreement		system benefiting select groups
19	US		zu'ama

Emerging themes from key words

- Governing structures in Lebanon, particularly power-sharing, reproduce sectarianism.
- Lebanon's economy is subjected to the interests of sectarian elites.
- Abuse of political immunity undermines the rule of law and enshrines sectarian rule.
- Unresolved historical grievances keep sectarian tensions alive.
- External interference instrumentalizes sectarian differences.
- The Palestinian question is key to moving beyond sectarianism in Lebanon.
- Suspicion and lack of trust between Lebanese undermines any desectarianization effort.
- Forming a common understanding vis à vis national identity and national interest is critical to end sectarianism in Lebanon.
- Changing the status quo starts by confronting sectarian narratives and propaganda.
- Hope for a post-sectarian future in Lebanon relies in raising more tolerant and self-aware generations.
- Religious leaders are constrained by religious hierarchy and political manipulation.
- Independent clergymen have agency to reconstruct sectarian identities in a nonabrasive way.
- Changing political, economic and social structures that reproduce sectarianism requires sustainable concerted efforts amongst Lebanon's disgruntled public.

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