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Sectarianism and International Relations

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The Project on Middle East Political Science

The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) is a collaborative network that aims to increase the impact of political scientists specializing in the study of the Middle East in the public sphere and in the academic community. POMEPS, directed by Marc Lynch, is based at the Institute for Middle East Studies at the George Washington University and is supported by Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Henry Luce Foundation. For more information, see http://www.pomeps.org.

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Introduction: Sectarianism and International Relations

By Simon Mabon (Lancaster University) and Marc Lynch (POMEPS)

Sectarianism has surged in the politics of the Middle East over the last two decades. The Iraqi civil war unleashed horrific images of sectarian massacres, exacerbating underlying cleavages and driving the formation of armed sectarian militias. Syria's civil war intensified and accelerated those dynamics. Meanwhile, sectarian repression defaced political systems such as Bahrain's in the aftermath of the 2011 Arab uprisings.

Political scientists, as Morten Valbjorn explains in this collection, have divided over how to best explain this upsurge of sectarianism – and over the possibility of undoing those politicized hostilities. Some scholars have emphasized bottom-up drivers of sectarianism, as individuals and groups responded to the threats and opportunities created by state failure or identity-based state repression. Others scholars highlighted the role of sectarian entrepreneurs who used public rhetoric and political communication in novel ways to demonize opponents and fan hatreds.

This collection highlights a third line of inquiry: geopolitical competition. It focuses on how the competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia, in particular, has played out across the Middle East with devastating repercussions in Iraq, Syria, Bahrain, Lebanon and Yemen. It does not seek to minimize the importance of the other drivers. It simply seeks to explore how and where that geopolitical rivalry has inflamed or exploited sectarianism– and, equally importantly, how and where it has not.

The essays collected here were initially presented at a joint SEPAD-POMEPS workshop held at Chatham House in February 2020. The authors were asked to reflect on the ways in which geopolitical tensions between Saudi Arabia, Iran, the United States – and others – shapes conflict and societal tensions across the Middle East and beyond. Some common themes run through their responses – and some intriguing points of disagreement.

Saudi-Iranian Competition and Regional Structure

Understanding the interaction between domestic, regional and international politics has long been a key feature of International Relations – what Kenneth Waltz and others have termed the levels of analysis problem. The levels of analysis mode of analysis have always been complicated in the Middle East by the ways in which shared ethnicity, language, culture, religion and histories create a shared normative environment and distinctive set of political rules of the game. As the Arab uprisings of 2011 showed so dramatically, international structure in the Middle East is constituted by this common public sphere where events resonate across state borders as a consequence of shared norms, religion, or identities.

This overlay of balance of power with regional public sphere shapes the conditions under which Saudi Arabia and Iran played out their rivalry. The American response to the 9/11 attacks of 2001 and its invasion of Iraq in 2003 put the previous decade's unipolarity on steroids. The reckless drive for transformative primacy backfired, though, and over the past decade the global structure has been retreating from American hegemony to something far murkier. At the regional level, the post-2011 collapse of regional powers such as Egypt and Syria left the field open for the emergence of a multipolar structure, with great powers such as Israel, Saudi Arabia and Turkey joined by newer contenders such as the UAE and Qatar. At the level of the Gulf region, security across the Gulf settled into a sort of bipolarity, underpinned by American and Israeli support for Saudi Arabia and allies. This has never been a true bipolarity: the intra-Sunni conflict between the Saudi-UAE bloc and the Qatar-Turkey bloc, for instance, proved more important than the Iran-Saudi rivalry in North Africa and other areas.

Nonetheless, the Saudi-Iranian competition played out in a range of different arenas across the Middle East

– and beyond. The question for this collection is how important this competition has been for driving emergent sectarianism. If the rivalry stems from competing visions of regional order, then sectarianism might be epiphenomenal. If animosity stems from sect-based difference, alongside competing claims to leadership of the Islamic world, then it would be more central. If it is driven by domestic factors and regime security concerns, then the political landscape becomes far more complex, requiring the successful navigation of levels of analysis, with regional events shaping domestic affairs and vice versa.

Emergent Opportunity Structures

While the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is not new, the Iraq war and the Arab have transformed the terms on which the two powers compete. Their competing projects took on an increasingly prominent role in regional affairs through the fragmentation of political projects across the Middle East. Shared sectarian identities may be a means through which this is achieved, such as through the Iranian-led organization of Shi'a militias to fight in Syria or Gulf media urging Sunnis to contribute to supporting a jihad defined in sectarian terms. But, as contributors to this volume attest, we must not reduce regional politics to sect-based tensions but rather, as Greg Gause and May Darwich argue, connect them to material forces and power politics. Moreover, we must also critically reflect on the linkages between domestic and international politics, notably assumptions about regime types (and identities) and foreign policy behaviour.

The fragmentation of political projects after the Arab Uprisings created opportunity structures for regional powers to become involved in local politics in an attempt to exert influence. The unification of regional political space created a sort of security dilemma in which even powers without expansionary goals could not abstain from intervention for fear that rivals would take advantage. It is important to avoid overstating the role of external powers, however, and grant some agency to local actors who often seek to capitalise on regional tensions and position themselves on particular sides for domestic purposes.

The question of whether politics is determined by *inside-out* or *outside-in* is one that features heavily across this collection of essays amidst the conflation of domestic and regional politics in the context of a shared normative environment. Moreover, post 2011, the increased salience of sect-based identities created scope for the mapping of geopolitical aspirations onto sectarian kin across divided societies. In this context, regional powers are seen to be able to exert influence through cultivating relationships with local actors, while local actors are able to position themselves in particular ways in pursuit of material and ideational support from regional actors. Yet as Morten Valbjørn observes in this collection, much like debates within literature on sectarianism, questions of *who*, *where*, *when*, *why*, and *for whom*, which help to understand the ways in which sect-based identities are positioned within International Relations.

Why does sectarianism sometimes matter… and sometimes not?

Although sect-based identities have taken on prominence across the Middle East, other identities continue to resonate, also shaped by the contingencies of time and space. For example, Iraqi nationalism has been viewed by many in Saudi Arabia as a bulwark against Iranian-led Shi'a leadership. The Iranian consolidation of power following the 2003 invasion was viewed with great trepidation by Saudi Arabia for whom Nouri Al Maliki – the erstwhile Prime Minister of Iraq was viewed as an "Iranian agent." The transition away from the "pro-Shi'a" politics of Al Maliki to a more inclusive vision put forward by Haider Al Abadi thus provided an opportunity for Saudi to erode Iranian gains.

Indeed, as Jacob Eriksson explores, Saudi Arabia sought to mobilize a nationalist agenda - in contrast to Iranian efforts to exploit sectarian divisions - supported by the deployment of material resources. Beyond this, Iraq

has sought to position itself as a mediator in tensions between its Gulf neighbours, yet the escalation of protests in late 2019 posed serious questions about Baghdad's influence on regional politics along with both Saudi and Iranian influence in Iraq. Maria-Louise Clausen takes this analysis of Iraqi nationalism a step further, reflecting on the October protester's rejection of external interference and efforts to exert agency in the face of broad systemic pressures on domestic politics in Iraq.

In Bassel Salloukh's contribution to this volume, the case of Hizballah is used as a means to reflect on the salience of ideational factors amidst material pressures. Salloukh traces the evolution of the Party of God's position on the sectarian organisation of Lebanese politics from a staunch rejectionist position in its formative years to "perhaps its most significant prop." Hizballah's involvement in the Syrian war left it exposed to the virulent sect-based animosity that it had for so long rejected, while its actions also put a huge strain on its material capabilities. When the October 17 protests broke out across Lebanon, driven by broader Lebanese economic challenges, the Party of God's own material resources had dramatically waned, leaving it to rely on its ideological capital.

The permeability of Lebanese politics – best seen in the creation of the March 8 and March 14 blocs – left many suspecting that the October protests would lose its anchoring in domestic affairs. Yet, as Helle Malmvig and Tamirace Fakhoury argue, this has not occurred as a consequence of efforts to stress inclusivity, a direct avoidance of sectarian polarisation, and 'rising above' geopolitical binaries. In spite of initial successes, Malmvig and Fakhoury suggest that *geopoliticization* – a discursive process of moving issues from the domestic level to the international – provide the means for elites with a vested interest in the survival of the power-sharing system to try and discredit the protests movements.

In the context of these changing environments, the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has also changed. As Chris Phillips argues, changes to regional structures allowed Iran to gain the upper hand, capitalising on opportunities, using material and ideational capabilities in a way that out manoeuvred its regional rivals.

Similar variation can be seen beyond the borders of the Middle East. As May Darwich and Edward Wastnidge explore in this volume, Riyadh and Tehran – amongst other regional powers – have become increasingly involved in the Horn of Africa and Central Asia, amongst others, drawing on material and ideational reserves in pursuit of their interests.

As Wastnidge notes, Central Asia provided new opportunities for Saudi Arabia and Iran to exert influence across the wider Muslim world: for Iran, this helped reduce isolation and for Saudi Arabia, it provided opportunities to export its ideological vision. But, as Darwich notes, similar opportunities in the Horn of Africa driven by material power largely did not manifest in sectarianism.

Sectarianism and Power Politics

Gause and Phillips emphasize that while sect-based allegiance is undeniably important, it is one tool amongst many in a leader's ideational arsenal which must be taken alongside material capabilities. Reflecting on this, it is important, as Valbjorn argues, to remember that sectarianism is but one strand amongst many, including national, ethnic, and linguistic identities, and ideologies.

Decisions over when to deploy ideational or material tools are contingent on context. When ideational capital is eroded, it is hardly surprising for actors to turn to material capital and, conversely, when material capital is eroded, actors may deploy ideational capital. Understanding the conditions in which these decisions are taken requires reflecting on both domestic and regional contexts and navigating a set of complex IR questions. Power politics can never fully be divorced from questions of identity – especially when the exercise of political power involves the exploiting of identity cleavages available for mobilization. Sometimes that will mean sectarianism, sometimes it will not.

The strategic use of sectarianism increases in significance to the extent that the passions inflamed persist beyond the immediate conflict. If sectarian mobilization easily diffuses once the fighting ends, then it may be more easily dismissed as epiphenomenal. Decades of the study of ethnic conflict and identity wars suggests that this is not likely the case, however. Sectarian and identity divides which are magnified by the horrors of war do not easily fade from memory. They tend to become entrenched in individual psychologies, communal norms, political institutions, media frames, legacy armed groups, and historical memory. The sectarianism inflamed by the last two decades may prove alarmingly resistant to efforts to rebuild regional order even if the balance of power shifts and states move towards de-escalation. The essays in this collection offer only a first look, then, at where these processes come from and where they might lead.

— March 2020

Rivalry Amid Systemic Change:
Iranian and Saudi Competition in the post-American Middle East

By Christopher Phillips, Queen Mary University

Saudi Arabia has sought to contain Iran's regional influence since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Until 2003 it was relatively successful. The fallout of the invasion of Iraq set back Saudi containment strategy significantly. Since the 2011 Uprisings, Riyadh has had even less success. The rivalry has played out in various regional arenas, notably Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon and Bahrain.

Despite being seemingly well placed, Saudi Arabia is losing most of these contests. Bahrain remains a firm ally, but Riyadh's involvement in Lebanon has diminished, while its intervention in Yemen's civil war has done little to defend Saudi influence. Saudi-backed efforts to push Iran out of Syria have failed, while Iraq looks unlikely to swap camps any time soon. The extent of Iran's 'victories' can be debated, to be sure, given they have helped wreck Syria and Yemen and provoked opposition both back home and on the streets of Lebanon and Iraq. However, in relative terms vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia, Iran has come out on top.

The question posed by this paper is why? It is not new that the rivalry is asymmetric. Saudi Arabia treats Iran as its primary threat, while Iran sees Saudi Arabia as part of a wider western threat, led by the US and Israel. Each has different advantages and limitations in terms of material capabilities, ideological appeal and international alliances. Those advantages and limitations vary significantly across different theaters. But Saudi Arabia was able to successfully contain Iran for the first three decades after the Iranian Revolution. What changed?

Much can be explained by changes to the international and regional system in the wake of the 2003 Iraq war. This created space and opportunity for Iran that had not existed before.[1] Saudi Arabia subsequently 'under-balanced' its rival and failed to build a coalition to halt Iran's advance.[2] However, this Systemic Realist analysis, with its focus on the deployment of material capabilities, external structural forces and international alliances, underplays the role of ideational and domestic factors.[3] Neoclassical Realist (NCR) theories help to better explain both Saudi failure and Iranian success by showing how domestic factors interacted with external forces after 2011. Focusing especially on Syria and Yemen, I explore how the Iranian leadership proved more adept at taking advantage of the changing regional environment, maximising their material, ideological and international capabilities. In contrast, Saudi Arabia made repeated errors in both arenas, failing to utilise the advantages they had over Iran. This is significant within this volume's exploration of sectarianization, as the rivalry in both Syria and Yemen shows how sect identity was a strand of ideological capabilities mobilised by both states. However, as Morten Valbjorn discusses in his paper, it was only ever one strand alongside other non-sect identities and ideologies, and was one weapon among many.

Systemic change and differing capabilities

The 2011 uprisings triggered a new fierceness in the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, providing new arenas of competition like Syria and Yemen. The contextual systemic change was caused by structural shifts a decade earlier.[4] At the global level, the 2010s were shaped by a rising China and a more militarily interventionist Russia, and the world order shifted from uni-polarity to multi-polarity. This happened earlier in the Middle East, where the uni-polar 'Pax Americana' of the 1990s was already giving way to multi-polarity between 2003 and 2011.

Iran and Saudi Arabia's rivalry was a symptom of this shifting regional and global order, triggered by the ways in which the removal of Saddam Hussein empowered Iran. Iranian domestic factors were also significant, as more interventionist IRGC hardliners rose to power, and growing economic prosperity enabled a more activist

foreign policy. Saudi Arabia responded by confronting its rising rival, stepping up its role in Lebanon and Yemen. However, it was at a structural disadvantage given the pillar of its Iran containment strategy – the US – was becoming more withdrawn, especially under Barack Obama. Saudi leaders and diplomats were thrown by Obama's diplomatic style, which they experienced as unfriendly compared to George W Bush. This discomfort turned to fury when Obama abandoned Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in 2011. Throughout, the Saudis appeared to prefer to hold a grudge than adapt to the new leader in the White House.[5]

In terms of material capabilities in this rivalry, each had different advantages and limitations. Iran has a larger population, while Saudi has more disposable wealth. Iran has a bigger conventional military, but Saudi has more up-to-date equipment, especially its air force.[6] Importantly though, neither state has showed an interest or willingness to engage in direct inter-state conflict, which gives Iran an advantage as it has superior non-conventional military forces. Ideological appeal, while often dismissed by Realists, was a further important asset, especially given the sectarian element often present. Material reward, i.e. a salary, is not insignificant in mobilising nonconventional forces, but it is boosted and sometimes supplanted by ideological appeal.[7] Before 2011 both Iran and Saudi Arabia had successfully deployed ideology to mobilise fighters: Saudi in Afghanistan in the 1980s and Iran in Lebanon and Iraq in the 1980s and 2000s.

One huge advantage Saudi has over Iran is its international alliances which, according to Systemic Realism, could tip the balance to restrain Iran – as was the case until 2003. On paper, Saudi has more powerful allies than Iran: the United States, plus most European and Arab states. In contrast Iran has close economic ties to China, though no more so than Saudi, and a security relationship with Russia, particularly in Syria. Compared to Saudi, Iran has for a long time been comparatively internationally isolated.[8] Yet, as Gregory Gause notes, Riyadh has not been able to translate its nominal alliances into successful restraints on Tehran. As will be discussed, domestic factors also contribute to this inability.

Syria and Yemen

The Syria and Yemen conflicts are arenas of competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran that contrast in intriguing ways. Syria was an Iranian ally prior to 2011 that Saudi, among others, wanted to flip out of Tehran's fold. Yemen was a Saudi ally prior to 2011 that Iran sought to disrupt to weaken Riyadh. Both conflicts had domestic origins, but once war began both actors intervened in different ways to gain advantage. However, the outcomes in each conflict did not prove symmetrical, with Iran successfully defending President Bashar al-Assad, while Saudi Arabia has thus far proven unable to restore its ally to power in Sanaa.

In terms of deploying material capabilities, in Syria, Iran was willing to commit more financially to Assad than Saudi was to his opponents, and was superior at utilising non-conventional military forces. Riyadh was unwilling to utilize its superior military assets, such as deploying its air force. It was prepared to spend money on proxy forces, though less than Iran, and fighters it supported proved unable to turn the tide. In Yemen, we see the reverse but with different results. Saudi was willing to commit financially and militarily significantly more than Iran, including deploying its own conventional military. Iran, in contrast, deployed very small numbers of its own forces to back the Houthis, alongside training and money – yet a fraction of that spent by Saudi. Indeed, the Houthis had already captured Sanaa before Iran offered any significant support, but Tehran's backing helped to bog down the unsuccessful Saudi operation.9

Saudi's unwillingness to deploy its air force to Syria is understandable, but this gave Iran a decisive advantage being a better master of non-conventional warfare. Yet Riyadh did not recognise this in the early stages of the war, appointing Prince Bandar Bin Sultan to apply his expertise running Mujahidin in Afghanistan to Syria. In another instance of poor leadership impacting outcomes, despite his confidence Bandar proved incapable and was unable to marshal rebel forces into a united front. This was exacerbated by external factors: rival backers of the rebels, Turkey and Qatar, supporting different fighters,

and more domestic factors – Saudi opposing the Muslim Brotherhood forces preferred by Doha and Ankara.

In terms of ideological appeal, Iran successfully mobilised Shia fighters from Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan to fight in Syria. Similarly, sect helped it forge ties with Yemen's Shia Houthis and to arrange for non-Iranian Shia, such as Lebanon's Hezbollah, to train Yemenis. However, sect was not the only ideological tool Iran deployed successfully, nor was it always the preferred first option.[10] Since the 2000s Iran also posed as a leader of the anti-western 'Resistance Axis', appealing to non-Shias such as Hamas in Palestine. Indeed, despite the Houthis being Zaydi Shia, many saw their primary connection with Iran as the ideological anti-western ties, rather than religious commonality.[11] The ideological levers Iran utilised were diverse and situational – with different ties emphasised according to the groups it was trying to mobilise. Yet this reaped rewards in both Syria and Yemen.

In contrast Saudi Arabia arguably had the potential for more ideological appeal, but failed to deploy it. It also attempted to utilise different ties: pitching itself as a leader of Sunni Muslims against Shia Iran, and of Arabs against Persians. Yet this had limited success in Syria and Yemen. Having spent decades challenging the legitimacy of Arab nationalism, its appeals to Arabs unsurprisingly received little enthusiasm. Its Islamic credentials were stronger, but religiously-motivated Sunni fighters had rival international patrons in Syria: Qatar and Turkey. As Gregory Gause notes in this volume, anti-Iranianism rather than sectarianism was the main motivation for Saudi involvement in Yemen. Even so, once involved it did appeal to Yemen's Sunnis. Yet here, as in Syria, it had a rival – this time its ally the UAE - offering a different narrative and dividing forces.[12] In contrast, Iran is largely unrivalled in its pitch as the sole voice of religiously motivated Shia fighters – though this is changing in Iraq. Saudi could not unite religious Sunnis behind one broad doctrine with Sunni Islamists, Salafis and Jihadists disagreeing on politics and theology. Saudi Arabia is in a weaker position compared to Iran regarding Islamists, having a far greater fear that they threaten Saudi rule.

Saudi did not mobilise its international alliances effectively, while Iran has maximised more limited external assets. Since before 2011 Saudi has sought to mobilise allies against Iran, with plans for an 'Arab NATO' or a modest GCC security organisation mooted without success. The exceptions were the interventions in Bahrain in 2011 and Yemen in 2015. In Yemen the alliance was largely limited to Saudi and UAE forces, despite theoretically boasting support from 10 (mostly Arab) states, but proved unable to achieve military victory. Wider international support was indirectly won with the US unwilling to seriously pressure Riyadh, but no game-changing western intervention was achieved. Likewise, despite repeated Saudi lobbying (alongside others), Riyadh's alliance with the US was not leveraged to persuade Barack Obama to intervene in Syria against Assad. In contrast, Iran was able to leverage a more limited relationship with Russia into a game changing intervention. In 2015 Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani travelled to Moscow to persuade Vladimir Putin. This was ironically at the one point where Saudi non-conventional warfare had had some success, after it combined with Turkey to back a single rebel coalition advancing on Assad's west Syrian heartland. Iran's lobbying of Russia countered this, and Moscow's intervention killed any chance that Assad would fall. Riyadh, distracted by its new war in Yemen, dialled down its interest in Syria and ended support for the rebels a few years later.[13]

Iran did not boast as close an alliance with Russia as Saudi did with the US. Yet a few factors differed. Firstly, Russia and Iran's strategic interests in Syria aligned: both were completely opposed to Assad's fall. In contrast, in Syria Saudi was less firmly committed to Assad's toppling, limiting its involvement, and nor was the US. In Yemen the US did not see the strategic priority of defeating the Houthis in the way that Saudi did. The personalities of leaders mattered too. Obama had a poor relationship with the Saudis, and Riyadh put the onus on the president changing rather than themselves. While his successor Donald Trump had a stronger relationship, he was instinctively more isolationist. Saudi, Israel and others persuaded him to confront Iran more, but his deceive intervention in Yemen (or Syria) seems highly unlikely.

In contrast Qassem Suleimani proved highly persuasive of Vladimir Putin. It likely helped that he was an effective commander and Putin could be confident that his forces could work effectively on the ground when supported by the Russian air force.

Play Your Cards Right

Saudi and Iranian competition in the Yemen and Syria conflicts point to interesting conclusions about the interaction of international systemic and domestic factors, which feed into our wider discussion of both states' use of sectarian identity. Both conflicts broke out in an international and regional systemic environment that was more favourable to Iran than to Saudi: one in which Riyadh's long-term ally and the lynchpin of its Iran containment strategy was retreating. That said, Riyadh still possessed strategic advantage over Iran in some areas, it just proved unable to utilise them well. It had a superior air force that it was unwilling to deploy in Syria, and deployed ineffectively in Yemen. It had access to greater wealth to pay local fighters, but was not willing to match Iran's spending in Syria. While its ideological appeal, including Sunni sect identity, theoretically had a wider audience than Iran's, it was unable to translate this into effective unconventional warfare. It likewise had a closer relationship to more powerful international allies than Iran yet, again, was unable to translate this into meaningful intervention in either Yemen or Syria.

This brief analysis has suggested that Saudi Arabia's inability to adapt to the changing external context and make the most of its advantages had much to do with domestic factors, including the personalities involved, supporting the NCR approach. Confidence in Bandar Bin Sultan's abilities at asymmetric warfare in Syria proved unfounded, for example, and he was evidently no Suleimani. The decision to expend huge resources in Yemen, which Iran had not invested many resources in, but not in Syria, where it had, was another strategic error. Rivalry with other potential allies against Iran, like Turkey and Qatar, limited both Saudi's ideological appeal in Syria and the effectiveness of the forces it was sponsoring. Domestic fears of the Muslim Brotherhood and Jihadists likewise led to only a limited engagement with these proxies. The poor personal relationships with Barack Obama and the inability to adapt to the new president contributed to a weak relationship with the US at a time when Riyadh needed as much goodwill and support from its retreating ally as it could get. Subsequent closeness with Trump has not rectified this.

Iran did make errors along the way, and Saudi did land some successful blows. In one example of sectarianization, it successfully characterised Iran as a 'Shia' power, challenging Iran's earlier claims to regional leadership across the Muslim world. Whereas in the 2000s Iran's leaders, alongside Assad and Hassan Nasrallah were popular among non-Shia Muslims, the Syria war in particular shattered that support. Similarly, Saudi has helped nudge Trump to abandon the JCPOA and reapply sanctions, which are squeezing Tehran. However, this may deter Iran from expanding further, a retreat from the strategic gains it has made since 2011 seems unlikely. In this it has played its hand far better: taking advantage of the international context better than its rival. It more effectively deployed proxies, maximised its more limited financial clout and made the most of a limited relationship with Russia to bring about joint intervention in Syria. Moreover, it deployed a range of ideological weapons to develop an effective network of fighters – only some of which were mobilised by sect, others by being part of the anti-western 'resistance axis'. Within our broader discussion of sectarianism then, this suggests that both actors have deployed sectarian tools to mobilise fighters, but not every time and with mixed results. However, for neither has this been the only resource utilised in a complex rivalry that has varied over time and location.

Endnotes

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Saudi Arabia and Sectarianism in Middle East International Relations

By F. Gregory Gause, III, Bush School of Government and Public Service, Texas A&M University

Saudi Arabia is just about everyone's favorite villain in explaining the new salience of sect-centric mobilization and violence in the international politics of the Middle East.[1] Andrew Hammond avers that sectarianism "has long underpinned Saudi Arabia's domestic and foreign policy" and that it has "proved to be a particularly effective tool in the government's management of the Arab Awakening."[2] Marc Lynch emphasized the "top-down push towards sectarian polarization" that he contends characterized the response of both Saudi Arabia and Iran toward the uprisings of 2010-11, going on to say that "Saudi Arabia found it particularly useful to exploit this rising sectarianism, for both domestic and regional reasons."[3] Madawi Al-Rasheed, one of the most astute and careful observers of the kingdom's politics, asserts that sectarianism was the Saudi avenue of counter-revolution during the uprisings.[4] Journalists and policy-makers tend to be even more explicit in blaming Riyadh for the current regional situation.[5]

There is certainly no argument about the fact that Saudi Arabia has for decades promoted its particular version of Islam, both at home and abroad, that denigrates Shi'ism. But an effort to put the blame overwhelmingly on Saudi Arabia for sect-specific violence avoids the hard work of thinking carefully about the issue. Parsing out just what role Saudi Arabia has played in the rise of inter-sect violence requires us to ask more specific questions: 1) Is sectarian violence in the current regional configuration a top-down or a bottom-up phenomenon? 2) How should we understand intra-sectarian divisions within the sectarian framework that seems to dominate many analyses of Middle Eastern regional politics? 3) Just what are the links between a profoundly sect-centric domestic political system and a foreign policy that privileges relations with fellow sectarians across borders? I will look at all three in the context of Saudi Arabia's role in regional politics.

We should remain clear about what we are trying to explain. The salience of sect-specific identity politics in regional international relations requires different explanations than the importance of a particular sect's role in the domestic politics of a particular state. Saudi Arabia has been a salafi polity for over a century. Explaining why that is, or why the Iranian revolution ended up producing a self-consciously Shi'i regime led by clergymen, are interesting questions but not the question before us. The relationship between regime type and foreign policy is one to be examined, not assumed.

Top-Down or Bottom-Up

If one views the contemporary salience of sect-specific violence in the Middle East as the product of ideological export by important regional states, then the question of Saudi culpability is asked and answered. It is just then a matter of apportioning the percentage of blame to Riyadh and to Tehran, with perhaps a small slice of the cake being cut for Turkey and Qatar with their support for the Muslim Brotherhood. But the top-down version of events does not hold up to even a cursory examination.

Saudi Arabia has been promoting an Islamic frame for regional politics since at least the mid-1960's. King Faisal proposed the formation of what eventually became the Islamic Conference Organization to try to counter Pan-Arabism, seeking to bring other regional Muslim states like Iran, Turkey and Pakistan (also American allies) into the frame and dilute the ideological sway of Nasserism. Sectarian identity was not a driving issue in regional politics then, although Saudi Arabia was as "Wahhabi" domestically then as it is now. The Saudis saw the Shah's Iran as a partner, not an enemy. The Iranian Revolution introduced a challenge to the monopoly asserted by Riyadh to speak for "Islam" in regional politics, and sectarian differences undoubtedly played a role in the tensions

between the two states. But the level of that tension waxed and waned – high during the Iran-Iraq War, moderated during the Rafsanjani and Khatami presidencies.[6] Riyadh and Tehran found themselves with parallel interests on a number of occasions, most notably during the Gulf War of 1990-91. Their rivalry, up to the 2010's, was kept within bounds.

Sectarian violence became much more salient in regional international politics only in the wake of the internal political upheavals that began with the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and then spread to numerous Arab countries during of the Arab Uprisings.[7] It was the cracking open of these political systems that led sectarian identities, which had always existed in these societies, to emerge as the organizing principle of much of the political mobilization that followed. Regimes doubled-down on their sect-specific social bases; oppositions mobilized in sectarian ways in reaction. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia (among others) used sectarian connections to build proxy relations and to extend influence into the civil wars that broke out in many of these states. But the regional powers did not have to fight their way into these conflicts. They were invited in by the local parties, who desperately needed the money, guns and political support that a regional patron could provide. Sunnis naturally looked to important Sunni states, not just Saudi Arabia but also Turkey, for support; Shia just as naturally looked to Iran. But it was the breaking of the state, first in Iraq and then in other parts of the Arab East, that raised sectarian alliances between local groups and outside powers to the important role they hold in regional politics today.[8]

A similar dynamic occurred in Libya, although not on a sectarian basis. Much as the case in Iraq, an American-led military intervention brought down an unpopular but fierce regime that had been in power for decades. In Libya the societal divisions that emerged from the fall of the Qaddafi regime were tribal, regional and ideological. These divisions facilitated the intervention of a number of regional actors, including Egypt, Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, as well as extra-regional powers like Russia and France. It is not a sectarian fight, but it looks very much like the struggles occurring in the Arab East. The breaking of the state and the civil conflict that follows create the structural conditions for the kind of regional politics we see in the Middle East now. Sectarian cleavage is just one kind of domestic social division and trans-national linkage that can facilitate the regional involvements and rivalries that characterize those conditions.

Bottom-up political struggle where the contestants mobilize along sect-centric lines is not the creation of Iran or Saudi Arabia. It is part of the history and institutional development of Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen – each in different ways.[9] When Saddam Hussein, Hafez al-Assad and Ali Abdallah Salih had firm grips on their states, sectarian identity was a minor note in regional international relations, though extremely important in understanding the politics of these states. After the upheavals of 2003 and 2010-11, it emerged as a central element, because of the collapse of state authority.

Are Intra-Sunni Divisions "Sectarian"?

I have argued elsewhere that the ideological divisions among Sunni actors themselves are as important for understanding regional international politics as are Sunni-Shia conflicts.[10] Unlike Iran, Saudi Arabia cannot find reliable allies in the civil conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Yemen because many if not most salafi movements there have inclined toward the salafi jihadism of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, which is as threatening to the Saudi regime (perhaps more threatening) than Iranian-supported Shi'i movements. Saudi Arabia's top-down, regime-supporting version of Salafism also is inconsistent with the more bottom-up, populist, quasi-democratic version of political Islam embodied by the Muslim Brotherhood and supported by Turkey and Qatar in the post-2011 regional struggle for power. The contest between these two poles in the Sunni world for influence in Egypt after the fall of the Mubarak regime was intense and expensive, and had nothing to do with Iran or fear of Shi'ism. The Saudis and their Emirati partners backed the coup of then-General and Defense Minister Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi, who in

regional politics would have to be seen as an "anti-Islamist" (secularist might be an exaggeration), against the Muslim Brotherhood President, Muhammad Morsi.[11]

These three tendencies in the Sunni world – official Salafism, salafi jihadism and Muslim Brotherhood populism for short-hand – are all located within the same sect of Islam. Is this important element of regional conflict and division properly labeled "sectarian?" I think not. The salafi jihadists and the Saudi 'ulama probably do not differ all that much on theological questions. They differ profoundly on the political implications of their beliefs. The Saudi objections to the Muslim Brotherhood have nothing to do with issues of religious identity and praxis. Saudi Arabia was home to exiled Muslim Brothers from throughout the Arab world for decades. Brothers helped to build the Saudi educational system. These are not things that could be said about Shia exiles. The regime's current problems with the Brotherhood have everything to do with the Brothers' turn toward more democratic politics and toward close relations with Turkey and Qatar. The differences here are more ideological than they are sectarian. They are closer to the differences that Riyadh had with the Arab nationalists of the 1950's and 1960's, differences over the proper organization of domestic politics and the appropriate set of foreign policies and foreign allies.

Regime Type and Regional International Politics: Is "Wahhabi" Saudi Arabia Inevitably Sectarian in Foreign Policy?

The short answer to this question is: no. It is undoubtedly true that Saudi Arabia has used its vast oil wealth and the prestige that being home to Mecca and Medina brings to propagate its salafi version of Islam – puritanical, xenophobic and anti-Shia – throughout the Muslim world. The consequences of that decades-long effort have been profound in many countries and quite different in many cases than the Saudi leadership would have liked. The rise of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State is strong evidence that Saudi Arabia has lost control over political Salafism, if it ever had such control outside its borders. But that long-term ideational effort needs to be distinguished from the short-term influence of sectarianism in determining Saudi policy on questions of the regional balance of power in the Middle East. A brief review of three cases highlight the fact that Saudi foreign policy is driven by many factors, sectarianism being just one, and in most cases not the major one.

Saudi Arabia made every effort to cultivate Hafez al-Assad in Syria, despite both the sociological fact of Alawi dominance of the regime and the burgeoning Syrian-Iranian relationship from the 1980's. Riyadh continued those efforts in the 2000's after Bashar al-Assad succeeded his father. There is no evidence that the Saudis aided the uprising of the Muslim Brotherhood against the regime in the late 1970's and early 1980's, despite their common Sunni identity. As the Syrian uprising began in 2011, Riyadh held back from involvement, its fear of popular revolution in the region restraining its desire to deal Iran a geopolitical setback. Turkey and Qatar were more aggressive in supporting Sunni Islamist opponents of the regime at the outset. When the Saudis did get involved, they first backed the most "secular" of the opposition forces, the Free Syrian Army. When it became apparent that the FSA was not an effective force, Riyadh sought out its own salafi Islamists to back, but could never work cooperatively with Turkey and its clients to bring down the Assad regime.[12] The divisions within the Sunni world, as salient for Saudi Arabia as its competition with Iran, complicated a purely sectarian framing of the Syrian crisis for Riyadh.

While one might argue that sectarian factors help explain Saudi Arabia's support for Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980's, whatever sectarian allegiances the Saudis felt for Saddam Hussein disappeared after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Riyadh continued to isolate Saddam from then to his fall in 2003, despite the fact that his regime remained a block to Iranian regional ambitions. After the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Saudi government kept its distance from both the new Iraqi government that emerged (seen in Riyadh as too close to Iran) and from the salafi Sunni opposition – al-Qaeda in

Iraq and then the Islamic State. Any sign of Saudi support for such groups, in the wake of the tensions in Saudi-American relations after the September 11, 2001 attacks, would have enormously complicated the relationship with Washington. Saudi Arabia was without allies in Iraq, and was much less involved in the country's post-2003 domestic politics than either Iran or Turkey were. It thought it had found a useful local ally in the Iraqiyya Party of Iyad Allawi, which it supported in the 2005 and 2010 elections.[13] Allawi himself, a thoroughly secular man, is a Shi'i and his party was explicitly non-sectarian. The Saudis could have supported any number of Sunni sectarian parties in these elections, but did not. Since the advent of King Salman in 2015, Riyadh has begun to cautiously normalize relations with Baghdad, despite the continuing dominance of Shi'i parties in the government.

The failed Saudi intervention in Yemen is a tragedy on many levels, most directly in terms of the suffering of millions of Yemenis. But it is arguable whether sectarianism was the primary driver of Saudi decision-making on Yemen. Riyadh was the major regional supporter of the grandfathers of the Houthis in their civil war in the 1960's against the Egyptian-supported republicans. The Saudis maintained good relations with a number of important Yemeni tribal shaykhs, Zaydi Shi'i all of them, over the decades after the civil war. Riyadh had an up and down relationship with Ali Abdallah Salih, another Zaydi, but from around 2000 to the Yemeni uprising of 2011, it seemed to have made its peace with Salih's regime. The Saudis can certainly be faulted for encouraging the growth of Salafism in Yemen, which itself can help explain the origins of the Houthi movement. But Riyadh has had no problem dealing with Yemeni Zaydis in the past, and will not have any problems dealing with them in the future. The strong desire of the Houthis to attach themselves to Iran is what distinguishes them, in Saudi eyes, from other Zaydi actors. As in the case of Saudi policy toward Syria since 2011, the balance of power motivation of checking and rolling back Iranian power can explain Saudi behavior in Yemen just as effectively as a purely sectarian explanation.

Domestic Wahhabism and Regional Sectarianism

Simon Mabon has made a powerful argument that the Saudi-Iranian tensions of today have deep roots in what he calls the "internal security dilemmas" of each regime. Those challenges have led both Riyadh and Tehran to use religious narratives, symbols and institutions to buttress their claims to rule and delegitimize their domestic opponents – official Salafism in Saudi Arabia and velayet e-faqih in Iran. These domestic regime security strategies lead each regime to project these identities and values into the foreign policy realm.[14] Their regional rivalry is, to a great extent, fated by their domestic regime security strategies.

I have made a different argument, at least about Saudi Arabia, here. The threat posed by Iran, as viewed from Riyadh, is less about Tehran's ability to stir up opposition among Saudi Shia (although there is some of that) and more about Tehran's geopolitical reach into Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and, prospectively, the smaller Gulf monarchies (particularly Bahrain). It is a balance of power threat more than a challenge to domestic regime security and identity. If anything, it is the hostile Saudi position toward both salafi jihadists and the Muslim Brotherhood that is more anchored in domestic regime security considerations.

But this does not mean that the profoundly anti-Shi'a position of state Salafism in Saudi Arabia is irrelevant to explaining the salience of sectarian violence in regional international politics. It might better be understood in terms of constituencies rather than legitimacy principles. The clerical establishment has been a partner of the Al Saud regime since the inception of the first Saudi state in the 18th century. With the advent of great oil wealth, the regime has built international Islamic organizations (eg., Islamic Conference Organization) and transnational, state-supported non-governmental organizations (eg., Muslim World League, World Assembly of Muslim Youth) that have propagated the official Saudi version of Salafism, including its anti-Shia bias. Direct Saudi support for mosques and schools abroad are another avenue through

which the anti-Shia position of official Wahhabism has spread throughout the Muslim world. Sect-specific propaganda has, arguably, a broader audience because of Saudi state support for both the domestic and international efforts of the Saudi clerical establishment.

That anti-Shia bias is apparent in the Saudi press and, with the increasing Saudi role in regional media, in the Saudi-supported regional media. Sometimes that bias is subtle; sometimes it is blatant. But it certainly encourages a sectarian framing that might be instrumental for the Saudi regime but seems deeply felt in some quarters of the Sunni world, both within Saudi Arabia and outside it. Saudis have joined the fight against the "Shi'i" post-Saddam regime in Iraq and against the Assad regime in Syria in considerable numbers.[15] Grass-roots, rather than state, financial contributions from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states helped to fund the salafi jihadist opposition in Syria from the outset of the conflict.[16] These activities continue despite the public opposition of the Saudi state. Riyadh made it a crime in 2014 for its citizens to fight in foreign wars.[17] The Financial Action Task Force in 2018 commended Riyadh for its work to stem private financial transfers to terrorist organizations, while pointing to a number of areas that could be strengthened.[18] Despite state discouragement of support for salafi jihadist groups that glorify their targeting of Shia, some elements of Saudi society continue to support them.

This tension between official Saudi policy and grass-roots Saudi behavior highlights the uncertainties surrounding Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman's efforts to relegate the Saudi religious establishment to a more subordinate role in the country and to "return" Saudi Arabia to what he has characterized as the "moderate" version of Islam that obtained before the 1980's. If decades of official Saudi support for clerical institutions that propagated anti-Shia sentiments both at home and abroad helped to create a Sunni Muslim world open to sectarian appeals, can a reversal of Saudi policy toward those clerical institutions herald a long-term trend reducing the potency of sectarian rhetoric?

Endnotes

[1] Fanar Haddad makes an important argument that the word "sectarianism" has lost its analytic utility and should be replaced by more specific adjectives. I use the word in the title because of its continuing general usage, but take Haddad's point. "'Sectarianism' and Its Discontents in the Study of the Middle East," *Middle East Journal, Vol. 71, No. 3 (Summer 2017), pp. 363-382.*

[2] Andrew Hammond, "Saudi Arabia: cultivating sectarian spaces," *The Gulf and Sectarianism, European Council on Foreign Relations, November 2013.*

[3] Marc Lynch, *The New Arab Wars: Uprisings and Anarchy in the Middle East, (New York: Public Affairs, 2016), p. 15. See also Marc Lynch, "Why Saudi Arabia Escalated the Middle East's Sectarian Conflict," Washington Post (Monkey Cage blog), January 4, 2016,* https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/01/04/why-saudi-arabia-escalated-the-middle-easts-sectarian-conflict/?postshare=191451927613283.

[4] Madawi Al-Rasheed, "Sectarianism as Counter-Revolution: Saudi Responses to the Arab Spring," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism, Vol. 11, No. 3 (December 2011).*

[5] For example, see John McHugo, "Spreading Sectarianism in the Muslim world," *OpenDemocracy, February 27, 2019,* https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/spreading-sectarianism-in-muslim-world/: "Many people associate today's toxic sectarianism in the Middle East with the Iranian mullahs but the West's ally, Saudi Arabia, carries greater blame."

[6] Henner Furtig, *Iran's Rivalry with Saudi Arabia between the Gulf Wars, (Reading: Ithaca Press, 2002); Banafsheh Keynoush, Saudi Arabia and Iran: Friends or Foes? (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Fred Wehrey et al., Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam: Rivalry, Cooperation and Implications for U.S. Policy, RAND Corporation, March 2009.*

[7] I make this argument at greater length in "Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War," Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper No. 11, July 2014, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/English-PDF-1.pdf.

[8] Raymond Hinnebusch comes to a very similar conclusion. "The Sectarian Revolution in the Middle East," *R/evolutions: Global Trends and Regional Issues, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2016), pp. 120-152. See particularly pp. 127-132.*

[9] Morten Valbjorn has outlined an interesting way to get beyond the primordialism v. instrumentalism debate that has framed much of the thinking about the domestic causes and consequences of sectarianism, though characteristically with lots of parentheses. "Beyond the beyond(s): On the (many) third way(s) beyond primordialism and instrumentalism in the study of sectarianism," *Nations and Nationalism, Vol. 26 (2020): pp. 91-107.*

[10] F. Gregory Gause, III, "Ideologies, Alignments and Underbalancing in the New Middle East Cold War," *PS: Political Science and Politics, Vol. 50, No. 3 (July 2017): 672-675.*

[11] Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi, "Qatar's Brotherhood Ties Alienate Fellow Gulf States," Al-Monitor, January 23, 2013, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/01/qatar-muslim-brotherhood.html; Mohsin Khan and Richard LeBaron, "What Will the Gulf's $12 Billion Buy Egypt?" Atlantic Council of the U.S., July 11, 2013, http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/egyptsource/what-will-the-gulfs-12-billion-buy-in-egypt.

[12] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016); Lina Khatib, "Syria, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar: the sectarianization of the Syrian conflict and undermining of democratization in the region," British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, Vol. 46, No. 3 (2019): 385-403.*

[13] Toby Dodge, *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2012), p. 192.*

[14] Simon Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Power and Rivalry in the Middle East, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016).*

[15] As of 2016, it is estimated that 2,500 Saudis joined ISIS to fight in Iraq and Syria, second to Tunisia in terms of total numbers and ninth in terms of per-capita ranking. Efraim Benmelech and Esteban F. Klor, "What Explains the Flow of Foreign Fighters to ISIS," *Terrorism and Political Violence, 2018,* DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2018.1482214. Saudis seem to have been the largest contingent of foreign fighters in Iraq in the 2000's, though the total number of Saudi fighters in Iraq during that time seems to have been around 1,500. Richard A. Oppel, Jr., "Foreign Fighters in Iraq Are Tied to Allies of U.S.," *New York Times*, November 22, 2007, https://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/22/world/middleeast/22fighters.html; Thomas Hegghammer, "Saudis in Iraq: Patterns of Radicalization and Recruitment," *Cultures & Conflits* (2008), https://journals.openedition.org/conflits/10042#quotation.

[16] Elizabeth Dickinson, "Playing with Fire: Why Private Gulf Financing for Syria's Extremist Rebels Risks Igniting Sectarian Conflict at Home," The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World, Analysis Paper No. 16, December 2013, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/private-gulf-financing-syria-extremist-rebels-sectarian-conflict-dickinson.pdf.

[17] Angus McDowall and Yara Bayoumy, "Saudi Arabia to jail citizens who fight abroad," Reuters, February 3, 2014, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-law/saudi-arabia-to-jail-citizens-who-fight-abroad-idUSBREA1213O20140203.

[18] Financial Action Task Force, FATF-MENAFATF, "Anti-money laundering and counter-terrorist financing measures in Saudi Arabia – Executive Summary," 2018, http://www.fatf-gafi.org/media/fatf/documents/reports/mer/MER-Saudi-Arabia-2018-Executive-Summary.pdf.

Sectarian identity politics and Middle East international relations in the first post-Arab Uprisings decade— from 'whether' to 'how,' 'where' 'when' and for 'whom'

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During the last decade, sectarianism has figured prominently in discussions about regional politics of the Middle East. Much of the discussion has been about 'whether' sectarian identity politics matters in post-Arab uprisings international relations. This is a valid question and may become even more important in the coming years, if a new 'hyper-nationalism' will replace the recent decades' focus on sectarianism, as suggested by some observers.[1] However, when it comes to understanding the role of sectarian identity politics in Middle East international relations during the *first decade* after the Arab uprisings, it is useful supplement the 'whether' question with another set of questions focusing on 'how,' 'where,' 'when,' and 'who.' In order to answer these additional questions, it is worthwhile paying attention to some of the contested issues in the broader sectarianism debate and revisit some of the more classic debates on International Relations Theory (IR) and the Middle East.

The Arab Uprisings and the fall and rise of dripping identity politics

Traditionally, identity politics has figured prominently in the study of the international relations of the Middle East, a region famously described as 'dripping with identity politics.'[2] Scholars have discussed whether ideational factors matter compared to material ones, as well as how the presence of multiple trans-state identities has influenced dynamics of regional politics and whether this puts the region apart from international relations elsewhere.[3]

The Arab uprisings challenged this conception of an identity-saturated Middle East. Some suggested the potential for the emergence of a 'new Middle East' which would pave the way for a new kind of identity politics or maybe even make the whole debate on identity politics obsolete.[4] Thus, the absence of classic Arab nationalist or Islamist slogans and the presence of only *Egyptian* flags at Tahrir Square made some to claim that state and national identity in the Middle East at last had prevailed.

However, the rise of sectarianized conflicts and transnational religious mobilization soon made clear that it was premature to declare trans-state identities 'so 20th century.' In line with Lynch's observation about how 'a number of deeper trends have come together in recent years to give frightening new power to *identity politics writ large*,'[5] various kinds of trans-state identities began subsequently to receive increasing attention. Some observers drew attention to sub-state identities based on tribe or ethnicity, discussing whether this would lead to a remapping of the Middle East.[6] Others suggested that the defining feature of identity politics in a 'new Middle East' would be what Abdo coined the 'new sectarianism,' and others described as a process of 'sectarianization.'[7]

Approaching a sectarianized new Middle East

Sectarianism is not a novel topic for the scholarly agenda on Middle East politics, but in the last decade it has become a 'catchphrase in politics, media and academia.'[8] Past debates on 'whether' sectarianism matters have been replaced by a growing recognition – even among previous sceptics – that sectarianism has become a 'real factor in politics.'[9] This has been reflected in a 'surge' of publications on Shia/Sunni sectarianism in the Middle East discussing how sectarianism can be conceptualized, mapped and explained in terms of its causes and consequences for domestic as well as regional politics.[10]

In the more theoretically informed debate on sectarianism,

it is possible to identify a common way of framing the existing study of sectarianism.[11] It is presented as being polarized between primordialist and instrumentalist approaches. Both of these two allegedly very influential camps are considered faulty as they are accused of either reducing everything to sectarianism or explaining it away as a mere epiphenomenon. This critique is usually therefore followed by a call on scholars of sectarianism to get beyond both primordialism and instrumentalism.

This framing misses a number of important features of the *actual* sectarianism debate. The critique of primordialism and instrumentalism might as such be valid, but at closer inspection it turns out that *in academia* these two camps are far less influential than claimed. In fact, it can be hard to find a genuine primordialist scholar nowadays. Instead, it appears that most scholars consider themselves as representing the much coveted 'third way' beyond primordialism and instrumentalism.

At the same time, it also becomes clear that the 'third way' is not only a very crowded field. It is also populated by very different kinds of 'creatures.' Thus, an agreement about the need to get beyond both primordialism and instrumentalism has not translated into any 'new consensus' as for how to do this more specifically. Instead, it is possible to identify a range of different kinds of 'third way' strategies.[12] This leaves a lot of room for disagreements and debate among those who in principle subscribe to the same overall 'beyond' ambition. So, rather than using all the energy 'beating dead horses,' those interested in the *real* disagreements in the current scholarly sectarianism debate are therefore well advised to turn their attention to differences among the multiple suggestions for how sectarianism can be approached in a way that is neither primordialist nor instrumentalist.

Debating international relations in a sectarianized Middle East

These insights from the broader sectarianism debate are also useful, when it comes to how the role of sectarianism in Middle East international relations has been discussed in the wake of the Arab uprisings. Similar to the pattern in the broader debate on sectarianism, the existing approaches have often been framed as being polarized between two camps: those who reduce everything to an ancient sectarian Shia/Sunni divide and those who only emphasize geopolitics ending up explaining sectarianism away. Both of these approaches are rejected and instead the critics are calling for a new allegedly superior 'third way' beyond both.[13]

Like in the broader sectarianism debate, it is indeed possible to find examples close to these two polarized camps. On closer inspection, however, it turns out – again - that they are few, and the more or less 'pure' examples will typically come from politicians, journalists or figures from think tanks rather than the more theoretically informed scholarly debate. Thus, most scholars seem to acknowledge that sectarianism 'somehow' has become a factor to consider when studying Middle East international relations in the first decade after the Arab uprisings. But the majority do also stress that sectarian politics is far from 'the whole story' as sectarianism is only *one* among more important factors.[14] The really contested issue, therefore, seems rather to be about how one moves from the rather banal statement that it is important to pay attention to both geopolitics and sectarian identity politics to specifying how, when, where and for whom sectarianism matters in international relations.

This point is far from novel for those acquainted with past identity-saturated discussions about Middle East international relations. Thus, there is not only a rather broad consensus about how *both* geopolitics *and* identities matters, but also that 'simply claiming that "identity matters" is no longer sufficient,' as Lynch already noticed two decades ago.[15] As a consequence, much Middle East scholarship concerning international relations has been less preoccupied with the question about 'whether' than about 'how,' 'where,' 'when' and for 'whom' identity politics matters.[16] Along with insights from the recent 'beyond' discussion in the broader sectarianism debate, some of the analytical distinctions and dimensions from this classic debate can therefore be useful to revisit, when it comes

to examining the role of sectarian politics in post-Arab uprisings Middle East international relations.

First, the '*how*' question. By revisiting some of the discussions in IR generally and among Middle East scholars more specifically, it is possible to identify a number of ways in which identities and ideas can affect international relations.[17] In simplified terms, it is possible to group the suggestions in two clusters with somewhat different foci. The *first* and most far-ranging cluster takes as its point of departure the view that identities and ideas give meaning to actor's realities and their understanding of their interests. Identities are therefore considered crucial for how actors conceive of the international and answer fundamental questions such as 'What is a threat?' and 'Who is threatening and against whom?' which again influences what is considered (un)thinkable and (im) possible.[18] The *second* cluster turns greater attention to the question about how identities can both constrain and enable international actors in the way they pursue their interests—regardless of where these come from. Thus, the prevalence of specific ideas and identities can, on the one hand, impose costs on certain forms of behavior, making an actor hesitate to or even refrain from following what, from a narrowly materialist perspective, would be in their interest. On the other hand, they can also enable actors to pursue their interests in ways not otherwise possible.[19]

For the role of sectarian politics in Middle East international relations, this literature provides some useful tools as it invites to a discussion on specifying exactly where in the 'causal equation' sectarianism matters. In other words, has sectarianism influenced Iran or Saudi Arabia's worldviews, their threat perceptions, notions of their interests or ways of identifying friends/enemies? Or is it rather so that the impact from recent decades' sectarianization of regional politics mainly concerns how this process, at the same time, has enabled and constrained the two in pursuing interests, which has less to do with sectarianism per se than with geopolitical or regime survival concerns. For instance, even if Iran's regional policy and choice of allies are not informed by its Shiite identity per se, the regional sectarianization may still play a role by limiting Iran's ability to access actors in the 'Sunni Arab world' compared to the decade before the Arab uprising, and at the same time it may have strengthened links to various 'Shia non-state actors.'[20]

Another way to approach the '*how*' question is through the literature on (international) politics/religion, which asks about whether identity politics involving religious identities is somehow different from those relating to other kinds of identities. Following Brubaker's discussion about 'Religious Dimensions of Political Conflict and Violence,' the answer to this question depends on whether one subscribes to a 'diacritical' or a 'normative ordering' understanding of religious identities.[21] While the former perceives identities as 'culturally empty,' the 'content' of identities matters in the latter understanding. Sheikh has similarly discussed whether religious identities should be equated with other kinds of identity politics in international relations or if they hold some distinct qualities. While subscribing to the latter view, she emphasizes at the same time the need for alternatives to essentialist - and instrumentalist - ways of including religion in IR. Against this background, she introduces a distinction between perceiving religion as a belief community, as power, or as speech act.[22]

While religion and sectarianism are not identical, this literature brings attention to the basic question about whether all identities should be considered as 'empty,' so their influence on international relations basically will be the same; or is it necessary to pay attention to their 'content' and to distinguish between dynamics associated with sect-centric and other kinds of identities. In addition to the question about whether sectarian identities as such are different from other forms of identity politics,[23] a number of other questions emerge. For instance, are dynamics related to trans-state identities concerning Shia different from the Sunni counterpart,[24] and does it make a difference if rivalries involving identity politics are played out between actors associated with the same or different 'sect-centric identities,' e.g. Qatar/Turkey/Saudi rivalries vs. Iran-Saudi?[25] Does it make sense drawing parallels between the 'classic' Arab cold war that revolved around an

Arab trans-state identity, and the current regional rivalries, which has been labelled as a 'neo-sectarian' or 'Shia-Sunni' regional cold war?[26] Does it make a difference which kind of (trans-state) identity external patrons emphasize when approaching local 'proxies' in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and what about Libya, where Shia/Sunni sectarianism does not play any role;[27] and, finally, does the shifting importance for Iran being Persian, Iranian, or Shiite and for Saudi Arabia being Arab, Sunni or Saudi matter for their threat perceptions and international behavior?[28]

Second, in view of how the salience of sectarianism has waxed and waned across time as well as space, it is also relevant to consider 'when,' 'where' and for 'whom' sectarian identity politics matters. As for the '*who*' question, Gause asks elsewhere in this issue whether sectarianism in the present regional configuration is a top-down or a bottom-up phenomenon. The answer to this question carries implications for, whether one should mainly direct attention to elite actors, i.e., foreign policymakers, or to the broader public and various non-state actors. While Gause earlier mainly has emphasized the elites and top-down dynamics, in his discussion in this issue bottom-up dynamics appears to play a larger role.[29] By focusing on the 'who' question, one will furthermore become attentive to how the role and salience of sectarianism may vary among different kinds of actors. For instance, for some sectarianism may be nothing but a tool used instrumentally, whereas it for others can be more deeply felt, or it may, over time, become internalized and get a life of its own.[30]

When it comes to the '*where*' and '*when*' questions, it can be useful to revisit the broader literature on the international politics of ethnic conflicts, and in particular the Middle East specific debates on the permeability of the post-colonial Arab state in a regional 'sound chamber in which information, ideas, and opinions have resonated with little regard for state frontiers.'[31] These literatures bring attention to how the salience of trans-state identities often correlates with levels of state(de)formation, and how the presence of weak states and strong trans-state identities provide amble opportunities for proxy warfare. Thus, foreign powers can use trans-state identities to interfere and mingle in local conflicts in weak states with permeable borders (outside-in logic), and as a way of addressing the 'ethnic security dilemma' local actors can appeal to trans-state identities as a way of seeking support from the outside (inside-out logic). As various observers have suggested[32], this analytical lens is also useful in specifying and explaining where and when regional politics has become particularly 'sectarianized'; in short, it is often in the context of 'regionalized civil wars,' where countries with weakened or collapsed state institutions and some sort of sectarian division domestically become arenas for complex 'inter-mestic' rivalries involving external powers and local (non)state actors, e.g. Syria, Iraq, Yemen.

Change – and continuity – in an identity-saturated Middle East

During the last decade, sectarianism has figured prominently in discussions about regional politics in the Middle East. In one way, this marks a change from debates before the Arab uprisings. At that time, some sort of Arabism usually figured as the most prominent example of trans-state identities, which some claimed were becoming obsolete in the 21st century. On the other hand, this focus on sectarian politics can also be perceived in continuation of a much longer and broader debate on the role of trans-state identities in regional politics of the Middle East and ideational factors in international relations more broadly. As shown in above, it is useful to keep these older debates in mind. Besides providing a range of analytical tools and distinctions suitable to push the debate from 'whether' to more nuanced accounts of 'how,' 'where,' 'when' and for 'whom' sectarian identity politics mattered in the first decade after the Arab uprisings, they can also provide insights to the question about whether or not the recent decades' sectarianization of regional politics really constituted a significantly new kind of identity politics in the Middle East.

Endnotes

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[2] Telhami, S. and M. Barnett, "Introduction: Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East," in *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East*, ed. S. Telhami and M. Barnett (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 3. Paradoxically, the Middle East has not only been described as a place 'dripping with identity politics' for which reason it is important to pay attention to ideational factors. The region has also been depicted as one of the places in the world that 'best fits the realist view of international politics,' see Nye, J. S., *Understanding International Conflicts - an Introduction to Theory and History* (N.Y.: Longman, 1997), 148.

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[11] for an elaboration of the below argument see Valbjørn, M., "Beyond the Beyond(S): On the (Many) Third Way(S) Beyond Primordialism and Instrumentalism in the Study of Sectarianism," *Nations and Nationalism* 26, no. 1 (2020).

[12] I have elsewhere distinguished between three broad kinds of 'third way strategies': i) 'The New Savior,' ii) 'The Baby and the Bathwater'; iii) 'Lego Theorizing,' see Valbjørn, M., "Beyond the Beyond(S).

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[23] Malmvig, "Coming in from the Cold: How We May Take Sectarian Identity Politics Seriously in the Middle East without Playing to the Tunes of Regional Power Elites."

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[29] Compare Gause's discussion in the present issue and for instance Gause, "Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War," in *Brookings Doha Center - Analysis Paper* (2014).

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The Potential of Nationalism in Iraq:
Caught between Domestic Repression and external Co-optation

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Since October 2019, Iraq has experienced prolonged protests that focus on the limited capacity of the Iraqi state to deliver basic services, unemployment, and rampant corruption.[1] The 2019-2020 protests have been larger, more widespread and of longer duration than previously. Most importantly, the protestors call for an end to the ethnic and sectarian quota system that has defined Iraqi politics since 2003. They reject a sectarian division of Iraqis into Sunnis and Shias and instead couch their protest in the language and symbols of Iraqi state-based nationalism.[2] The fact that the political elite has responded to largely peaceful protest with violence has further deepened the crisis of legitimacy in Iraq.

The appeal to nationalism is double-edged. The protestors have used the notion of national identity to challenge the internal Iraqi elite. Simultaneously, they use it to call for respect for Iraqi sovereignty. This is both a rejection of domestic politicians who have sought external patronage to bolster their internal power as well as a direct rebuff of external actors, who have exploited the weakness of the Iraqi state to increase their influence over Iraqi politics. The refrain often heard that the Middle East is characterized by its permeability to external powers aptly describes an Iraqi reality where regional and international powers, primarily Iran and the US, have played a key role since 2003.[3]

This paper focuses on how debates about sovereignty and hierarchies at an international level are reflected in and interact with domestic politics. Questions of equal sovereignty and (un)equal access to power interact with domestic struggles between those seeking to maintain the status quo and those seeking change. The notion of transition underscores the insecurity that follows from being located in a time of potential change. In a slight re-write of Gramsci, the current status is one where the old is fighting back as the new struggles to move beyond a rejection of the old.[4]

Anarchy and hierarchy in a penetrated region

Many theorists argue that the Middle East is particularly conducive to realist explanations of international politics which maintain that whereas hierarchic elements within the international structures may limit the exercise of sovereignty, the larger system is anarchic and not hierarchical.[5] This notion of the international as a realm of sovereign states co-existing under anarchy has been challenged by critical and post-colonial scholars.[6] Pinar Bilgin, for instance, has pointed to underlying inequalities that result from unequal access to shape dynamics of world politics and to define what counts as legitimate actions in the international realm.[7] Raymond Hinnebusch's upgraded version of structuralism focuses on patterns of global economic inequality as undergirding a hierarchy divided between core and periphery. The core and periphery exist in a relation of asymmetric interdependence or, in other words, a system of clientelism where the periphery remains dependent on the core.[8]

The American targeted killing of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani underscores the dilemma of how to reconcile a system of formally "like units" with the role of great powers as upholders of international order.[9] The United States justified the killing as a response to "an escalating series of attacks" by Iran on US forces and interests in the Middle East and thus legally permissible under "The Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq".[10] Although targeted killings have become a permanent feature of American foreign policy in places such as Yemen and across Africa, the assassination of Soleimani was unique as he was a high-ranking official of a recognized state and it was done on the territory of another sovereign state without asking the permission or notifying that state beforehand.[11] The US designated Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard

Corps (IRGC) a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) in April 2019 which is the first time the United States has designated an arm of another government, rather than a non-state actor, as a FTO.[12]

The attack also killed Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, founder of the Kataib Hezbollah and the de facto leader of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). Where Soleimaini was the face of Iran's network of militias operating abroad, Muhandis embodied the Iraqi state's inability to assert a monopoly of legitimate use of violence. The weakness of the Iraqi state has left Iraq vulnerable to domestic threats as well as direct military intervention.[13] The killing of Soleimani and Muhandis had immediate implications for domestic Iraqi politics, not least the trajectory of the protests. They can thus be read as an example of how issues of conflict and order among states are inseparable from issues of conflict and order within states.[14] Iranian-backed actors in Iraq, who had been unable to tame the independent protestors, took the opportunity to try and seize control over the demonstrations by redirecting them towards a shared foreign enemy, the US. The Iraqi parliament narrowly passed a non-binding resolution urging the government to end all foreign-troop presence in the country and cancel its request for assistance from the US-led coalition against Islamic State. However, the independent protestors refused to rally behind political forces such as Muqtadr al-Sadr and continued their dual demand for domestic reform and respect for Iraqi sovereignty.

Transforming Iraq through state-based nationalism

Iraqi regimes have previously been able to defer internal unrest through reference to an "imaginary geopolitical boundary" that pitted the Arab world (us) against Western intervention (them). The current protests reject all forms of external interference – including by Iran or by Arab neighbors.[15] The regime's attempts at framing the protests as foreign conspiracies have failed to gain traction and has not been able to defer attention away from the political elites unpopularity. Instead, the combination of political paralysis and violent crackdowns on the protestors have further underscored the regime's lack of legitimacy and its inability to control Iranian-backed militias.

The protestors view the sectarian and ineffective domestic system as being upheld by an internal elite sustained by regional and international actors. The protests are therefore simultaneously a rejection of sectarianism, the domestic political system and external interference in Iraqi domestic politics. The protestors reject sectarianism as a tool used by the political elite to divide and weaken the Iraqi people.[16] Sectarian identity was the foundation of post-2003 political order in Iraq, and institutionalized in the political quota system, referred to as the *muhasasa* system.[17] This system has been remarkably stable, with a comparatively small number of individuals and groups dominating Iraqi politics since 2003.[18]

The protesters are seeking to move beyond an understanding of Iraq as defined by a Shia-centric state-building project and a Sunni rejection of that project and towards an understanding of Iraqi citizenship.[19] This is seen in the proliferation of slogans that focus on Iraqi unity such as the dominant: "We want a homeland" (نريد_وطن) and the protestors use of the Iraqi flag. The protesters demand a complete overhaul of the political system including new political representatives who have not been part of this system since 2003. The fact that the protests have taken place in Baghdad and Shia urban centers, has made it difficult for the Shia dominated Iraqi leadership to activate a sectarian counter narrative. The protests are not anti-Shia as seen in the prevalence of Shia iconography. Instead, they are Shias protesting their Shia-dominated government.[20] It is a Shia dominated movement but one that is not Shia *centric*.

The protestors have linked the call for a civil state to the need for external actors to respect the sovereignty of the Iraqi state. The permeability of the Iraqi state means that Iraq has become a theater for the conflict between the US and Iran, while these powers simultaneously seek to influence Iraq's internal politics either directly or through support to proxies. The Iraqi state depends on external support, but Iraqi elite actors are tightly integrated into relations of asymmetric interdependence or, in other

words, a system of clientelism. The rents that Iraqi elite actors have accrued from their foreign patrons have been used to sustain the regime and further alienated the Iraqi political elite from the Iraqi population. Hence, whereas the rejection of territorial nationalism was once linked to colonialism and the interference of external actors, it is now used to further an agenda that seeks to safeguard Iraqi society against external interference.

Transitions

Iraqi state-based nationalism is used to signal opposition to the ethno-sectarian status quo and a desire for an Iraq based on unity. However, at the same time discussions on Iraqi citizenship can become an arena for discussions about who are real Iraqis and historically, this type of discussion has let to attempts at changing the demographics of Iraq.[21] The Iraqi population across ethno-sectarian cleavages share a deeply felt frustration with the political elite. But the protest movement struggle to translate a frustration with the current into a shared vision for a future state.

Transitions are periods where individuals or institutions seek to negotiate a path that moves them away from the old and towards something new. As such, transitions are ruptures where actors will struggle to formulate and/or gather support for their particular narrative. In the Iraqi case, a transition away from the current political system would affect both the domestic elite that has controlled Iraq since 2003, and their external patrons' ability to control events in Iraq. Whereas the counterreaction to the protestors have been spearheaded by Iranian-backed Shia militias and Iranian backed political leaders, most of Iraq's political elite has hesitated to support the protests. Consequently, the most distinct response has been a counter process where elite actors, both internal and external, are either seeking to maintain the status quo or to use the situation of insecurity to maneuver themselves into a better bargaining position within the existing structures.

The US assassination of Soleimani and Muhandis at a critical time in Iraq together with the continued interference in Iraq's domestic affairs, demonstrates how the prospects for a transition in Iraq and the path that the transition will take, needs to be analyzed in the crossroads of domestic politics, which may or may not be influenced by clientelistic relationships to external patrons, and Iraq's position as a theater in which Iran and the US play out their conflict. The Iraqi state is under intense pressure, and there is a risk that long-standing tensions between pro-Iranian and anti-Iranian, between the political elite and the forces of change, and within the political elite itself may be exacerbated. [22]

Conclusion

The protest movement in Iraq that began in October 2019 exemplifies how populations are increasingly turning against alliances between their ruling elites and their external patrons. In Iraq, the result has been sustained and widespread protests that combines opposition to the entrenched ethno-sectarian formula that has dominated Iraq for decades and the sustained influence of external actors, particularly Iran and the US. Even if a combination of coercion, protest fatigue and co-optation manage to calm the situation, the deep-seated frustration with the political system needs to be addressed.

The Iranian-backed Hashd al-Shabi has played a key role in the coercive response to the protests. Whereas this, on the one hand, display the enormous power of these actors and deep integration into the security sector and political system, the events since October also underscores their limited ability to direct Iraqi politics. In the face of protests that could not easily be dismissed as foreign funded, the Iranian backed political class and militias have struggled to come up with a counternarrative to the protestors call for a civil state. The protestors, on the other hand, have struggled to pose an immediate threat to the political system. However, whereas the protests may not result in immediate transition, they can be read as part of an ongoing process of transformation where a young generation reject the post-2003 order as they try to formulate an alternative vision of Iraq.

Endnotes

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[4] "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear." Antonio Gramsci, Prison Notebooks

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Iraq: Between a Rock and a Hard Place

By Jacob Eriksson, University of York

Iraq is attempting to navigate a way forward through treacherous conditions shaped by rising tensions between Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United States. Some of these conditions, such as the U.S. assassination of the leader of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Quds Force, Qassem Soleimani, and the deputy leader of the Hashd al-Shaabi, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, in Baghdad on 3 January 2020, have been imposed upon them. Others, such as the prominent Iranian role in Iraqi politics or the presence of US troops as part of the fight against ISIS, are to a substantial extent a self-inflicted product of the policies of multiple Iraqi governments. Others are the unfortunate result of geography, lying between competing powers. The strength and independence of pro-Iranian militias mean that Iraq is likely to continue to be the epicentre and host of violent confrontation between regional and international powers.

Nationalism and sectarianism intersect in complex ways in Iraq. Fanar Haddad argues that although Arab Iraqis are generally committed to the notion of an Iraqi nation-state, distinct Sunni and Shia nationalisms have competed for primacy. Following the collapse of Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist state in 2003, a new Shia-dominated state emerged to replace the historically Sunni-dominated order. Twin senses of victimhood in an unstable political context led to the assertion of aggressive sectarian identities and civil war.[1]

A combination of sectarian affinity, strategic interests, and chronic insecurity has led Iran to exercise unrivalled influence over the post-2003 Iraqi state. While the United States exercised a commanding role in the immediate aftermath of the 2003 invasion and occupation, Iran's role was consolidated during the 2006-2014 government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, which emphasised a sub-state Shia sectarian identity which undermined a unitary nationalism to maintain the power of the ruling elite.[2] Under Maliki, Iran-aligned Shia militia gradually became embedded and institutionalised within the Iraqi state, a process consolidated by the rise of the Hashd, or Popular Mobilisation Units, through the war against the Islamic State.[3] Mowaffak al-Rubaie, a former National Security Advisor (2004-2009), described Qassem Soleimani, who oversaw these militia as head of the Quds Force, as "the most powerful man in Iraq without question. Nothing gets done without him".[4] Continuing Iranian influence is exercised through key politicians and Hashd leaders such as Hadi al-Ameri and Qais al-Khazali of the Fatah Alliance, the second biggest bloc in the Iraqi parliament, who are closely aligned to Tehran and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Viewing the new Shia-dominated Iraqi state with suspicion, Saudi Arabia sought to limit Iranian influence by supporting Iraqi Sunni politicians, tribal leaders, and Sahwa militia.[5] The overt sectarianism of Maliki's government and his close relationship with Iran meant that official relations between the two countries were minimal. However, relations thawed under the leadership of former Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi who, seeking Saudi investment, sought to convince the Saudis that he was above all an Iraqi nationalist as opposed to an Iranian client.[6] Abadi's nationalism dovetailed with a new Saudi interest in engagement strategies. Riyadh has placed their nationalist outreach in stark contrast to the Iranian strategy of exploiting sectarian divisions by emphasizing Iraqi patriotism and the unifying power of Arab identity as opposed to any specific sectarian identity.[7] This approach was perhaps best illustrated by the July 2017 visit to Jeddah by the powerful Iraqi Shia cleric and politician Muqtada al-Sadr, keen to burnish his non-sectarian nationalist credentials.

Saudi Arabia and Iran thus employ different strands of identity politics in their engagement with Iraq, the former an ethnic Arab identity and the latter a sectarian Shia identity. Although Iraqi leaders are keen to court economic

investment from the Saudis, they remain acutely aware that Saudi interests centre on countering Iranian influence. Iranian assistance has been vital to the defeat of ISIS and reasserting government authority, but this may prove to be a double-edged sword as the independence of the Hashd undermines the state.[8] The challenge of harnessing the positive elements from each relationship and limiting the danger of being the staging ground for a proxy conflict remains a precarious balancing act.[9]

One strategy to address this challenge has been to act as a mediator. Following the attacks on Saudi Arabian Aramco oil installations at Abqaiq and Khurais on 14 September 2019, which the Saudis and the US blamed on Iran,[10] former Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi travelled to Jeddah to mediate between the two regional rivals. Iraqi officials have offered different accounts of the de-escalation initiative's origins. While one suggested it was undertaken at Iran's request, another claimed it was at the behest of the Saudis out of concern for the lack of a robust US military response to the attack, something Saudi officials have denied.[11] Whatever the case, Abdul Mahdi communicated each side's conditions for talks with the other: the Saudis insisted that Iran cease support for the Houthis in Yemen, minimize their role in Syria, and work with the Assad regime to reach an accommodation with Syrian rebel groups and devise a new constitution; the Iranians were willing to negotiate if sanctions against them were lifted.[12] Iraqi hopes of a potential meeting between the two sides hosted in Baghdad were complicated by the resignation of Abdul Mahdi in response to persistent protests against the government, and by the assassination of Soleimani. According to Abdul Mahdi, Soleimani was carrying an Iranian response to the Saudis when he was killed. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has dismissed such a notion, although this needs to be understood in the context of the Trump administration's depiction of Soleimani as a terrorist above all else, and their supposed displeasure at the prospect of negotiations disrupting its "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran.[13]

In some ways, Iraq is an ideal mediator. As expressed by Iraqi official Abbas al-Hasnawi, "The Iraqi leadership has channels with both sides. Our Sunni brothers [in the government] liaise with the Saudis and our Shia brothers with the Iranians."[14] Beyond those seemingly sectarian lines of communication, Iraq's intimate relations with Iran mean they are familiar with Iranian positions on key issues and can aid their ability to communicate Iranian interests and red lines, while improved relations with the Saudis has created greater trust between them and the Iraqi government. The actions of certain pro-Iranian Hashd groups, however, endanger these improved relations and any potential mediator role. An attack on a Saudi oil pipeline on 14 May 2019 was found to have emanated from southern Iraq, not Yemen as previously thought. Abdul Mahdi was reportedly "very angry" and embarrassed about the incident, and urged Falih al-Fayyadh, chairman of the Hashd, to exert greater control over the groups to prevent any future attacks or provocations.[15]

Iranian interests are also being challenged by the protests that have been taking place in Baghdad and other major cities in Shia-majority southern Iraq since October 2019. Protestors are railing against the corruption of the ruling elite, the lack of service provision by the state, government mismanagement, and unemployment, but also against the level of Iranian influence in their country.[16] These are a continuation and intensification of the protests that took place in the summer of 2018, when protestors set fire to the Iranian consulate and multiple Hashd offices in Basra; in November 2019, protestors burned down the Iranian consulate in Najaf, and Hashd offices in multiple cities have been attacked.[17] Hashd units have been central to the brutal government response to the protests, reportedly coordinated by Soleimani and Iran, estimated to have killed over 500 and injured tens of thousands.[18] This has severely tarnished the legitimacy of the main pro-Iranian Hashd factions, who are now identified as being part of the corrupt political elite rather than separate from it.[19]

Iran remains intent on ensuring that the existing elite bargain in Iraq remains unchanged, and in this endeavour appears to enjoy the support of key political figures such as Sadr. Having initially supported the protestors in line with his old unfulfilled promises to tackle corruption, Sadr

withdrew his support in February 2020, calling for his supporters to leave the streets and using his "Blue Hats" to violently subdue protests in Baghdad's Tahrir Square and in Najaf.[20] As Mansour and Robin-D'Cruz have highlighted, Sadr has shifted closer to Iran, spending more time in Qom and relying on an Iranian-brokered cease-fire to keep the peace in an ongoing conflict with rival Shia militia Asaib Ahl al-Haqq. Together with the unpopularity of his stance against the protests, this may herald a decline of his autonomy as a political actor.[21] Ali, a 29-year-old protestor from Sadr City in Baghdad, refused to leave the streets despite Sadr's call: "I love Muqtada al-Sadr because he was the one who fought against the American interference, the first one to call for demonstrations. … He's a good leader but I'm participating in these demonstrations [for the] homeland, not al-Sadr and I will still be in the square participating until I achieve the demands of the martyrs."[22]

Such defiance illustrates the scale of the challenge the Iraqi government and their Iranian sponsors continue to face. Moreover, it also reflects the sense of nationalism that has characterised the protests, and the widespread rejection of sectarianism as an instrument of elite manipulation to sow division among the people. However, decisions on key national questions such as the continued presence of US troops may stoke renewed sectarian divisions. For example, voting in Parliament on the expulsion of US troops ran along sectarian lines, with Shia members voting in favour while Kurds and Sunnis abstained.[23] Evicting US troops from Iraq remains a strategic Iranian goal, but runs the risk of being seen very clearly as a narrow Iranian interest rather than a national Iraqi interest. It is also noteworthy that Sadr's 24 January "millioniya" protest against the continued presence of US forces was relatively brief and poorly attended, although this should in the first instance be understood as solidarity among the protestors as opposed to support for a continued US troop presence.[24]

As Iran searches for a new Hashd leader to replace Muhandis, intra-Shia divisions between groups supporting Khamenei, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, and Sadr pose a serious challenge to existing power dynamics.[25] Simultaneously, Prime Ministerial candidates who lack a political base and are therefore unlikely to challenge existing elites or the power of the Hashd, such as Muhammad Tawfiq Allawi, have been roundly rejected by the protestors and failed to form a government. Given the continued strength and relative independence of the Hashd from the Iraqi government, the potential for further attacks against US forces in Iraq or indeed their Saudi Arabian allies, and the likelihood of protracted Iranian retaliation for Soleimani's assassination, Iraq remains in a dangerous position. Continued Iranian and Saudi public statements to the effect that they are willing to negotiate will be welcome news in Baghdad, but their agency to effect such positive change is limited.[26] Still, a government that pursues Iraqi national interests rather than sectarian interests at the behest of a foreign power stands a better chance of weathering this storm.

It remains difficult, however, to see where such a nationalist political alternative would come from. As evidenced throughout the Arab Uprisings, translating popular protest and dissatisfaction with the ruling elite into a coherent, united, and viable political movement is extremely challenging. For all of the hope represented by the protestors, the structural obstacles to change remain formidable. Moreover, the issue is further complicated by the lack of national reconciliation following the territorial defeat of ISIS, with Sunni and minority communities in formerly held ISIS areas continuing to face extreme challenges inadequately addressed by the Iraqi state.[27] Without this, in the face of continuing mistrust, it is hard to envisage a truly nationalist political alternative successfully emerging.

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Tales of the Unexpected:
Will the Lebanese Uprising Stay Clear of Attempts at Geopolitization?[1]

By Helle Malmvig (Danish Institute for International Studies) and Tamirace Fakhoury (Lebanese American University)

It is October 2019 and Lebanon's popular protest movement is in full bloom. At Beirut's Ring Road a young activist holds up a bottle of tequila and a hand-written placard: Sponsored by the Mexican embassy. Another protester hands out Lebanese bread, while declaring that the Manakish are supplied by the Qatari government. Lebanese activists have from early on sought to humorize and diffuse predictable allegations of foreign backing and infiltration. Key political leaders and party-run media and TV stations, as well as foreign powers, have however routinely uttered allegations of external interference. Iran's supreme leader for instance, accused the Lebanese protest of "being instigated by the US and Israel."2

Lebanese domestic politics, including mass mobilization, is usually depicted as exceptionally permeable and susceptible to regional geopolitics and foreign interventionism.[3] This is partly the result of the fractured nature of Lebanese politics, which enable ruling elites to draw competing external powers into local politics, while external powers can use the fragmented order as a battleground for their own rivalries.[4] Since 2005, following the departure of Syria's military troops, Lebanese politics has been largely polarized into two blocks usually framed as the pro-Syrian March 8 versus the Anti-Syrian March 14 Alliances. These alliances have been reinforced, and partly reproduced, by wider regional cleavages namely the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and the Hezbollah-led Resistance axis versus the West binary. Lately, though, Saudi financial support and overt interventionism seem to have taken a back seat, since the infamous pressure on former premier Saad el Hariri to resign in Riyadh in 2017.

Given this proneness to foreign interventionism and the permeability of the state, it is remarkable that the Lebanese protest movement (called the *Thawra* or the Revolution by Lebanese protesters) has managed at least in the first stages to remain anchored in domestic politics. By domestic anchoring we refer to a three-fold dynamic 1) Protests erupted as a result of domestic grievances 2) Protesters have voiced domestic or "home-grown" demands, as opposed to foreign policy demands, 3) There are no indications of direct or material external backing of protesters.

In Iraq, demonstrators have called for an end to Iranian and US influence, as Marie Louise Clausen also shows in this issue. In Lebanon, however, the focus of the protests has thus far been determinedly domestic. This makes the current protest movement different from previous Lebanese episodes of contention that were quickly captured by overlapping external and internal dividing lines. In the 2005 Cedar Revolutio, for instance, massive protests called for an end to Syrian predominance in Lebanese politics, and eventually forced Syrian troops to withdraw. Protesters at the time also denounced Lebanon's sectarian political system, but bottom-up contention was soon co-opted by Lebanon's polarized political coalitions: The Hezbollah-led March 8 Coalition which is supported by Iran and the Syrian regime, and the contending March 14 Coalition led by the Sunni Future Movement and backed by Saudi Arabia and Western governments.

Against this background, the domestic anchoring of Lebanon's current protest movement arises as a real achievement, but also one that may be difficult to sustain. Below we outline three ways through which the protest movement has sought to anchor itself in a widely domestic context; exploring how protest tactics, framings and narratives have centered on cross-sectarian mobilization and nation-wide issues. Yet, we also show how such modes of domestic anchoring have been challenged by what we call *geopolitization*[5] and sectarian meddling, thwarting protesters' attempts at forging national and collective appeal.

By *geopolitization*, we posit that geopolitics, rather than being a 'natural' or inevitable part of international politics,

is a discursive process, or even a speech act, whereby political elite actors seek to lift an issue from the realm of national politics into the international realm of brute force and particularistic interest. Geopolitization for instance occurs when ruling elites try to delegitimize contestation and challenges to their authority by pointing to foreign strategic interests and meddling or to the geopolitical implications of change for disrupting the status quo (e.g. framing change as an opportunity for outside powers and rivals to leverage and benefit from a changing scene). In this sense, geopolitization borders concepts such as securitization and internationalization[6], being a discursive move which – if successful - overrides domestic (presumably low politics) concerns with geopolitical (presumably high politics) ones. Geopolitization is also a powerful speech act, in so far as it draws on 'Arab regional norms' of non-intervention/sovereignty and anti-imperialism[7], and the embeddedness of such norms in historic memories of colonialism and foreign intrusion. Within this normative order, geopolitization versus domestic anchoring act as centrifugal or opposing forces in the context of a mass uprising: On the one hand, successful geopolitization constitutes an effective way of undermining an uprising's popular support and legitimacy. On the other, mass mobilization that is convincingly anchored in domestic politics and particularly successful at countering attempts at geopolitization will be likely perceived as particularly legitimate.

The domestic anchoring of Lebanon's protest movement

Inclusiveness

In the wake of wildfires to which the government inadequately responded, an announced WhatsApp tax spurred hundreds of young men from poorer backgrounds to riot in the center of Beirut.[8] Protests rapidly expanded both in terms of participation and demands. In contrast to the 2015 YouStink movement, which largely focused on staging protests in Beirut, demonstrations this time acquired a nation-wide base. They spread to cities and rural areas in the North and South of Lebanon, and united citizens across geographical, social and generational divisions. The Northern city of Tripoli witnessed some of the largest demonstrations ever, but protest and roadblocks also spread to unlikely sites of contention such as Nabatiyeh in the South. Women and feminist actors emerged as key curators of the "thawra". Mobilizing at the "frontlines" of the demonstrations, they sought to prevent police or militia thugs' violence. On several occasions, women were organizing marches that re-articulated and gave direction to the demands and narratives of the "Revolution", for instance the ritual of banging of pots and pans every evening at eight.

Collective action also took on multiple creative and innovative forms. Protest spaces spread from streets to university campuses, guilds and professional associations. Tents and new activist platforms hosted various talks to debate economic and political strategies of change. Revolutionary art and creative content went viral on new social media platforms such as *ArtofThrawra, Megaphone* and more recently *The public square.* Graffiti, drawings, and slogans have adorned city walls and facades. At the heart of Beirut, "the revolution fist" and the so-called "egg" were used as collective art installation emerging as iconic symbols of the uprising. To signal national unity and disrupt the use of party flags and salutes, protesters waved the Lebanese flag from shop windows and private homes. Singing the national anthem in protest spaces became a widespread ritual of the "Thawra".

As Salloukh also shows in this volume, the broadly formulated demands and national frames of the uprising succeeded in attracting supporters from various localities and sects. Protest framings targeted the entire political and economic elite and the corrupt and defunct economic policies associated with the sectarian system. Protesters have tirelessly chanted the widely adopted slogan *kellon ya'3ni kellon* (all of you means all of you). This slogan epitomizes the outright rejection of the entire sectarian political class even targeting figures such as Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah who previously enjoyed an almost sacrosanct status above the mundane horse-trading of Lebanese politics. Indeed, the slogan was soon adapted

to "all of them means all of them, and Nasrallah is one of them". The use of profanities, ridicule and provocative satire against ruling incumbents was described by some protesters as a liberating act or a form of emancipatory catharsis, while inevitably alienating others, especially older generations. Notwithstanding this, protest framings, which targeted failing governance and called for recovering "looted public money", managed to resonate with various population segments irrespective of class, background and confessional affiliation. Through talks and teach-ins, protesters debated a plethora of issues ranging from family law issues, capital controls to re-appropriation of public spaces along the coast. They moreover carefully calibrated their slogans to avoid partisan demands linked to Lebanon's polarized political coalitions or to foreign powers.

Shying away from sectarian violence and polarization

Early on, protesters were conscious that safeguarding the peaceful character of the demonstrations and avoiding sectarian violence were paramount to sustaining the uprising. One of the protests' tactical repertoire consisted in anchoring narratives of peaceful coexistence and refuting the scare tactics of a return to the civil war era promulgated by some political parties. Multiple art works captioned "Lebanese Civil War 1975-2019" framed the current uprising as one marking the end of sectarian divisions and the emergence of a new national identity. In response to politicians' veiled threats that mass protests would lead to the outbreak of civil war, activists chanted "we are the future and you are the civil war".

As protests however stretched in their second month, the use of disruptive, confrontational and violent tactics became more frequent. Still, protesters sought to defuse tensions through a variety of ways. In November 2019, militia thugs destroyed the protest tents and the "revolutionary hand" in Ras al Solh in downtown Beirut. Nocturnal clashes between protesters and party supporters who were shouting *Shia Shia Shia* scared off many demonstrators in Beirut, threatening to alter the composition and peaceful character of the protests. At this juncture, anti-government protesters voiced outcries of anger against the so-called shabiha. Still, many activists insisted that preserving the uprising's peaceful character remained a core priority. Here, they argued that "party supporters" were victims of sectarianized politics as much as the "rest of us", and that efforts should be made to reach out rather than to condemn them. In Ain al Rummanah, the local district where the Lebanese Civil War broke out in 1975, stone-throwing clashes threatened to erupt into an episode of sectarian violence. However, one day later, Muslim and Christian women met right at the Chiyah-Ain Rummaneh dividing line exchanging white roses and hugs, thereby diffusing sectarian tensions of the night before.

Avoiding partisan alliance and rising above the Iran-US binary

In response to allegations of foreign financing and meddling, protesters have from the outset abstained from siding and negotiating with international actors. In October, civil society organizations refused to meet with a French official, suspected of striving to facilitate negotiations between the political establishment and protesters. The Legal Agenda, a prominent grassroots organization, published a communique countering rumors that the French embassy had appointed it to negotiate on behalf of the uprising. Reacting to official statements of US, Iranian or Russian officials who back different political actors, protesters have stressed the "home-grown" character of the uprising and its embeddedness in Lebanon's domestic plight.

However, allegations of external partisanship have seeped in public spheres and online discussions. A Fulbright scholar who criticized the Lebanese political establishment on TV was accused of being a US agent. Some tents that hosted talks discussing contentious issues such as the conflict between Hezbollah and Israel closed in the light of allegations that they had evolved into tools of divisiveness. In the wake of Iranian General Soleimani's slaying by US forces, Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah gave a speech in which he argued that "you are with us or with the US" , and in the South in the border town of

Maroun al Ras, Hezbollah erected a monumental statue of Soleimani pointing his finger towards Israel, while holding a Palestinian flag, signaling not only that Hezbollah stands in solidarity with the Palestinians, but also is the only protector of Lebanon from Israel. Against this backdrop, public figures who voice support for the revolution report that they often find it difficult to refute binary logics such as "either with us or the US" or either "with us or with Israel"

The inevitable *geopoliticization* of the protests?

Protesters have sought to distance themselves from external alignments and to concentrate on the *endogenous* rather than the exogeneous character of Lebanon's plight. Still, attempts at *geopolitization* have been widespread and aided on by the formula of sectarian power-sharing that favors external patronage and alignment. Politicians have continuously resorted to and drawn in scenarios of external entanglement either to justify their survival, turn a blind eye to their failings or to buttress external alliances. In his TV appearances, President Michel Aoun for instance insisted that the lack of support from the international community was key to the deterioration of Lebanon's situation. At the outset of the protests, Nasrallah warned protesters of the looming dangers of civil war and exploitation by Israeli and US Forces. In the context of the escalating Iranian-US conflict following Soleimani's assassination, Hezbollah's leader focused in his speeches on the primacy of external alignments in determining Lebanon's fate, thus engaging in a prime example of geopolitization by relegating the protest to low politics being trumpeted by the high politics of Lebanon's external alliances. In January 2020, amid increased security measures that involved setting up metal gates and barbed wire in Beirut, security forces confronted protesters with intense tear gas and water cannons under the pretext that the protests were "infiltrated".

Counter-narratives accusing protesters of acting as trump cards for external actors have resulted in discrediting and polarizing some "thawra" initiatives. By mid-November, competing groups accused protesters who had orchestrated a "thawra bus ride" from North to South Lebanon of benefitting from US funds. Vociferous debates gained ground on social media though the US embassy rushed to deny the news. That same month, a small-scale demonstration was staged in front of the US embassy in Awkar. Demonstrators burned Israeli and US flags and called for an end to US meddling in Lebanese politics. Initially the protest was framed as part of the 'thawra', yet it turned out that it was not the protest movement who had staged the anti-American demonstration, but political party supporters.

Domestication versus geopolitization of Lebanon's *thawra*: what may lie ahead?

Attempts at geopolitization have not succeeded *yet* in disrupting the domestic anchoring of the Lebanon uprising. The framings, public discourses, and repertoires remain anchored in Lebanon's domestic plight, thus going against the grain of Lebanon's presumed exceptional permeability and vulnerability to foreign interventionism. Worth noting is also that the Saudi-Iranian rivalry has played little role and that the contending blocks of March 8 and March 14 may cease to frame Lebanese politics altogether.

Yet there are also signs to the opposite. Lebanon's economy is on the verge of collapse and in policy debates, the thorny issue as to whether a Hezbollah-led government will be able to access international restructuring and Gulf economic aid have taken the forefront. Already Western governments have expressed reservations towards funneling money to the current government, though Iran continues to channel funds through its local allies. Similarly, if US-Iranian tensions flare up again, or if Israeli-Hezbollah military confrontations in Syria or Lebanon break out, geopolitization will likely overtake the domestic character of the protest. However, protesters have so far remarkably managed to anchor their protest framings and activities in Lebanon's *endogenous* plight. As one Lebanese journalist and activist puts it: "This is truly a local moment. It is a domestic accountability story and a rejection of foreign interference"[9]

Endnotes

[1] This piece is partly based on the two authors' interviews and fieldwork with activist in October and November 2019

[2] Protests in Lebanon: A View from Iran, 20 November 2019, https://lobelog.com/how-the-supreme-leader-shaped-irans-view-of-the-lebanese-protests/



[4] See also Bassel Salloukh (2017) "The sectarianization of geopolitics" in *Hashemi and Postel eds. Sectarianization: Mapping the new Politics of the Middle East*, Hurst and Company, London

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[8] Majed Rima and Lana Salman (2019), "Lebanon's Thawra," Middle East Report 292/3 (Fall/Winter 2019). https://merip.org/2019/12/lebanons-thawra/ and Tamirace Fakhoury. (2019) "The Unmaking of Lebanon's Sectarian Order? The October Uprising and Its Drivers", Instituto Affari Internazionali working paper, https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaicom1966.pdf

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The Sectarian Image Reversed:
The Role of Geopolitics in Hezbollah's Domestic Politics

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Hezbollah occupies a geopolitical space no other Armed Non-State Actor (ANSA) in the region is able to duplicate. Whether doing so to serve its own interests, or as part of the complicated Saudi-Iranian geopolitical contest, Hezbollah is present operationally or logistically in every area and battlefield involving the so-called resistance axis (*mihwar al-muqawama*), from Syria and Yemen to the Gaza Strip and Iraq. As the party's Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah once declared, "where we have to be, we shall be,"[1] a position memorialized in a popular party propaganda anthem.[2]

How does Hezbollah's growing involvement in regional politics fit into debates on the role of sectarianism in Middle East International Relations (MEIR) as examined in Morten Valbjørn's contribution to this POMEPS collection?[3] Does it follow the pattern described by Gregory Gause of post-uprisings broken states opening up opportunity structures for other regional states to deploy sectarianism in defense of what are primarily external, balance of power threats?[4] I will argue that we should also reverse the valence of the "second image" and consider another dynamic at work: of domestic sectarian political actors invoking geopolitical battles from the outside-in for strictly domestic political purposes.[5]

Hezbollah's response to the 17 October 2019 anti-sectarian protests in Lebanon shows how Nasrallah framed the protests as part of a larger external geopolitical campaign (*mu'amara*) targeting the resistance axis – a dynamic similar to what Tamirace Fakhoury and Helle Malmvig label "geopolitization" in their contribution to this collection.[6] Nasrallah did so for two reasons: to insulate the party's core Shi'a constituency from the potential security and political fallouts of the protests, but also to harden the party cadre's sectarian allegiances in anticipation of future socioeconomic hard times. This process proceeded gradually, and in response to threat perception and debates inside the party. Nevertheless, Hezbollah became embroiled in the kind of public sectarian agitation it has always tried to avoid, ultimately making a full reversal in its position vis-à-vis the Lebanese sectarian system: from being its most ardent critic to perhaps its most significant prop.

A Leap of Faith in the Sectarian System

Hezbollah denounced the Lebanese sectarian system in its very first communiqué of 1983, subscribing instead to the idea of an Islamic state and *wilayat al-faqih*. Its later rejection of the 1989 Taif Accord was based on the claim that it consecrated the very sectarian system the party condemned as unjust. Hezbollah's position vis-à-vis the Lebanese political system started changing only after its decision to participate in the 1992 parliamentary elections, a shift dictated in large measure by geopolitical calculations as well as domestic ideological battles in Iran.[7]

The party avoided direct participation in the sectarian political system until after the assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri on 14 February 2005. Henceforth, the overlapping domestic and regional battle over post-Syria Lebanon brought Hezbollah to the center of Lebanese politics. But the party was always careful lest its politics and alliances assume a strictly sectarian coloring. Nasrallah always reminded his audiences that the overlapping domestic/external battle over post-Syria Lebanon between the 8 and 14 March coalitions was a *political* rather than a sectarian battle. The Memorandum of Understanding signed with the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) on 6 February 2006 was in part meant to provide the party domestic political cover from a Christian partner for what had emerged as a wholescale contest over control of the state's institutions and foreign policy primarily between the Future Movement and the Amal-Hezbollah dyad.[8] Even the military invasion of West Beirut on 8 May 2008, with all its

sectarian ramifications, was considered a "*yawm majid*"9 – a glorious day, a phrase that would come back to haunt Nasrallah after the 17 October protests – that helped end the then political deadlock in the country and paved the way for a new political settlement, one that took the form of the Qatari-negotiated 21 May 2008 Doha Accord.

It was only after the Doha Accord consecrated a new tradition of compulsory national unity cabinets as the norm in Lebanon's post-Syria consociational power-sharing arrangement that Hezbollah changed its official stance towards the country's sectarian political system. The political document released in November 2009 makes no mention of Hezbollah's desire to establish an Islamic state in Lebanon. It rather embraces Lebanese identity, rejects what it refers to as attempts to divide Lebanon under the guise of federalism, and calls for a strong, indivisible Lebanon. Such an outcome, according to the document, can only be obtained if Lebanon has "a just, capable, and strong state" and "a political system that truly represents the will of the people and its aspirations for justice, security, stability, felicity, and dignity."[10] The document identified political confessionalism as the central problem of the Lebanese political system and as a hindrance to reform. In light of the defects of the confessional system and Christian sensitivity to deconfessionalization, however, consociational democracy is considered the best interim solution, embodying a spirit of mutual coexistence. Hezbollah had thus accepted Taif's consociational formula while reserving for itself a strong unilateral veto power, especially on matters pertaining to what the party considers core-concerns, namely, cabinet formation and decision-making, foreign policy, and the future of its weapons arsenal.

Hezbollah's military intervention in Syria later exposed it to a heavy dose of sectarian demonizing, despite the party and its leader's constant attempts to characterize the battle as one not against Sunnis but rather *takfiri jihadi* groups. Yet beyond the level of official discourse, and especially in the world of popular culture and social media, Hezbollah deployed a range of sectarian markers to mobilize its community behind the war in Syria.[11] This, in turn, unleashed the kind of sectarian rhetoric and symbols, nationally but also transnationally, the party would have liked to avoid. Sectarian markers and language now dotted more provocatively the landscape of its intimate community.

With *mihwar al-muqawama* in ascendance regionally, and the Lebanese Parliament and cabinet controlled by a cross-sectarian and cross-confessional alliance of political allies, Hezbollah's main worry in the period leading up to the 17 October 2019 protests was the economic situation.[12] In fact, the party was a late comer to the domestic institutional and political economic scene. The Shi'a share in the predetermined postwar sectarian quota was originally the privilege of the Amal Movement, which came to be known as "Lebanon's deep state"[13] given its preponderance in the archipelago of clientelist networks embedded throughout the public sector.[14] Hezbollah MPs led an anti-corruption campaign pertaining to public finances in a bid to insulate the party from public anger at deteriorating economic conditions.[15] The party was also critical of the *Banque Du Liban*'s (BDL) compliance policies with the 2017 US Hezbollah International Financing Prevention Amendments Act (HIFPAA), targeting foreign individuals and companies who voluntarily offer financial, material or technological support to Hezbollah and its subsidiaries.[16] It considered BDL Governor Riad Salameh's compliance and monetary policies an extension of the US administration' strategy to dry up the party's financial swamps.[17]

17 October *Majid*

It is in this context that the 17 October 2019 protests exploded. They expressed deep subaltern cross-sectarian and cross-regional economic frustrations at the postwar "anatomy of corruption"[18] undergirding the sectarian political system, and the failure of the postwar political economy, one that depended on a continuous injection of capital inflows to finance the country's twin postwar fiscal and current account deficits.[19] Hezbollah was initially taken aback by the violence and (very personal) anti-elite rhetoric expressed by protesters in what is otherwise its

loyal subaltern Shi'a constituency across the country – not only in Beirut's southern suburbs, but also in the Beqaa and in the South.[20]

Its position vis-à-vis the protests would alter gradually as events unfolded, however. In his first speech after the protests, on 19 October, Nasrallah embraced the protesters' genuine grievances and demands.[21] He anchored the protests – Nasrallah refused to use the term 'revolution' – in the country's dire socioeconomic conditions and the inability of the political establishment to deal with these conditions, rejecting the claim that the protests were the workings of a political party, embassy, or foreign conspiracy. He even praised the protests for being "spontaneous and genuine and traversing confessional and sectarian and regional [divides] and political orientations." Nevertheless, Nasrallah warned against political free-riders – namely the Maronite Lebanese Forces and the Druze Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) – determined to undermine Michele Aoun's pro-Hezbollah presidency. He consequently drew a number of red lines for the protests. These protests, he suggested, could not lead to Aoun's resignation, the toppling of Saad al-Hariri's national unity government, or lead to early parliamentary elections; nor was he in favor of a technocratic government that, he argued, could not survive the intense economic pressures buffeting the country.

Nasrallah's second speech of 25 October struck a different tone – and body language – and was given on the morrow of two successive attacks by party partisans against the protesters in Martyrs Square and Riad al-Solh Street, the symbolic epicenter of the 17 October revolution.[22] In what amounted to the beginning of a calculated turn against the protests, Nasrallah claimed that the protests had swerved from their spontaneous and innocent beginnings; they had been infiltrated by politicians and external actors targeting, respectively, the pro-Hezbollah presidency and the country in what is a region-wide effort aimed at undermining the geopolitical achievements of *mihwar al-muqawama*. Albeit recognizing the diversity of protest groups – at one point in the speech he presented a typology of these groups – and a number of achievements unthinkable before the protests,[23] Nasrallah could not condone road closures or accept that the protesters had no leaders with whom the government could negotiate – a demand made by Aoun in a televised speech on 24 October. He repeated his red lines of the first speech, warning that any potential political "vacuum is deadly" (*al-faragh qatel*). Nasrallah then closed his speech by instructing Hezbollah's partisans to exit the protest sites. Some of them, he explained, had joined the protests out of genuine socioeconomic sentiments, others to defend and explain the party's policies against attempts to lump it with the rest of the corrupt political establishment – as in the slogan *kilon ya'ni kilon*. This was no longer their right place, however. The protesters' refusal to enter into dialogue with the presidency now meant only one thing: that Hezbollah itself was being targeted, even if inadvertently, in what is invariably a geopolitical contest with echoes reaching Iraq and beyond.[24]

These warnings were reiterated even more forcefully in Nasrallah's third speech of 1 November,[25] delivered after Hariri's resignation and hence that of his government. He accused those who were free-riding the protests of engineering a political coup against Hezbollah and its allies, namely Aoun and the FPM, and warned that the protests may lead to a complete collapse of state institutions and even civil war. This speech represented the highpoint of Nasrallah's campaign against the protests, one that ultimately backfired among the public, even inside the Shi'a community, for it portrayed Hezbollah as the main defender of the sectarian system with all its corruption and distortions.

Taken together, Nasrallah's second and third speeches underscored Hezbollah's apprehensions of the popular protests that exploded on 17 October. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the party did go through some sort of internal deliberations as to how to react to the protests.[26] One view suggested embracing the protests as reflecting long-time party demands for economic reforms and the fight against corruption. Another perspective interpreted the protests from a strictly domestic security and geopolitical perspective: an attempt by overlapping domestic and external actors to alter the balance of political power in

Hezbollah's favor in Lebanon and the geopolitical balance of power in favor of *mihwar al-muqawama*. Nothing symbolized more the apprehensions of this latter group than that graffiti dotting the walls of Beirut's downtown area in the aftermath of the protests: "17 October *majid*" it read – a glorious 17 October. The glory was for those protesting violently the country's dire socioeconomic conditions and corrupt sectarian political establishment, not Hezbollah's 2008 invasion of Beirut.

Back to the Sectarian Citadel

Hezbollah's incremental reaction to the 17 October protests saw it gradually, but surely, withdrawing to its core sectarian citadel. Whether by demonizing the protests or condoning an unabashedly aggressive sectarian discourse: the "*shi'a, shi'a, shi'a*" chants across the country sometimes against same-sect Shi'a protesters, multiple rounds of violent invasions of protest sites and Martyr Square, the burning of protesters' tents, waves of party flag-waving motorbike convoys across Beirut, all by Amal Movement and Hezbollah, these tactics amounted to a deliberate attempt to mobilize core constituencies, this by a party known for eschewing open sectarian rhetoric. In so doing it was obvious that Hezbollah had decided to react to the potential threats posed by the 17 October protests with a security rather than a political mindset.[27] Invariably, road closures jeopardized routes Hezbollah considers of strategic importance for its daily operational activities and the wellbeing of its core community – but especially those from the South and the Beqaa to Beirut. The party could also argue that some protest sites – especially around Beirut's Fuad Shihab (or ring) highway connecting the city's eastern and western sides – were too close for comfort. All this could have been managed through close coordination with the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), however.

What then explains the insistence on demonizing the protests and deploying open forms of sectarian mobilization and agitation? The party invoked demonizing tactics and sectarian agitation in a deliberately provocative strategy to achieve two overlapping objectives. It wanted to insulate its so-called "street" – the preferred term deployed by Lebanon's sectarian elites when referring to their sectarianized subjects – from the threat of security penetration by hostile intelligence agencies,[28] and from exposure to alternative ideological and political narratives than those manufactured by the party's official organs. On this view, then, the presence of some parts of Hezbollah's *mujtama' al-muqawama* (resistance society) in Martyr Square exposed the party and its supporters to security and political penetration. Nasrallah's demonization of the protests as part of a larger domestic and geopolitical coup, coupled with aggressive sectarian mobilization, was thus meant to retrieve the party's 'street' from Martyr Square's open spaces back to the party's immune citadel and its controlled environment. Demonizing the protests and intensifying the sectarian mobilization of the party's card-carrying constituency is also the party's preemptive strategy in anticipation of the coming economic collapse and its inescapable effects on its own supporters. The party seems to have concluded that the worst is yet to come as Lebanon's socioeconomic woes will soon increase in an exponential rather than linear manner. With its own material resources stretched to their limits, and ongoing costly military intervention in Syria, Hezbollah decided to fall back on unabashed sectarian mobilization as the best strategy to retain the loyalty of its core Shi'a constituency. But in demonizing the protests and intensifying sectarian modes of mobilization, it may soon discover that it will have to own a socioeconomic collapse that it had long warned against and is not entirely of its own making.

Endnotes

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[2] See the video of the anthem at: https://program.almanar.com.lb/episode/80012.
[3] See Morten Valbjørn, in this collection.
[4] See F. Gregory Gause, III, in this collection.
[5] See Lisel Hintz, *Identity Politics Inside Out: National Identity Contestation and Foreign Policy in Turkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
[6] See Tamirace Fakhoury and Helle Malmvig in this collection.
[7] See Shoghig Mikaelian and Bassel F. Salloukh, "Strong Actor in a Weak State: The Geopolitics of Hezbollah," in Mehran Kamrava, ed., *Fragile Politics: Weak States in the Greater Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 119-143.
[8] See Bassel F. Salloukh, "Democracy in Lebanon: The Primacy of the Sectarian System," in Nathan Brown and Emad El-Din Shahin, eds., *The Struggle over Democracy in the Middle East* (London: Routledge Press, 2009), pp. 134-150.
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[10] Quoted in Bassel F. Salloukh and Shoghig Mikaelian, "Hezbollah in Lebanon," in John L. Esposito and Emad Shahin, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Islam and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 520.
[11] See Helle Malmvig, "Allow Me This One Time to Speak as a Shi'i: The Sectarian Taboo, Music Videos and the Securitization of Sectarian Identity Politics in Hezbollah's Legitimation of its Military Involvement in Syria," *Mediterranean Politics*, (2020).
[12] See "Liqa' Nasrallah-Basil: Min al-Muwazana ila al-Boukamal," *al-Akhbar*, 12 October 2019.
[13] See Rabie Barakat, "Harakat Amal: Dawlat Lubnan al-'Amiqa," *al-Safir*, October 26, 2016.
[14] See Bassel F. Salloukh, "Taif and the Lebanese State: The Political Economy of a Very Sectarian Public Sector," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 25, 1, (2019), pp. 43–60.
[15] See "Fadlallah: Qadamna lil-Qada' ma Ladayna wa Lam Nara Fasidan Wara' al-Qudban," *al-Nahar*, 18 November 2019.
[16] Joyce Karam, "US Senate Unanimously Passes Two Bills Sanctioning Hezbollah," *The National*, 12 October 2018, at: https://www.thenational.ae/world/the-americas/us-senate-unanimously-passes-two-bills-sanctioning-hezbollah-1.779996.
[17] See "Basil ila Dimashq … Qariban: Hezbollah ila al-Share' li-Muwajahat al-Masaref," *al-Akhbar*, 14 October 2019.
[18] See Bassel F. Salloukh, "Anatomy of Corruption in Postwar Lebanon," The Lebanese Center for Policy Studies (LCPS), May 2019, at: https://www.lcps-lebanon.org/featuredArticle.php?id=229.
[19] See Bassel F. Salloukh, "Here's What the Protests in Lebanon and Iraq are Really About," *Washington Post*, Monkey Cage Blog, 19 October 2019, at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/10/19/heres-what-protests-lebanon-iraq-are-really-about/.
[20] For an excellent survey of the first weeks of the protests see Joey Ayoub, "Lebanon: A Revolution against Sectarianism," CrimethInc., 13 November 2019, at: https://crimethinc.com/2019/11/13/lebanon-a-revolution-against-sectarianism-chronicling-the-first-month-of-the-uprising.
[21] The text of the speech is reproduced at: https://almanar.com.lb/5851100.
[22] The text of the speech is reproduced at: https://almanar.com.lb/5876433.
[23] Namely, cabinet's willingness to endorse a new budget without deficit.
[24] Well before the 17 October protests the pro-Hezbollah *al-Akhbar* newspaper was reporting the protests in Iraq as part of a KSA and UAE plot to turn the tables against Iran. See, for example, Ibrahim al-Amin, "al-Iraq: Ayam lil-Ta'amur wal-Fasad wal-Tufuliya al-Thawriya," *al-Akhbar*, 14 October 2019.
[25] The text of the speech is reproduced at: https://almanar.com.lb/5905506.
[26] Interviews in Beirut throughout the first weeks of the protests with journalists with access to Hezbollah MPs.
[27] See the excellent analysis by Rabie Barakat, "Hezbollah wa Bo'bo' al-Mujtama' al-Madani," Awan, 27 November 2019, at: http://awanmedia.net/opinion-analysis/%d8%ad%d8%b2%d8%a8-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%84%d9%87-%d9%88%d8%a8%d9%8f%d8%b9%d8%a8%d9%8f%d8%b9-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%85%d8%ac%d8%aa%d9%85%d8%b9-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%85%d8%af%d9%86%d9%8a/.
[28] Hezbollah's intelligence cadres were ubiquitous in Martyr Square during the first days of the protests.

Saudi-Iranian Rivalry from the Gulf to the Horn of Africa:
Changing Geographies and Infrastructures[1]

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While the Arabian Gulf and the Horn of Africa share historical relations, geographic proximity and political links, transregional interactions increased dramatically since the 2015 Yemen war. Relations between the Arabian Gulf and the Horn of Africa have acquired a new dynamic following the 2015 Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen, when Gulf States—namely Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates—turned to the Horn of Africa as a geostrategic space critical to their war effort (Soliman 2017). Gulf States have heavily invested in infrastructures by leasing ports in Djibouti, Eritrea, Somalia and Somaliland along with investing in airports, building deep-water port facilities, and establishing military bases.

These infrastructural developments turned the Horn of Africa into a space for competition among Gulf States and other traditional actors, such as the United States, China, and Turkey. A growing literature attempts to explain this dynamic relationship between the two regions, often focusing on geopolitical or security dynamics (e.g. Bishkum, 2019; Cannon et al., 2019; Melvin, 2019a; Verhoeven, 2018) or on economic aspects of the new competition (Meester et al., 2019). Other authors study the impact of international competitions on national and regional policies in the Horn of Africa and the Middle East respectively (ICC, 2018b; Melvin 2019a, 2019b), with some focusing on single countries (ICC, 2018a; Ahmed et al., 2019; Larsen et al., 2019). While some scholars argue that Saudi-Emirati turn toward the Horn of Africa is driven by fear of Iranian encroachment in East Africa (Mansour and Ahmed 2019; Alieu Manjang 2017), other scholars shed light on ulterior economic and strategic dynamics that could have shaped these developments. This essay explores the Saudi-Iranian rivalry in the Horn of Africa. It argues that while Gulf engagement in the Horn of Africa was initially driven by concerns about Iranian expansion in East Africa and the Red Sear, their extent of their involvement rather reflected a broader move by Saudi Arabia and the UAE to project power beyond the Middle East. Whereas Gulf rivalry was often paralleled with sectarianization in the Middle East, North Africa, and West Africa (particularly in Nigeria), the Horn of Africa has been an area where the rivalry emerged without sectarianism. The essay will first present a quick overview of Iranian presence in the area. Then, it examines Saudi and Emirati endeavours to establish strategic partnerships in the Horn of Africa. Finally, it places this rivalry in the context of Gulf rivalries and offers some reflections on the role of sectarianism in the Middle East and beyond.

Iranian Involvement in the Horn of Africa

During the two decades, Iran extended its influence in the Horn of Africa by providing financial and military support to countries in East Africa. This Iranian influence in the region was primarily based on the long-term alliance with Sudan. Teheran's relations with Sudan dates back in 1989 at the advent of Omar al-Bashir to power. Shortly after Bashir came to power, both Sudan and Iran developed a strategic partnership through economic and military agreements. In 1991, Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani visited Khartoum and agreed to supply Sudan with free oil and arm supply. The two countries also signed a military pact (Kassab 2018). In the early 1990s, hundreds of Iranian revolutionary guards were in Sudan training Islamist militants from Sudan, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt and the Gulf (Rubin 2014, 77–78). By 2007, Iran became the main suppliers of weapons to Sudan, and both countries signed another defence agreement in 2008. In return, Sudan was suspected to channel weapons to Iran's allies, namely Hamas in the Gaza Strip and the Houthis in Yemen (Mansour and Ahmed 2019, 104-5).

Beyond its strategic relationship with Sudan, Iran pursued other partnerships and alliances in the Horn of Africa

(Lefebvre 2019). It strengthened its relations with Eretria, which allowed Asmara a path out of international isolation and US sanctions. Eritrea's proxy war in Somalia against Ethiopia (in the context of a long rivalry), resulted in Eritrea becoming increasingly isolated diplomatically in East Africa and internationally. In 2008, Eritrea opted out of this isolation by forging a strategic relationship with Washington's regional adversary, i.e. Iran. Iran also found in Eritrea's isolation an opportunity to establish a strategic foothold in the Horn of Africa with direct access to the Red Sea. Eritrea offered Iran a port to support its deployments in the Gulf of Aden/Red Sea. Eritrea also provided a maritime link between Iran and Syria by allowing Iranian naval forces moving from the Indian Ocean through the Red Sea and Suez Canal to the Mediterranean. Starting from November 2008, Iranian warships conducted anti-piracy operations off the coast of Somalia by using Eritrea's port of Assab, on the grounds of protecting Iranian commercial shipping.

Iran also attempted to foster relations with other countries in the Horn of Africa. In Djibouti, Iran expressed enthusiasm to enhance military cooperation (Manjang 2017), but nothing materialised. In Somalia, Iran maintained good relations with the Somali government while at the same time actively supporting Al-Shabab terrorist organisation (Reuters 2018). It was also suspected that Iran used Somalia since 2015 to smuggle arms to the Houthi rebels in Yemen (Feierstein 2017). Teheran's attempt to establish a foothold in the Red Sea region through a naval presence in the Gulf of Aden became a cause for concern for the Saudi Kingdom (Lefebvre 2012, 126).

Saudi-Emirati Expansion in the Horn of Africa

Until 2014, the Saudi-Emirati role in the Horn of Africa was driven by economic reasons to ensure food security, especially through investments in the agriculture sector. Following the 2015 Saudi-led intervention in Yemen, both countries started investing in the maritime and logistics sectors in the region, while building strategic alliances with several East African countries. In December 2018, Riyadh announced an alliance including six countries on the cost of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden (Egypt, Djibouti, Somalia, Sudan, Yemen and Jordan) with an aim of establishing security cooperation to decrease the influence of outside powers. A Saudi analyst explains the Saudi fear of Iranian expansion as follow: 'You are having trouble with the Iranians in the Gulf, you cannot afford to have more trouble in the Red Sea, you have to bring the Sudanese, the Egyptians and the rest of the Horn of Africa to some sort of understanding' (Wilson and England 2019).

Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE provided financial aid to cooperating with countries in the Horn of Africa to steer them away from Iran. Saudi Arabia offered Somalia US$50 million in January 2016, when it cut its diplomatic ties with Iran (McDowall and Maclean 2016). Sudan received US$1 billion deposit in its central bank from Saudi Arabia and a deal to supply Khartoum with oil for five years. Eritrea received military aid from the UAE after it cut its ties with Iran in 2017. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia signed a military and defence agreement with Djibouti in April 2017 aiming to build a military base there.

In addition to these strategic partnerships, Emirati investments in the Horn of Africa has also extended to ports infrastructures. In 2017, the independent (but unrecognized) Republic of Somaliland signed of a deal with the United Arab Emirates-based DP World to expand Berbera port (and, separately, to host a UAE military base nearby). In Somalia, Dubai-backed DP World signed a deal for the development and expansion of Bosaso port, already an important hub for trade between Puntland and southern Somali regions, as well as being a prominent point of departure for ('irregular') migration across the Gulf of Aden. In Eritrea, the UAE began constructing a military base at the southern Eritrean port city of Assab in 2015 (vital for its operations in Yemen) and normalised Eritrean relations with Ethiopia would allow access to this port and potentially provide new opportunities to UAE commercial and military ambitions.

The Scramble for Influence in the Horn of Africa: Reflections on Sectarianism



Wilson, Tom, and Andrew England. 2019. 'Middle East's Power Struggle Moves to the Horn of Africa.' Financial Times. 30 June 2019. https://www.ft.com/content/53b8b78c-90f2-11e9-b7ea-60e35ef678d2.

While the few analyses that discussed Saudi and Emirati investments and expansion in the Horn of Africa after 2015 focused on Iranian threats in the region, the extent of their investments shows a willingness of project power. The UAE and Saudi Arabia are using their financial capabilities to build new strategic alliances in the Horn of Africa while establishing long-term economic and military infrastructures. More importantly, these trans-regional dynamics were not solely shaped by the rivalry with Iran, Arab Gulf States have equally used the Horn of Africa as proxy for their internal rivalry. Patterns of alliances since 2017 in the Horn mirror the GCC crisis between Saudi Arabia/UAE and Qatar. When Saudi Arabia and the UAE cut ties with Qatar in 2017, African allies were asked to pick sides. Countries in the Horn of Africa receiving financial aid from Saudi Arabia and the UAE were coerced

and blackmailed to cut their relations with Qatar. This rivalry within the GCC created another layer of rivalry between Somalia and Somaliland in 2017 (Malley 2018). The Qatar crisis also created tensions between Eritrea and Djibouti after Doha decided to withdraw 400 monitors disputed by the two countries, after they both decided to support Saudi Arabia and the UAE (Abdi 2017).

While Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Iran are embroiled in conflicts and rivalries in the Middle East and North Africa, their rivalry exhibits different dynamics once moved outside of the region, as the case of the Horn of Africa shows. Saudi and Emirati power projection behaviour in Horn of Africa, while being initially driven by Iranian presence in the region, did not exhibit any sectarian dimension despite the fertile ground for this discourse in East Africa. The Sunni-Shiite divide is constantly put to use by Saudi Arabia to mobilise constituencies across the Arab world in its struggle for regional influence in Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon. Despite the presence of Shiite minorities in East Africa, the lack of similar strategy by the Saudi Kingdom and its allies shows that these endeavours of expansion in the Horn of African are driven by a will for power and influence. More importantly, the lack of a sectarian dynamic in the Horn could inform our understanding of sectarianization in the Middle East. Sectarian dynamics gained traction especially after 2003 and gained even a stronger dimension after the 2011 Arab uprisings. This last wave of sectarianism has emerged with the Syria crisis, where the sectarian discourse was used to mobilise Arab people at the regional level with a sense of urgency that their identity is under threat (Darwich and Fakhoury 2017). In the Horn of Africa, sectarian identities are present and the rivalry at the regional level intersects with local conflicts providing a fertile ground for religion to be securitised. The lack of sectarianism in the Gulf rivalry in the Horn of Africa could provide a heuristic case to illuminate the dynamics of sectarianization, or lack thereof, in the Middle East and beyond. Future studies could also explore Saudi diffusion of Sunni-Shiite sectarianism to Southeast Asia and its absence in the Horn of Africa.

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Central Asia and the Iran-Saudi rivalry

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Introduction

The Iran-Saudi rivalry has been one of the key factors influencing the geopolitics of the Middle East in recent years. It has also been felt beyond the region, as both states have sought to enhance their leadership aspirations in certain parts of the wider Muslim world. Though studies on the rivalry have understandably focused on its various manifestations primarily in the Middle East,[1] its impact on other regions, spaces and domains is also worthy of serious consideration.[2] It is through such an exploration of the wider impact that one can observe the core geopolitical character of the rivalry, which runs in contrast to explanations that seek to reduce it to a centuries-old, immutable sectarian conflict.

This essay explores the geopolitical competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia as experienced in Central Asia, specifically Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, following the implosion of the Soviet Union in 1991. The initial attempts to penetrate the region paid varying dividends for both states. For Iran it arguably helped reduce some of the international isolation that it had experienced due to US efforts at containment. For Saudi Arabia, it provided new grounds to spread its religious influence at a time when its foreign policy was less adventurous than today, and when its aims were arguably less overt.

As tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia increased over recent years, the rivalry has manifested itself on a number of different levels and locales. This has found its expression in the strengthening of certain alliances, involvement in regional conflicts (both tacitly and explicitly), soft power competition that utilises cultural and religious influence, and publications in the international news media, academic and think-tank outputs. Though Central Asia has been an area for both states to exert their influence, the nature of the Iran-Saudi competition there is primarily geopolitical in nature rather than speaking to any notions of sectarianism.

Iran and Saudi Arabia's early inroads into Central Asia

Iran's relationship with Central Asia is long-standing and pre-dates the incorporation of those Republics into the Soviet Union. In terms of the rivalry between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Saudi Arabia, however, 1991 provides a natural starting point. The opportunities provided by the 'opening up' of the region after years of Russian/Soviet domination led to predictions that states such as Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia would become embroiled in a competition for influence there.[3]

Turkey was held up as a potential model for the post-independence secular leaders of the region who had grown up in the Soviet system. Indeed, the potential for Iranian-Turkish rivalry in the region was perceived as more likely than Iranian-Saudi competition in the early years of independence, as each state offered a radically different political model while seeking to make use of its own shared cultural and historical commonalities with Central Asian states.

Iran views itself as a state that is very much of the Middle East but also linked with Central Asia. The Islamic Republic was fully cognisant of the lack of compatibility between its model of Islamic government rooted in political Shiism and the avowedly secular outlook of the post-independence leadership in the Sunni dominated region. While Iran provided funds for the rebuilding of mosques and reopening of madrassas, its contribution in terms of investment in religious infrastructure was comparatively small compared to other states.[4] Still, Central Asia held an important place in the Iranian geopolitical imagination,[5] as Iran sought to reconnect with a region that it had long-established cultural and historical links with prior to Russian expansion there. While mindful

of Russian concerns, Iran gradually expanded its cultural outreach activities in the region, focusing in particular on Tajikistan as a fellow Persian-speaking nation.[6]

Central Asia also provided Iran opportunities to reduce its international isolation and help rebuild its economy after the Iran-Iraq war. This coincided with the ascendancy of a more pragmatic trend in Iranian foreign policy following the death of Khomeini. The confluence of these factors, along with the fall of the Soviet Union, allowed Iran to build new international relationships and opportunities.

Iranian policy makers conceive of its position as a potential hub and/or conduit for Central Asian trade – affording those countries access to international waters and potential oil and natural gas export opportunities through infrastructure crossing Iranian territory. Tehran took efforts to institutionalise economic cooperation in the form of transforming the previously moribund Regional Cooperation and Development organisation into the Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) - joining it with the Central Asian states (along with Azerbaijan, Pakistan and Turkey). With a record that is more declaratory than substance, however, the ECO primarily acted as a forum for Iran and the Central Asian republics to showcase their international status as independent, rational actors. Indeed, the ECO now struggles to find relevance as an international organisation in the face of an increasingly active Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), as fora for economic and security cooperation in Eurasian geopolitical space.

In terms of Saudi Arabia, Central Asia did not exert the same overt pull, given its relative lack of geographical and cultural proximity with the region. Riyadh saw the new space that the collapse of the Soviet Union opened for influence primarily in terms of its efforts to build religious links with the region. This was in keeping with Saudi policies in the 1990s that sought to support the proselytization efforts of Wahhabi scholars, and was accompanied by significant donations and support towards the building of mosques, madrassas and funding of Wahhabist-inspired Islamic education and literature provision. Saudi efforts focused in particular on the Ferghana Valley region, with Saudi missionaries taking advantage of the more well-established Islamic traditions of the area.[7] This financial support was primarily channelled through Saudi banks operating through the representative structure of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC).[8] This was further enhanced through the provision of scholarships for Central Asian students to attend religious training in Saudi Arabia, along with well-publicised Hajj pilgrimages by Central Asian leaders during the early 1990s, and Saudi facilitation of free Hajj trips by prominent Muslim scholars from Central Asia. All of these activities represent very clear effort to influence, and ultimately instrumentalise Islam in the region to enhance Saudi standing there.

Understanding Iran and Saudi foreign policy towards Central Asia

The Iranian and Saudi efforts to expand their influence in Central Asia during the 1990s and into the early 2000s are not necessarily an outcome of any explicit rivalry between the two nations. Indeed, relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia during this time were probably at their best since any time following the revolution, with the exchange of state visits and cooperation within international forums such as the OIC. Rather, it can be viewed as both states making use of their respective strengths, often more in terms of their soft power potentials in the region, than any clear sense of competition. There was a possible battle for hearts and minds at play, but in reality, both were playing to their strengths in terms of the constituencies that they were targeting.

For Iran, the opportunity to pursue a pragmatic engagement with the region in terms of developing economic and institutional links paid a moderate dividends, though this was regularly stymied by its wider disagreements with the West, such as over the nuclear issue, which hampered its ability to fully realise its potential as an economic and infrastructural gateway to the region. For Saudi Arabia, its influence was cemented

primarily in the religious sphere, where it gained some ideological purchase in terms of helping shape Islamist discourses in the region. This, however, helped entrench an unyielding and increasingly sectarian interpretation of Islam among more Islamist-inclined actors in the region, and can be seen in the alliances and active cooperation formed between groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan.

Central Asia's subsequent importance to the US-led war on terror increased scrutiny on the role of Saudi funding of extremist movements in the region, though the covert methods of funding and importance of Saudi Arabia to many western states' foreign policies meant that it largely escaped any censure. For Central Asia's leaders, the perceived extremist threat allowed them to justify their crackdown on Islamist groups through hitching their responses to the wider aims of the war on terror.

Tajikistan – the rivalry out in the open

The trajectory of this rivalry can perhaps be seen most clearly in Tajikistan. As a fellow Persian-speaking nation, Tajikistan has occupied a significant place in Iranian foreign policy thinking since its independence. Early efforts at expanding cultural influence by Iran included efforts to promote the use of the Arabic-Persian alphabet in the country, and though this did not come to fruition, Iran continued to utilise its cultural and linguistic commonalities to enhance its relationship with Tajikistan. During the Ahmadinejad era (2005-2013), ties grew stronger with multiple state visits, increasing Iranian economic investment in various infrastructure projects, and expanding business ties.

The first signs of a potential complication in relations came with the imprisonment by Tehran of Iranian businessman Babak Zanjani in 2013, who had invested in several large projects in Tajikistan. Zanjani was accused of embezzling some $2 billion gained through trading Iranian oil through the black market when it had been under sanctions during the Ahmadinejad era. His considerable assets in Tajikistan were allegedly subsequently absorbed by Tajik businesses, a charge denied by Dushanbe,[9] thus depriving Tehran of the means to secure any remittance of the owed monies.

In what could be seen as a partial response to the breach of trust between the countries over the Zanjani affair, Tajik opposition figure and leader of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT),[10] Iran invited Muhiddin Kabiri to attend its annual Islamic Unity Conference in December 2015. With the IRPT having been outlawed earlier that year, the decision to host Kabiri prompted an icy response and protest note from Tajikistan.

While the Iran-Saudi rivalry, which had been growing ever more prominent in the Middle East, had not really impacted much on the region up to this point, Saudi Arabia now saw an opportunity to take advantage of a downturn in the Iran-Tajikistan relationship, and strike a blow against its regional rival in a country that Iran had long viewed as a natural partner. Shortly after the Kabiri incident, Tajik president Emomali Rahmon visited Saudi Arabia, the visit coinciding with a sharp deterioration in Iran-Saudi relations due to the fall-out from the execution of the Saudi Shi'i cleric Nimr al-Nimr in January 2016. During his visit, Rahmon was able to secure significant increases in Saudi investment in Tajikistan, with the Saudi Islamic Development Bank pledging some $108 million to assist in infrastructure projects in Tajikistan.[11] The Saudi Development Fund also invested $200 million in range of construction projects, and Riyadh's help was sought in the completion of the long-delayed for Rogun dam project.[12]

Iran's long-standing cultural ties were also weakened as a result of the growing rift between Tehran and Dushanbe, and in 2016 and 2017 Tajikistan's government ordered the closure of a number of Iranian cultural and development initiatives. This included the shuttering of Iranian cultural chancelleries, run by Iran's cultural diplomacy arm the Islamic Culture and Relations Organisation, in Dushanbe and Khujand, in a move decried by Iran's outgoing cultural attaché.[13] The local office of the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation, one of the Islamic Republic's largest charitable organisations, was also ordered to close. During this period, Tajikistan also blocked Iran's elevation to full membership status in the SCO.

Saudi Arabia sought to take full advantage of this downturn by increasing its penetration into various areas of Tajikistan's educational and cultural spheres with the funding of school building projects to further cement its influence.[14] President Rahmon was also a guest at the Saudi-organised, largely anti-Iranian 'Arab-Islamic-American summit' hosted in Riyadh in 2017, further enhancing a burgeoning relationship between Saudi Arabian and Tajikistan. This was followed by Saudi attempts to paint Iran's intentions in Tajikistan as nefarious in print and broadcast media.[15] Saudi glee at the state of affairs was evidenced further with their ambassador's gloating about how the expulsion of 'Iranian agents' from the country during the 2017 rupture in Iran-Tajikistan ties had been 'great victory' for Saudi Arabia.[16] By 2019, however, Tehran-Dushanbe ties were back on track, with the Tajik Foreign Minister visiting Iran and President Rouhani holding bi-lateral discussions with President Rahmon on the side-lines of the Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) summit in Dushanbe.

Conclusion

The history of Iran and Saudi Arabia's relations with Central Asia reflects the state of relations between the two rivals. The relative harmony in bi-lateral ties during the 1990s and into the early 2000s saw both states pursuing objectives that were commensurate with their declared national interests, which at the time did not explicitly conflict. With the development of the rivalry came new theatres in which to exploit pre-existing concerns as seen in the example of Tajikistan. For Saudi Arabia it shows the opportunistic side of its foreign policy - utilising its financial muscle to gain favour with what had, until the downturn in ties between Dushanbe and Tehran, been an important focal point of Iranian influence. The focus on Tajikistan as a point where the rivalry become most acute is an exemplar of how the rivalry has manifested itself in locales beyond both states' borders. The wider Central Asian geopolitical space is also a site of potential competition, though taken as a whole, it is conversely a possible site of cooperation and thus de-escalation in the rivalry.[17] This depends on whether Riyadh sees any potential in enhancing its ties through institutional arrangements such as the SCO, cooperation with the EAEU, or indeed through active participation in the Belt and Road initiative. Ultimately the primacy of Russian and Chinese interests in the region mean that both states' room for manoeuvre is limited.

This exploration of the rivalry shows how it remains one that is defined by geopolitics rather than sectarian interpretations. While other identity markers, including Islamic and Persian identity remain relevant and have been instrumentalised to a certain extent by both states, the core concerns of Tajikistan, and arguably other Central Asian states too, vis-a-vis Iran and Saudi Arabia have been about balancing and self-interest. However, the example of how the rivalry played out in very conspicuous terms in Tajikistan shows that it remains of continued salience when considering the complex geopolitics and interrelationship between the Middle East and Central Asia.

Endnotes

[1] Some ideas in this essay were developed in the context of a collaborative project with Dr. Jutta Bakonyi at Durham University. I would like to thank her for allowing me to use these in this piece.

[1] See, for example, Simon Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran Power and Rivalry in the Middle East, I.B. Tauris, 2015; Simon Mabon, 'Saudi Arabia and Iran: Friends, Rivals or Foes in Geopolitical Flux,' Bustan: The Middle East Book Review, 2017, 8(1): 38-53; Banafsheh Keynoush, Saudi Arabia and Iran: Friends or Foes?, Palgrave, 2016; Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, Iran-Saudi Arabia Relations and Regional Order, Routledge, 2014.*

[2] See also May Darwich's contribution to this collection that explores the Iran-Saudi rivalry in the Horn of Afrcia.

[3] See, for example: Anoushiravan Ehteshami, 'New Frontiers: Iran, the GCC and the CCARs', in *From the Gulf to Central Asia: Players in the New Great Game, ed. Anoushiravan Ehteshami, University of Exeter Press, 1994: 92–113; Houman Piemani, Regional Security and the Future of Central Asia-The Competition of Iran, Turkey, and Russia, Praeger, 1998; Eva Rakel, 'Paradigms of Iranian Policy in Central Eurasia and Beyond', in Central Eurasia in Global Politics: Conflict, Security and Development, ed. Mehdi Parvizi Amineh and Henk Houwelling, Brill Publishers, 2004: 235–255*

[4] Ghoncheh Tazmimi, 'The Islamic revival in Central Asia: a potent force or a misconception?' Central Asian Survey, 2001, 20(1): 63–83 (78).

[5] Edward Wastnidge, Central Asia in the Iranian geopolitical imagination', *Cambridge Journal of Eurasian Studies, 2017, 1. (p.3).*

[6] See, for example, Brenton Clark, "Iranian Foreign Policy Toward Tajikistan and Afghanistan during the Ahmadinejad Presidency: The Rising Salience of Persian National Identity," *Journal of Central Asian & Caucasian Studies, 2012, 7 (13): 73–105; Morteza Mahmoudi, "Asia-ye markazi va roshd hamkariha-ye chand janebe iran va tajikistan (Central Asia and the Growth of Iran-Tajikistan Multilateral Cooperation)," Motale at-e asia-ye markazi va qafqaz (Central Asia and the Caucasus Review), 2007, 58: 7–48; Edward Wastnidge, "Pragmatic Politics: Iran, Central Asia and Cultural Foreign Policy," Central Asia and the Caucasus, 2014, 15 (4): 119–130.*

[7] The Fergana Valley, and indeed the rest of Central Asia, does not have a long history of Wahhabi or Salafi Islam. Muslims in the region have traditionally followed Hanafi and Sufi traditions, however, as Yerekesheva (2004, p.585) notes, '…Saudi Arabian missionaries following the Hanbali Mazhab version of Islam easily influenced the minds of the people in the Ferghana Valley, especially the youth.' – see Laura Yerekesheva, 'Religious identity in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan: Global local interplay' *Strategic Analysis, 2004, 28 (4): 577-588.*

[8] Anna Zelkina 'Islam and Security in the New States of Central Asia: How Genuine is the Islamic Threat?' *Religion, State & Society, 1999, Vol. 27, No 3/4: 355-372 (p.369).*

[9] 'Tajik banker: Zanjani has no money in Tajik banks', *IRNA, July 26 2016, available at:* https://en.irna.ir/news/82163223/Tajik-banker-Zanjani-has-no-money-in-Tajik-banks (accessed November 8, 2019).

[10] The Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) had previously acted as the only official opposition to the Tajik government, holding a small number of seats in the Tajik parliament as a result of negotiations that brought the cessation of hostilities in the Tajik civil war in 1992. For decades the only registered Islamic party in Central Asia, the IRPT were outlawed by the Tajik government in 2015 after losing their parliamentary seats.

[11] The Islamic Development Bank had only invested $84 million in Tajikistan from 2002-2015, so this was a significant increase. See 'The Tajik President's Blunt Attempt At Entering Middle East Politics', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, January 5, 2015, available at:* https://www.rferl.org/a/tajik-president-blunt-attempt-entering-middle-east-politics/27468877.html (accessed November 1 2019).

[12] 'Naghsh-e arabistan dar sardi ravabet-e iran va tajikestan (The role of Saudi Arabia in the Iran and Tajikistan's cold relations)' *The International (in Persian), July 9 2017, available at:* http://theinternational.ir/west-of-asia/item/663 (accessed November 8 2019).

[13] See Hamid Ahmadi, 'Iran and Tajikistan: How Culture and Civilization Fade in the Shadow of Politics and the Political', *Iran and the Caucasus, 2019, 23: 105-119 (p.116).*

[14] 'Tajikistan: Saudis Give Loans to Build Schools, But Why?', *Eurasianet, October 3, 2017, available at:* https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-saudis-give-loans-to-build-schools-but-why (accessed November 6, 2019).

[15] See Hamidreza Azizi, 'Saudi Arabia woos Persian-speaking Sunnis in Central Asia' *Al-Monitor, August 22, 2017, available at:* https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/08/iran-tajikistan-saudi-arabia-influence-tension-central-asia.html

[16] 'Tajikistan: Saudis Brag About Pushing Out Iran', *Eurasianet, September 19, 2017, available at:* https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-saudis-brag-about-pushing-out-iran (accessed December 8, 2019).

[17] For an exploration of how Iran has utilised elements of its Eurasian diplomacy to de-securitise, and thus provide a potential model for de-escalation of tensions, see Samira Nasirzadeh and Edward Wastnidge, 'De-securitizing through Diplomacy: De-sectarianization and the View from the Islamic Republic', *The Review of Faith & International Affairs, 2020, 18(1), DOI:* https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2020.1729529

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