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Identity Politics and Regional Order in the Levant

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ABSTRACT

The primary identification with sectarian, confessional and ethnic affiliations has come to underpin and drive conflict across the Levant, raising doubts over the future of a fading regional order. The Middle Eastern debate on sectarianism joins the ranks of global debates on political contestation based on community identities and the instrumentalisation of identity politics for political gain. The relationship between identity and political order is highly ambiguous in that identity can be a constituent and disruptive force of order alike. The surge of sectarian identity politics in the Levant is commonly ascribed to four broad, interconnected elements: The weakness of Arab nation-states; pre-existing ethno-sectarian divides; the power vacuums that arose in the wake of the 2003 invasion of Iraq and following the 2011 uprisings; and the efforts of regional and extra-regional players to strike geopolitical advantage of these conditions. In both the domestic and regional contexts, it is primarily exclusionary identity politics, not the diversity of identities as such, that is prone to fuel conflict. In order to reduce the potential of political instrumentalisation of communal affiliations, the policy challenge is to reinforce the constituent dimension of identity, build inclusive identity narratives, and use identity politics not as a disruptor but as glue between communities. A constructive, inclusive brand of identity politics would need to forge a more malleable delineation of identity as a flexible, dynamic choice.

Keywords: Identity Politics, Regional Order, Sectarianism, Arab Countries, Middle East, the Levant.

Kimlik Politikaları ve Levant'da Bölgesel Düzen

ÖZET

Mezhepçi, dini ve etnik bağlılıklar, Levant bölgesinde çatışmaları desteklemenin ve yönlendirmenin yanı sıra bozulmaya başlayan bölgesel düzenin geleceği ile ilgili şüpheleri de artırmaktadır. Orta Doğu'da mezhepçilik üzerine yapılan tartışmalar, toplulukların kimlikleri ile siyasi kazanç hedefiyle araçsallaştırdıkları kimlik politikalarına bağlı, küresel düzeyde gerçekleşen siyasi çatışmalarla ilgili tartışmalarla birleşmektedir. Düzen kurucu ve yıkıcı gücü özellikleri bir arada taşınması nedeniyle kimlik ile siyasi düzen arasındaki ilişki belirsizdir. Levant'ta mezhepçi kimlik politikalarının artışı, genellikle Arap ulus-devletlerinin zayıflığı, önceden var olan etnik-mezhebi ayrımlar, 2003 Irak'ın işgali sonrasında başlayan ve 2011 ayaklanmalarıyla yükselen güç boşluğu ve bölge ve bölge-dışı oyuncuların bu koşullarda jeopolitik avantaj kazanma çabaları olmak üzere dört geniş kapsamlı ve birbiriyle bağlantılı faktöre ilişkilendirilmektedir. Hem yerel hem de bölgesel bağlamda, kimlik çeşitliliğine önem veren politikalar yerine temel olarak dışlayıcı nitelikli kimlik politikalarının yürütülmesi bölgede çatışmaları artırmaktadır. Toplumsal bağlılıkların siyasal açıdan araçsallaştırılması potansiyelini azaltmak için ortaya, kimliğin kurucu boyutunu güçlendiren, kapsayıcı kimlik anlatıları oluşturan ve kimlik politikalarını bozucu bir unsur olarak değil, topluluklar arasında birleşmeyi sağlayacak bir unsur olarak kullanmaya yönelik siyaset önerileri atılmaktadır. Yapıcı ve kapsayıcı nitelikli bir kimlik siyaseti tarzı, esnek ve dinamik bir seçim olarak kimliğin daha kolay şekillendirilebilir bir tanımını oluşturmaya ihtiyaç duyacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kimlik Politikaları, Bölgesel Düzen, Mezhepçilik, Arap Ülkeleri, Orta Doğu, Levant

Introduction

Sectarianism has become the convenient standard lens to contemplate political tension and conflict across the Middle East. The primary identification with confessional and ethnic affiliations, and their instrumentalisation for specific political agendas has come to underpin and drive conflict across the region. Much ink has been spilled on how sectarianism has been reinforced in the years following the 2011 uprisings to become the main driver of political contestation and power struggles across the region.¹ While few scholars deny that identity-based politics has become deeply engrained in the workings of regional politics in the Levant, views have grown more nuanced in acknowledging that explaining Middle Eastern conflicts from the main vantage point of the Sunni-Shi'a divide fails to capture both the complexities of conflict and the broader motivations of the actors involved. The degree to which sectarianism is rather an object or a tool of conflict, however, remains contested.²

The Middle Eastern debate on sectarianism joins the ranks of global debates on political contestation based on community identities. Far from constituting a specific Middle Eastern or Levantine trait, the use of identity-based politics for geopolitical aims is a global trend. Political elites around the world take advantage of the increasing appeal of identity politics with discourses that address specific groups within or across polities, while more inclusive notions of national or supra-national identity struggle to appeal in similar ways.

A host of research has dwelled on whether, to the degree ethno-sectarian identities provide stronger markers of identity than the identification with widely discredited nation states, the legitimacy of state institutions, and the nation-state as such, is up for question. In the Levant, many have wondered whether the post-Ottoman state order, created by the Balfour Declaration in 1917, will survive the advancing ethno-sectarian fragmentation.³ One hypothesis underpinning many of these analyses has been that varieties of transnational identity politics, purposefully driven by actors interested in fragmentation, are undermining the state order in the Levant.

While the scope of this paper does not allow for a comprehensive assessment of this hypothesis, it will attempt to set the stage by reviewing some of the basic traits of the relationship between identity and order. What role does identity and identity politics play in nation-states and the regional order formed by them? What are the disruptive and uniting qualities of identity, and how are these used strategically by interested actors in the Middle East? What do these dynamics mean for the Levant?

Identity and Identity Politics

Identity defines the individual's belonging to a community. We have multiple overlapping identities: political, geographic, ethnic, religious, sectarian, kinship, etc. The term identity politics — political activism based on group affiliations such as ethnicity, religion, race, sexuality, gender or nationality — was coined in the 1970s and widely spread in the 1980s in response to social injustice, discrimination or assault experienced by members of specific minorities.⁴

1 See for example Geneive Abdo, "The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide", *Brookings Institution*, No.29, April 2013. For a more detailed discussion of the sectarianism lens in a specific national context see Fanar Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2011.

2 Detailed accounts of the roots of sectarianism in different contexts are contained in the volume edited by Frederic Wehrey, *Beyond Sunni and Shia: The Roots of Sectarianism in a Changing Middle East*, London, Hurst Publishers, 2017.

3 Steven Heydemann, "Syria's Uprising: sectarianism, regionalization, and state order in the Levant", *FRIDE Working Paper*, Madrid, Fundación para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Diálogo Exterior, 2013.

4 Elin Diamond, "Identity politics then and now", *Theatre Research International*, Vol.37, No.1, 2012, p.64-67.

A governance entity is built on a community with a shared identity that agrees on the rules on which the community is based. As actors defend or promote a certain order of governance, they define themselves in a particular manner. Modern definitions of statehood emphasize the legitimacy of government institutions as being among the core traits of a state.⁵ Legitimacy is linked to state institutions' effective representation of a defined community. Nurturing a clear notion of national identity is therefore a main ingredient of state building.

Actors with a shared identity may however disagree over the norms and order that they associate with that identity. Conflicting or imposed identities, a lack of agreement on the defining identity of a community, or among a community, can lead to conflict over the way the community should be organized and governed. This is especially the case in multi-ethnic and multi-confessional states where sub-national, tribal or religious affiliations and loyalties may take precedence over nationally defined identities. The strengthening of local identities can enhance the difficulties of building a consensus on how a shared state should be designed and governed.⁶ The relationship between identity and political order, hence, is highly ambiguous in that identity can be a constituent and disruptive force of order alike.

Traditional notions of identity often part from a static understanding of the term that assumes the need to rank one's individual identities to determine a primordial one. Such one-dimensional conceptions appear increasingly insufficient to explain the complexity of multiple simultaneous identities whose reality is much more malleable and dynamic. Public international law aims to avoid multiple citizenship because of the conflict of loyalty and/or incompatible national legislation that may arise for an individual affiliated with multiple states. By contrast, an alleged conflict between a sectarian affiliation and citizenship is eroded if the underlying motivation to prioritize allegiance with a sectarian community is not primarily religious but based on economic or security considerations, moving the spotlight from issues of faith and identity to governance.

In the Levant, overlapping and layered ethnic, tribal, and confessional identities have coexisted throughout history. The notion that the recent framing of regional conflict along confessional lines will necessarily undermine nation-state based notions of identity belies the multidimensional and malleable character of identity.⁷ Ussama Makdisi writes:

Communal identities ... have always represented dynamic and highly contextual understandings of self and other. They have been driven by innumerable schisms, and have also undergone repeated redefinitions throughout their long histories. Thus, the invocation of sectarianism as a category of analysis for understanding the Middle East ... conflates a religious identification with a political one, and it ignores the kinship, class, and national and regional networks within which sectarian self-expression has invariably been enmeshed.⁸

The malleable nature of identity stands in contrast with the way identity politics – in the Middle East and beyond — has defined individual belonging in increasingly narrow and exclusionary ways.

5 "State fragility and collapse in the Arab region", interview with Ezzedine C. Fishere, Yale MacMillan Center, Council on Middle East Studies, 5 April 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XUz0Aqr-3EY> (Accessed on 30 January 2018).

6 Amal Treacher, "Edward Said: Identity, Politics and History". *Psychodynamic Practice*, Vol.11, No.4, 2005, p.372-378.

7 See also Steven Heydemann, *Syria's Uprising: sectarianism, regionalisation, and state order in the Levant*, Madrid, FRIDE Working Paper, 2013.

8 Ussama Makdisi, *The Mythology of the Sectarian Middle East*, James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy Research Paper, Houston, Rice University, 2017.

The surge of identity politics as a result of popular discontent with institutions is a global trend. Zygmunt Bauman has argued that the main trait of modernity is the fragility and temporariness, or fluidity, of its forms of life.⁹ Bauman's theory applies at multiple levels, from individual jobs and relationships to the way nations deal with each other. In this increasingly fluid world, governments and individuals alike struggle to reduce complexity and adapt their toolboxes and priorities to the requirements of a qualitatively changing global order. Bauman explains:

It is (...) patterns, codes and rules to which one could conform, which one could select as stable orientation points and by which one could subsequently let oneself be guided, that are nowadays increasingly short supply. It does not mean that our contemporaries are guided solely by their own imagination and resolve and are free to construct their mode of life from scratch and at will, or that they are no longer dependent on society for the building materials and design blueprints. But it does mean that we are presently moving from the era of pre-allocated 'reference groups' into the epoch of 'universal comparison', (...) These days patterns and configurations are no longer 'given', let alone 'self-evident'; there are just too many of them, clashing with one another and contradicting one another's commandments, so that each one has been stripped of a good deal of compelling, coercively constraining powers.¹⁰

The insecurity that comes with the erosion of traditional forms of life and order favors the global surge of identity politics as individuals seek orientation by clinging to increasingly rigid identity labels. While there is little new about the human search for identity, today this search takes place in a different social context. Since the end of ideological bipolarity three decades ago, identity politics has replaced ideology as a powerful driver of political mobilization. An increasingly narrow conception of identity, and responsiveness to exclusive identity politics, has been acknowledged as a key factor in processes of radicalization.¹¹ As Kenan Malik observes pointedly, "racist populism and radical Islamism are both, in their different ways, expressions of social disengagement in an era of identity politics."¹²

The surge of rigid, exclusionary narrow-scope allegiances over weakening notions of broader, more inclusive identities makes identity politics a promising tool for groups with specific political agendas to advance their cause via polarization, often in opposition to or circumvention of the state and its institutions. Separatists, ethno-nationalists, right-wing populists, religious extremists, but also entrenched elites, strategically draw on identity politics to frame a cause likely to mobilize people in line with their vested interests. In societies from the United States and Europe to the Middle East, these identity-based narratives are able to thrive in political and ideological vacuums that are left by disillusionment with public institutions, weak political leadership and a (real or perceived) lack of accountability.

The Exploitation of Diversity in the Levant

In the Levant, the institutional and security vacuum in the Middle East since the 2011 uprisings created inroads for external players to advance their geopolitical agendas under an all-encompassing sectarian narrative. Sectarianism tends to fracture societies internally, posing a threat to the cohesion of the nation-state and the peaceful coexistence of its citizens.

⁹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2000, p.1-16 and 168-202.

¹⁰ Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, p.7.

¹¹ Tufyal Chowdhury, *The Role of Muslim Identity Politics in Radicalisation*, Study commissioned by the UK Department for Communities and Local Government, London, Communities and Local Government Publications, 2007.

¹² Kenan Malik, "A search for identity draws jihadis to the horrors of Isis", *The Guardian*, 1 March 2015.

The surge of sectarian identity politics in the region is commonly ascribed to four broad, interconnected elements: the weakness of Arab nation-states; pre-existing ethno-sectarian divides; the power vacuums that arose in the wake of the 2003 invasion of Iraq and, more forcefully, following the 2011 uprisings; and the efforts of regional and extra-regional players to strike geopolitical advantage of these conditions.

During the 1950s and 1960s, most Arab states were institutionally and ideologically weak and loyalty to the state was challenged by sub-national and supra-national identities, most notably Arab nationalism. Gause sustains that the decline of the transnational ideological power of Arab nationalism was flanked by a period of consolidation of Arab states in the 1970s and 1980s which, albeit by authoritarian and oppressive means, were ultimately effective in controlling their societies. Following from this, he argues that the rise of sectarian conflict in the region was largely a result of the weakening of these state-building projects over the past two decades.¹³ Aaron Miller stresses that despite the popular cliché of Arab states as ‘tribes with flags’ (coined by Egyptian diplomat Tahseen Bashir), “respect for borders in this part of the world has proven pretty resilient”.¹⁴

Ultimately, the 2011 uprisings have provided ample evidence of the poor governance for any conception of state weakness. The uprisings were above all rooted in a demand for public legitimacy and accountability. They have made clear how authoritarian Arab states, long viewed stable for their capacity and durability, ultimately collapsed over their failure to gather the popular legitimacy needed to build and consolidate citizens’ identification with the nation and its institutions. Scholars have stressed how state institutions that lack accountability and fail to provide effective services and security leave voids in which non-state spoilers thrive.¹⁵

Next to weak governance, the deterioration of state-citizen relations rests on Arab states’ relatively fading value as a source of identity. Where sources of higher authority such as nationalist notions are losing ground, alternative identities tied to sub- or transnational identities are on the rise, further eroding the legitimacy of the state.¹⁶ Arguably, eroding legitimacy can make state institutions more vulnerable to non-state challengers. Given that non-state communities often lack the capacities and reach of states to tackle transnational security challenges, their ability to replace the state is limited. Most non-state challengers, therefore, contest not the concept of statehood in itself, but the state’s institutional design and performance.¹⁷

The example of post-2003 Iraq shows how sectarianism can flourish as a result of state weakness and power vacuums, paired with misled external intervention.¹⁸ The collapse of the Iraqi state shifted the long-crumbling authoritarian stability of Arab states toward sectarian fracture. Having been

13 F. Gregory III Gause, “Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle Eastern Cold War”, *Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper*, No 11, July 2014, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/English-PDF-1.pdf>

14 Aaron David Miller, “Tribes with Flags”, *Foreign Policy*, 27 February 2013.

15 See for example Francis Fukuyama, “The Imperative of State-Building”, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol.15, No.2, 2004; Keith Krause and Jennifer Milliken, “State-Failure, State Collapse and State Reconstruction: Concepts, Lessons and Strategies”, *Development and Change*, Vol.33, No.5, November 2002, p.753–774.

16 See also Bassam Tibi on the “simultaneity of structural globalization and cultural fragmentation”, Bassam Tibi (Ed.), *Islam in Global Politics: Conflict and cross-civilizational bridging*, London, Routledge, 2012.

17 Florence Gaub, “State Vacuums and Non-state Actors in the Middle East and North Africa”, Lorenzo Kamel (Ed.), *The Frailty of Authority: Borders, Non-State Actors and Power Vacuums in a Changing Middle East*, Rome, Edizioni Nuova Cultura, 2017, p.51-64.

18 Sir John Jenkins, “States and Non-states: The Levant in Turmoil”, *Asian Affairs*, Vol.47, No.2, 2016, p.199-214.

utilized by Saddam Hussein in his reliance on tribal and sectarian loyalty to back up his fragile rule, the collapse of the Iraqi state soon brought Kurdish and sectarian identities to the forefront of the eventual power struggle. Iraqi consociationalism was implemented after 2003 as a means of creating fully inclusive power structures for the new, fragile Iraqi state. By institutionalizing power structures along ethnic and confessional lines, however, Iran and its Iraqi proxies were given ample opportunity to define Iraqi politics along communal lines. These arrangements also allowed the Kurds to carve out an ethnic quasi-state in the North, thereby ensuring the entrenchment of sectarianism in Iraqi politics and, by extension, a lasting Iranian influence in Iraq.¹⁹

One of the most consequential case studies of identity politics in the Levant has been the rise and fall of the Islamic State (IS). Terrorism expert Marc Sageman has noted how IS has been “using religion to advance a political vision, rather than using politics to advance a religious vision”, and that religion “plays a role not as a driver of behavior but as a vehicle for outrage and, crucially, a marker of identity.”²⁰ In picturing the *Umma* as a global political community, prospective recruits are allured by the idea of being “members and defenders of the ultimate in-group.”²¹ Here, too, the example of Iraq provides lessons of how a collapsed state unable to provide security to its citizens drove people to seek protection from armed sections of their sectarian groups. Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State were able to take advantage of this securitization of sectarianism. Ultimately, the invasion of Iraq created the environment for Al-Qaeda to regain its stature.²²

Next to state weakness and power vacuums, the recent surge of sectarianism as a main marker of political identity has been portrayed by some as a natural consequence of ancient ethnic and sectarian fault lines somehow etched in the Middle Eastern DNA. In 2016, U.S. President Barack Obama erroneously claimed in his State of the Union speech that “the only organizing principles [in the region] are sectarian” and that the roots of ongoing conflicts in the Middle East “date back millennia.”²³ A cultural relativist logic of blaming current conflict on alleged historical fault lines can also be found in claims that the 2011 uprisings resuscitated centuries-old sectarian conflicts that had been temporarily set aside when the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement saw France and Britain draw national boundaries across the lines of ethno-sectarian communities. Although ethno-sectarian diversity of course played a significant role throughout the history of the Levant, the historical record does not support the portrayal of these diversities as an inevitable fault line of conflict. In the Middle East and elsewhere, religious communities have fought each other for centuries just as they have often coexisted peacefully. And even where sectarian conflict emerged, its intensity and sources have varied considerably.²⁴

Sectarianism as the main narrative of regional conflict emerged following the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and only became fully entrenched via the political vacuum and ensuing geopolitical competition dynamics in the aftermath of the 2011 popular uprisings. The major determinant of conflict over

19 Ibid.

20 Marc Sageman, quoted in Mehdi Hasan, “How Islamic is the Islamic State?”, *New Statesman*, 10 March 2015.

21 Jenkins, “States and Non-states”, p.199-214.

22 Marc Lynch, “Sectarian Dangers in the Middle East: A Conversation with Raymond Hinnebusch”, *POMEPS Middle East Politics Podcast*, Project on Middle East Political Science, 2017, <https://soundcloud.com/pomeps-245027518/ray-hinnebusch> (Accessed on 28 February 2018).

23 Karla Adam, “Obama ridiculed for saying conflicts in the Middle East ‘date back Millennia’”, *Washington Post*, 13 January 2016.

24 Daniel Byman, “Sectarianism Afflicts the New Middle East”, *Survival*, Vol.56, No.1, 2014, p.79-100.

the past decades has not been the Levant's substantial ethno-sectarian diversity, but the political exploitation of such diversity for political and economic gain.²⁵

Institutionalized sectarianism has been present in Lebanon since the 19th century and sectarianism has been widely instrumentalized over the past decades. For example, sectarianism has been used as a means to access resources via clientelist networks, or as a way for regimes to create trusted core groups.²⁶ Bassel Salloukh shows how Levantine sectarianism has emerged over decades by a mix of structural and power-related factors that have come to feed a clientelist network along sectarian lines that is now difficult to undo.²⁷ Makdisi points out how these clientelist sectarian structures have been flanked by an empty anti-sectarian rhetoric to prop up the public diplomacy arsenal of corrupt, anti-democratic political elites in the Middle East, that have come to evoke the threat of sectarianism to selectively denounce violence and discrimination in service of their individual agenda.²⁸

Lebanon, long considered an outlier in the Arab world with its highly institutionalized political structures along sectarian lines, risks to become an inspiration to other countries in the region as societies struggle to deal with increasing sectarian polarization. But Lebanon also holds a key lesson for the region: When sectarian, tribal or ethnic divisions are considered the primordial parameters of society, an institutionalization of these identities via a power-sharing pact becomes the only way to solve conflict. While such pacts may help the cause of peace in the short term, ironically, they perpetuate sectarian fault lines in the society, facilitating the narrative of sectarian fault lines as an ancient cultural feature and enhancing the prospects of future conflict.

In addition to state weakness and sectarian non-state actors thriving in the power vacuums left by state collapse, sectarianism has risen as a result of the geopolitical contest among regional and international actors, which will be dealt with in the following section.

The Sectarianization of Geopolitical Contest

Hashemi and Postel have coined the term "sectarianization" as "a process shaped by political actors operating within specific contexts, pursuing political goals that involve popular mobilization around particular (religious) identity markers."²⁹ They underline the instrumentalization of sectarian identities to gain or maintain political power, and pointedly add: "To paraphrase the famous Clausewitz aphorism about war as a continuation of politics by other means, sectarian conflict in the Middle East today is the perpetuation of political rule by via identity mobilization."³⁰

Just like multiple political actors have done on the national and sub-national levels, leaders across and beyond the Middle East have taken ample advantage of the opportunities provided by the surge of identity politics, using it as a tool of hybrid warfare in larger geopolitical power struggles. The result has been a sectarianization of regional geopolitical contest. Those who can claim and steer identity politics are one step ahead.

25 Bassel Salloukh, "How to break the Middle East's Sectarian Spiral", *Washington Post*, 8 August 2016.

26 Lynch, "Sectarian Dangers in the Middle East".

27 Bassel Salloukh, "Sect Supreme", *Foreign Affairs*, 14 July 2014.

28 Makdisi, "The Mythology of the Sectarian Middle East", p.6.

29 Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel, "The Sectarianization Thesis", Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel (Eds.), *Sectarianization; Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2017.

30 Ibid, p.5.

Reasons for external interference in the Levant abound as the future of Syria, and the Levant more broadly, directly affects the core strategic interests of every major regional and global player. The fact that alliances have come to be formed along shared geopolitical interest and regime affinities just as much as along sectarian lines supports the view that the emerging conflict scenario in the region is primarily driven by dynamics of classical geopolitical competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia and their respective allies. Despite concerns about sectarian divisions in their own societies, regional actors utilize sectarian identity politics for political mobilization abroad.³¹ External actors' arming of sectarian communities friendly to their strategic aims might in many instances have tipped the balance from non-sectarian towards sectarian conflict.

The crossing of sectarian boundaries in Middle Eastern alliances (such as Tehran's close relations with Hamas) speaks to how regional powers are primarily motivated by their geopolitical interests. Such a development demonstrates the global trend towards pragmatic issue-based alliances of international actors with parties that they otherwise would have little in common with. In fact, the fluid nature of alliances strengthens the link between geopolitical and sectarian motivations. The increasing unpredictability of long-standing alliances has contributed to the escalation of the Saudi-Iranian confrontation by heightening Saudi Arabia's sense of vulnerability against a surge from an increasingly assertive Iran. In addition, the record of shifting Middle Eastern alliances over the past few years shows how alliances are highly vulnerable to changes in their members' domestic politics, especially if they involve power shifts from one ethnic or sectarian group to another.³²

The sectarianization of geopolitical contest has been facilitated by alliances between regional or global powers and non-state actors in which material empowerment is traded for local influence. In an effort to exploit the opportunities left in the wake of the 2011 uprisings, ambitious regional powers sought alliances with non-state actors pursuing sectarian agendas who had filled power vacuums left by deposed regimes. These alliances between local non-state actors and their external sponsors framed conflict more and more along ethno-sectarian lines. In the identity-driven regional conflict scenario, a regional actors' influence came to depend largely on his capacity to engage and co-opt influential proxy agents across the region.³³

Examples such as Iran's relation with Hezbollah, Qatar's patronage of the Muslim Brotherhood and Russian and US support to the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds illustrate how states' proxy warfare and the increasing influence of non-state actors can erode statehood and regional order. Moreover, as local and transnational identities gain in importance over nationalist notions, states may turn to non-state actors to draw legitimacy from their religious, sectarian, ideological or tribal affiliations. Affinities between patron and client based on kinship, ideology and/or religion have been key to establishing and sustaining the relationship. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia have used sectarian proxies to legitimize and support their regional power competition, guided by the formation of a sectarianism-led axis.³⁴

31 F. Gregory Gause, "Ideologies, alliances and underbalancing in the new Middle East Cold War", Memo for the Symposium 'International Relations and A New Middle East', *Project on Middle East Political Science*, 2015, <https://pomeps.org/2015/08/26/ideologies-alliances-and-underbalancing-in-the-new-middle-east-cold-war/> (Accessed on 26 February 2018).

32 Eduard Soler i Lecha, "Liquid Alliances in the Middle East", Barcelona, CIDOB, December 2017.

33 Gause, "Ideologies, alliances and underbalancing".

34 See also Kristina Kausch, "State and Non-State Alliances in the Middle East", *The International Spectator*, Vol.52, No.3, 2017, p.36-47.

Conclusion

A look at the linkages between identity and order show clearly how identity politics are often instrumentalized for political gain. Contrary to widespread belief, it is not so much the diversity of identities itself, but the use of exclusionary identity politics that so often motivates conflict. It follows that public debates vastly over-emphasize the substance of specific identities, to the detriment of a broader debate on constructive forms of identity politics. Radicalization is not primarily about religion; sectarian proxy warfare is not primarily about doctrinal differences. Political strategy, in turn, should focus less on the substance of sects, religion or ethnicity, but on the larger appeal of identity politics.

Whether the sectarianisation of Middle Eastern politics and conflict can be reversed will depend on undoing the main factors that brought it about. To the degree that sectarianism is a result of the competitive interference by external powers instrumentalising sectarianism, a withdrawal of external forces from domestic conflict, especially an end to the practice of arming sectarian groups, might help to de-escalate conflicts, although it could also likely tip the balance towards unfriendly conflict parties. To the degree sectarianization is a response to the security dilemma — people feeling a lack of order and an inability to seek security from any party besides their sectarian groups — the focus on ceasefires and the establishment of a balance of power between regime and opposition might eventually open a space for moderate voices and de-polarization.³⁵

Importantly, the trend towards sectarian politics in the Levant has also been met with resistance and backlash from increasingly vocal groups and movements, such as the *Beirut Madinati*. These groups explicitly oppose the framing of politics along sectarian lines and seek to reframe political debates along the inclusive shared interests of all citizens. In the Levant, the existence of multiple identities contrasts with the salience of sectarianism and risks that a whole generation will develop that defines itself only, or predominantly, in sectarian terms. The explicit fostering of the notion of multiple identities (Syrian, Arab, Sufi etc.) during a coming period of reconstruction will therefore be key.

The policy challenge for political actors in the age of identity politics more broadly is to reinforce the constituent dimension of identity, build inclusive identity narratives, and use identity politics as glue between communities, instead of as a disruptor. Identity politics works only in an exclusionary way if identities are presented as mutually exclusive. A constructive and inclusive brand of identity politics would need to forge a more malleable delineation of identity as a flexible, dynamic choice.

35 Lynch, "Sectarian Dangers in the Middle East".