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## Divisive Rule

Sectarianism and Power Maintenance in the  
Arab Spring: Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria

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**Divisive Rule  
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After long-ruling autocrats were toppled in Tunisia and Egypt in early 2011, a wave of public protests against authoritarianism, corruption, and state incompetence swept across the Arab world. In due course the Arab Spring reached four *deeply divided societies* whose recent history had seen ethnic and sectarian conflict and sometimes extreme violence. While sharing that trait they differ substantially with regard to the state's capacity for shaping and maintaining the political order. Lebanon and post-2003 Iraq are examples of *weak* states that are incapable of controlling political actors who exploit sectarian identity politics in the interests of external patrons and their claims on power and resources. Pre-2003 Iraq, Syria and to a lesser extent Bahrain are cases where authoritarian rulers used the tools of a *strong* state for strategies of divide and rule that prevent social actors from mounting a challenge to their maintenance of power.

The concern among many observers and policy-makers was hence that bottom-up mobilizations modeled on Tunisia and Egypt might sweep away whatever safeguards of stability and control existed in these countries, and set communities against each other, or regimes against specific communities, in violent and destructive conflict. The challenged regimes and their supporters played their part in nurturing such fears, among foreign allies and local followers alike, so as to present themselves as the only safeguards of stability. Supporters of the protest movements, on the other hand, rejected such warnings as patently self-serving when coming from the regimes, and accused foreign actors of ulterior motives, such as defending allies and strategic interests.

Initially, it appeared that the concerns were indeed exaggerated; perhaps a product of the same dismissive (or Orientalist) mindset that had discounted the chances for democratization in the Arab World *per se*, and prevented most analysts from spotting the momentum that had been building up towards the 2011 uprisings. As in Tunisia and Egypt, the protest movements in the four states analyzed here initially remained largely peaceful, and adopted discourses that emphasized popular unity against authoritarian, corrupt, and divisive rulers and political elites. To a

limited extent, they also succeeded in attracting support *across* the lines that divide these societies. For a brief historical moment, their cross-cutting appeal even appeared capable of *overcoming* these divisions and creating *narratives of national unity and reconciliation* in and through popular struggle against political oppression and for social justice.

This was a powerful claim. With the partial exception of the Kurdish areas of Iraq and Syria, national unity is a highly valued ideal in all four countries, despite – or perhaps, precisely because of – the existing divisions. Governments and political actors build a significant part of their legitimacy on claiming to defend the unity of the nation and contain dangerous internal strife. By advancing their own narrative of national unity, these movements threatened to pull the rug from under such techniques of rule, and claim this source of legitimacy for themselves.

Eventually, the skeptics were proved right. Shored up by its royal Gulf allies and applauded by political actors claiming to represent the country's Sunni community, the regime in Bahrain crushed the massive uprising in this tiniest of all Arab states, and meted out collective punishment to the Shiite population. In Iraq, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki contained Baghdad's own Tahrir Square movement through a skillful mix of repression and sectarian counter-mobilization, only to harvest a deadly wave of sectarian violence two years on. Lebanon's 2005 "Intifada of Independence," arguably the region's first and most successful example of a bottom-up movement, soon led to bitter confrontation between Sunni and Shiite Lebanese. In early 2011, a movement for "the fall of the *sectarian* regime" initially gained traction but ultimately fell back into the old sectarian divides. In Syria, mostly peaceful demonstrations against the corrupt and sectarian Assad regime reached massive proportions by the summer of 2011, but equally massive regime violence turned political contestation into devastating sectarian strife and provided an opening for militant Sunni Islamists. In all four countries, the outcome was violence and even deeper divisions.

The purpose of this study is to show that these outcomes were neither pre-ordained, nor were the ensuing conflicts generated by "ancient sectarian hatreds" that had been bottled-up by authoritarian control and self-ignited when released. While existing grievances and the lingering memory of past violence and victimization certainly created dangerous environments for contentious politics, it took concrete

political decisions to set these ingredients alight and create conflagration. Ruling regimes and established political leaders had a vested interest in turning peaceful movements that aimed to unite people against their abusive power into a violent conflict that would send these same people scrambling for protection by whoever had the power to do so. They also had control over the necessary means: institutions and followers prepared to apply violence, and media to frame it in ways that served the desired purpose. Finally, ongoing strategic competition over influence in the region provided hardliners bent on confrontation with sources of external support and leverage and license they may not have otherwise had.

On the other hand, a number of shortcomings specific to divided societies prevented these movements from realizing the full potential of their initial inclusive appeal, and hence, from achieving the broad, cross-cleavage solidarity that was essential for the successes achieved by comparable movements elsewhere. Instead, cross-sectarian support dwindled as the crisis wore on, and the movements either disappeared or became parties in the conflict they had set out to transcend.

The conclusion from these painful experiences should not be that authoritarianism is the least bad or the only workable solution for divided societies, let alone that Europeans should acquiesce to or even condone such forms of rule. As demonstrated by the catastrophe in Syria (and before it, Yugoslavia), suppressing ethnic and sectarian conflict will not make it disappear, and authoritarian rule cultivates such conflicts at least as much as it contains them. Rather, Europe should provide active support to the constituencies and potentials for cross-sectarian solidarity that exist in all four countries, support the presently stalled formal national reconciliation processes in Bahrain, Iraq, and Lebanon, and steer the diplomatic process around the Syrian crisis in a similar direction. Since the conflicts in all four countries are fueled by the strategic competition between Iran and the GCC countries, in particular Saudi Arabia, Europe should seek cooperation with both sides that addresses their mutual security concerns.

# Bahrain

In the fall of 2010, parliamentary elections in Bahrain were accompanied by yet another of the waves of arrests of human rights defenders and political activists that have characterized this small island state for decades.<sup>1</sup> Inspired by events in Tunisia and Egypt, anonymous online activists started calling for a “Day of Rage” at the end of January 2011.<sup>2</sup> On February 14, decentralized protests sprang up in 55 neighborhoods across the archipelago, in most cases numbering only a few hundred participants. The first fatality was reported that evening.

The funeral procession held the next day led to further confrontation and a second fatality, after which protesters set up a makeshift camp at “Pearl Roundabout,” a major traffic node on the western edge of Manama’s financial district. The camp was cleared by riot police on February 17, leaving four more dead. Two days later, when the reform-minded wing of the royal family temporarily prevailed, the police were withdrawn and the protestors again set up camp. For the next four weeks, Pearl Roundabout became the focal point for public debates, political action, and massive demonstrations.<sup>3</sup> As time progressed, the demands grew: instead of constitutional monarchy and the reforms that the legal opposition parties and regime representatives wrangled over in a hastily convened “National Dialogue,”<sup>4</sup> protesters increasingly called for a republic, or demanded the immediate fall of King Hamad. On February 21, a counter-demonstration declaring allegiance to the Al-Khalifa dynasty was convened on the other side of town by prominent Sunni clerics and politicians claiming to represent the Sunni community.

1 Jon Marks, “Bahrain Returns to the Bad Old Days,” *Guardian*, September 13, 2010, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/sep/13/bahrain-opposition-protests>. Slightly less than 50 percent of the country’s inhabitants hold Bahraini citizenship.

2 The Facebook page “February 14 – Revolution in Bahrain” (<https://www.facebook.com/TrueRoyalDemocracy>; Arabic) was established on January 26.

3 Amal Khalaf, “Squaring the Circle: Bahrain’s Pearl Roundabout,” *Middle East Critique* 22, no. 3, (2013): 265–80.

4 In Bahrain, so-called “political associations” perform the role of parties, and are referred to as such in this study.

Violence soon followed, providing the pretext for the (mostly Saudi) troops of the Gulf Cooperation Council’s “Peninsula Shield Force” to enter the country on March 14, and the second clearing of Pearl Roundabout three days later. The ensuing waves of repression amounted to an organized witch hunt.<sup>5</sup> Almost three years later, the political process remains paralyzed and the National Dialogue stalled, while the main opposition parties boycott parliament. Low-level protests and violence occur on a daily basis in Shiite neighborhoods, while opposition leaders and activists languish in prison on threadbare charges.

## Political Contestation and Sectarianism

The events of 2011 followed a long-established pattern: Whenever Bahrain’s rulers found their position challenged – by demands for participation, rivalries within the dynasty, or loss of foreign support – they would reach out to domestic opponents, but always stop short of relinquishing control over governance and resources. Once the challenges had been warded off, mechanisms of participation were rolled back or emptied of content, and ensuing protest violently crushed.

Thus the loss of direct British protection in 1973 yielded the first constitution and parliament, to be suspended two years later after the United States assumed the United Kingdom’s regional role and increased oil revenues provided the means to buy domestic consent. After 1989, the global trend for democratization and the American interest in stabilizing the region prompted certain concessions to a nascent constitutional movement; when international and American attention shifted to events in Yugoslavia and Rwanda, Bahrain soon slid into its own violent “Intifada.” When the new Emir (later King) Hamad attempted to create his own power base in 1999, he sought and received popular support for his reformist “National Action Charter”; yet after he had secured his position and the impending invasion of Iraq ensured

5 *Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry*, <http://www.bici.org.bh/BICIreportEN.pdf>.

unwavering US support,<sup>6</sup> he imposed a constitution that left parliament with little power. Blatant gerrymandering ensured a loyal majority even in this emasculated assembly, leading to an opposition boycott and new cycles of unrest.

Conversely, the political opposition has struggled and on most occasions failed to maintain unity between advocates of accommodation and proponents of confrontation. Movements and parties have repeatedly fractured into “radicals,” who refuse to legitimize processes without substance, and “moderates” who prefer to be part of any process. Thus, the patterns of contestation that emerged over a period of six decades became predictable in their sequences and outcomes, often pitting the same actors against each other time and again.<sup>7</sup>

Until the late 1970s, both regime and opposition avoided the issue of sectarian inequality generated by Bahrain’s process of state formation.<sup>8</sup> On the eve of colonization in the late-eighteenth century, tribal Bedouin from the Arabian interior had established a system of feudal exploitation of (Shiite) natives by (Sunni) conquerors. By the 1930s British-led modernization had created opportunities to escape from feudal bondage through education and employment (some also advanced as clients and clerks of the feudal lords). It also attracted new (mostly Sunni) migrants from the Persian littoral, who were neither related nor necessarily loyal to the dynasty. But the majority of the Shiite population remained mired in poverty, and lack of access to the corridors of power kept their neighborhoods and villages underserved.

Sectarian inequalities were not a prime concern of the traditional Bahraini opposition, which mobilized around ideological discourses (Arab nationalism and

communism) and rejected sectarianism as backward and detrimental to the objectives of national and class unity. Their membership was mostly urban and had direct experience of cross-sectarian relationships in mixed workplaces and urban areas. On the other hand, many clients of the royal family were former allies from the conquering tribes and hence Sunni, but Bahrain’s rulers had no interest in systematically favoring one sect over the other. Rather, they strove to cultivate loyalists in all communities, not least Shiite clerics who could stem the dangerous influence of secular ideologies on the lower classes, and included many upwardly mobile Shiites in their networks of patronage.

The Iranian revolution of 1979 fundamentally changed this equation. With its largely disenfranchised Shiite majority and authoritarian, pro-Western government, Bahrain appeared a natural target for Iranian ambitions to “export” its revolution. Whether this actually led to substantial Iranian sponsorship for subversive activities in Bahrain remains contested,<sup>9</sup> but the suspicion has poisoned the relationship between the state and its Shiite citizens ever since. Doubts over their loyalty led to the exclusion of Shiites from employment in many fields, at a time when oil revenues were dwindling and unemployment rising. Economic reorientation towards retail, finance, and hospitality industry, and the concomitant demise of unionized labor, meant that the number of Bahraini youth employed in urban, mixed workplaces (or any workplace at all) contracted by the mid-1990s, while residence in the mixed central areas of Manama became increasingly unaffordable even for those holding jobs. Consequently, a new generation of young, Iranian-trained Shiite clerics with a clear agenda of social activism succeeded in turning local mosques and community centers into nodes of political mobilization, and supplanted the traditional urban middle-class opposition parties.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Bahrain hosts a United States Navy facility that is home to the US Naval Forces Central Command and the US Fifth Fleet, and served as primary base for “Operation Iraqi Freedom” in 2003.

<sup>7</sup> While dynastic rule by definition runs in the family, so do opposition and political activism, and many prominent activists continue the work of their fathers or in-laws. Most of the leaders of the 2011 uprising were veterans of the “Intifada” of the 1990s.

<sup>8</sup> On the following, see Fuad I. Khuri, *Tribe and State in Bahrain* (Chicago, 1980); Abdulhadi Khalaf, *Contentious Politics in Bahrain*, <http://www.smi.uib.no/pao/khalaf.html>, 1998; Ute Meinel, *Die Intifada im Ölscheichtum Bahrain* (Münster, 2002); Justin Gengler, *Ethnic Conflict and Political Mobilization in Bahrain and the Arab Gulf* (PhD Thesis, Ann Arbor, 2011), <http://www-personal.umich.edu/~jgengler/docs/diss/Dissertation%20-%20Combined,%20formatted.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> For example, in late 1981 the Bahraini government arrested members of the Iranian-inspired and -sponsored Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB) for allegedly planning terrorist attacks to trigger a general uprising of the Shiite population. For an overview of alleged Iranian scheming against Bahrain see Mitchell A. Belfer, “The Fourteenth Province: The Irano-Bahraini Conflict in Perspective,” *Central European Journal of Security Studies*, July 18, 2011, <http://www.cejss.org/editors-desk/the-fourteenth-province-the-irano-bahraini-conflict-in-perspective>.

<sup>10</sup> Fred Lawson “Repertoires of Contestation in Bahrain,” in *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*, ed. Quintan Wiktorowicz (Bloomington, 2003), 89–111.



Bigoted statements by some representatives of the royal family added sectarian insult to social injury,<sup>11</sup> as did the import of (mostly Sunni) labor from Pakistan, Syria and Jordan to fill positions with which Bahraini Shiites were not trusted, while their rapid naturalization was perceived as part of a broader agenda to tilt the demographic balance. Rather than overcoming the inherited sectarian gap through inclusive development, by the 1990s the Bahraini state was actively working to deepen it, and fueling resentment among its Shiite citizens.

Conversely, when the new Emir Hamad signaled in 1999 that substantial social reform (most importantly scaling back foreign labor to free up jobs for working class Bahrainis) was on the cards, he was feted and hoisted on the shoulders of residents in Sitra, a hotbed of Shiite resistance.<sup>12</sup> While it is true that, by the 2000s, opposition against the Bahraini regime was dominated by political forces with a pronounced Shiite background, the issue was primarily participation and social justice, not sect.

## Sectarianism and the 2011 Uprising

While the first calls for a “Day of Rage” originated from unidentified digital activists they were explicitly supported by illegal political groups identified with the Shiite population, such as Al-Haq, Al-Wafa, and the London-based Bahrain Freedom Movement. The biggest opposition party Al-Wifaq – led by Shiite cleric Ali Salman – issued an implicit endorsement, as did the prominent cleric Isa Qasim in his Friday sermon preceding the event.<sup>13</sup> The only non-Shiite party to

come out in support was the leftist non-sectarian Waad. While social media and the widespread use of internet-enabled mobile devices certainly amplified the mobilization, many of these tools and tactics had already been introduced during the protests of the late 1990s. Digital activists themselves report encountering much skepticism, and attribute the eventual success of the mobilization to the active participation of prominent religious figures, such as Abdelwahhab Hussein, one of the main intellectual leaders of the 1990s Intifada, who headed one of the first marches on February 14.<sup>14</sup>

Such support gave the call a momentum it could not have had otherwise, but also made it liable to appear as yet another attempt by “the Shiites” to better their lot, inevitably at the expense of others, or worse, to impose religious and political norms along the lines of the Iranian model. The protestors worked to counter such suspicions and make the movement as inclusive as possible. Some of the more aggressive elements of the established protest repertoire – in particular, blocking roads with burning tires – were avoided and non-violence was propagated.<sup>15</sup> Political personalities identified with the Sunni population were showcased to underline the cross-sectarian character of the movement,<sup>16</sup> badges and banners proclaiming cross-sectarian solidarity were ubiquitous, and ecumenical prayers were held.<sup>17</sup> Emphasis was

**11** In 1995, Sheikh Khalid Bin Hamad (a second cousin of the current ruler) wrote a notorious poem proposing the deportation of the Shiite population to outlying islands. See Justin Gengler, “Royal Factionalism, the Khawalid, and the Securitization of ‘the Sh’i’a Problem’ in Bahrain,” *Journal of Arabian Studies* 3, no.1 (2013). A report drafted in 2006 by a (later deported) royal advisor claimed to have discovered a secret network to discredit Shiite parties and public figures, sponsored by members of the same royal faction. See Bahrain Center for Human Rights, “*Al Bander Report: Demographic Engineering in Bahrain and Mechanisms of Exclusion*,” September 30, 2006, <http://www.bahrainrights.org/en/node/528>.

**12** International Crisis Group, *Bahrain’s Sectarian Challenge*, Middle East Report 40 (May 6, 2005), 7, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iran%20Gulf/Bahrain/Bahrain%20Sectarian%20Challenge.pdf>.

**13** A recording is available at <http://albayan.org/islam/sounds/Kotbat%20alJoma/438.wma> (Arabic).

**14** Interviews with activists Mohammed Al-Maskati, Ahmed Al-Widaei, Alaa Shehabi, May 2013. For an impartial first-hand account see Toby Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring That Wasn’t* (Stanford, 2013), chapter 3.

**15** Abbas Al-Murshed, *The Gulf Pattern of Political Change: The Economy of Sectarianism and Violence*, Bahrain Center for Studies in London (Arabic, an English translation of very unsatisfactory quality is available), [http://www.bcscl.org.uk/en/studies/download/14\\_9c56194a41981938093c509e13570c02](http://www.bcscl.org.uk/en/studies/download/14_9c56194a41981938093c509e13570c02).

Local human rights activists had been arguing for such tactics for years and received training from the Serbian organization CANVAS; the Egyptian example helped their arguments prevail in 2011 (interview with Al-Maskati; Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf* [see note 14], 47).

**16** Such as Ibrahim Sherif, leader of the Waad party or Mohamed Albuflasa, an independent politician and former military officer with links to the Salafi milieu. Oppositionists cite his arrest and prolonged detention immediately after a speech on February 15 as evidence that the regime felt especially threatened by expressions of solidarity from the more traditionalist Sunni milieu.

**17** Zainab Al-Khawaja, “Bahrain: Protesters Reject Sunni-Shia Split Claims,” *Institute for War and Peace Recording*, Arab Spring Issue 7 (March 23, 2011), <http://iwpr.net/report-news/bahrain-protesters-reject-sunni-shia-split-claims>.

placed on social demands and corruption – in particular, royal control over the country’s most valuable real estate – with which the vast majority of the population could identify. February 14, the “Day of Rage,” coincided with the tenth anniversary of the referendum in which an overwhelming majority of Bahrainis had endorsed King Hamad’s later abandoned reform agenda, and hence a touchstone of national consensus for democratic change. A sea of Bahraini flags and solemn commitments to Shiite-Sunni understanding further underlined the national, rather than factional agenda. Perhaps most crucially, by establishing the camp at Pearl Square, the protest based itself at a place not associated with any sect, where members of all communities could meet on equal terms.

Although there is evidence of some Sunni participation,<sup>18</sup> assessing the sectarian composition of the crowd at Pearl Roundabout and hence the success of these strategies remains difficult, in particular as the question is directly linked to competing political claims. The issue was further complicated by the refusal of many protestors to disclose their sectarian background, on grounds that only Bahraini citizenship should matter.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, the violence that accompanied the first clearing of the roundabout on February 17 made it increasingly difficult for the six legal political parties to prevail with their message of moderation and limited reform.<sup>20</sup> Forces pushing for a republic with a merely ceremonial role for the House of Khalifa (or none at all) became dominant. For those who already suspected an undeclared sectarian agenda, these demands confirmed that the solemn commitments to national unity and non-sectarianism

<sup>18</sup> Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf* (see note 14), 68; for interviews with protest participants see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UOqv7m9bF14&noredirect=1> (Arabic). The presence of Bahraini Shiites was very visible through known organizations and individuals, and participants from conservative and religious milieus whose attire identified their sectarian affiliation. Sunnis from these milieus were mostly absent, and the sectarian affiliation of secular Bahrainis of Sunni and mixed background who did participate was much less obvious.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* Comments on pro-opposition websites include dismissive statements such as “Sunnis sit at home while we are doing the fighting,” see e.g. <http://www.alwasatnews.com/3084/news/read/527416/1.html> (Arabic).

<sup>20</sup> E-mail communication with representatives of the *Waad* party, June 2013; Abbas Al-Murshed, *The February 14 Youth Coalition*, Bahrain Center for Studies in London (October 16, 2012) (Arabic), [http://www.bcsl.org.uk/en/studies/download/23\\_bf727a36143f982df409fba4242252c7](http://www.bcsl.org.uk/en/studies/download/23_bf727a36143f982df409fba4242252c7).

were purely tactical. Without royal power to offset their demographic advantage, Shiite political parties appeared poised to dominate the political system.<sup>21</sup>

Accordingly, the counter-demonstration of February 21 expressed unwavering loyalty to the crown. Staging the event at and naming the counter-movement after the Al-Fateh Mosque, as a location celebrating the eighteenth-century tribal conquest of Bahrain, clearly linked it to a national narrative identified with the Sunni community. The key role of politicians and clerics connected to the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafist currents further underlined this, and their manifesto addressed the Bahraini public as two communities (the “Sunni and Shiite street”) while warning ominously against sectarian strife. They thus rejected the narrative of national unity advanced at Pearl Roundabout and implicitly raised the specter of violence, which until that moment had only originated from the regime.<sup>22</sup>

That soon changed. Incendiary rhetoric from Salafi-connected Sunni politicians generated outlandish threat scenarios.<sup>23</sup> In early March, sectarian clashes erupted at the university and in mixed residential quarters, and roadblocks and vigilante groups sprang up amidst a flurry of rumors, leading to further altercations. Protest organizers at Pearl Roundabout and Shiite clerics invested significant energy in defusing the violence, including a seven-kilometer human chain formed between Al-Fateh Mosque and Pearl Roundabout on March 5, 2011, but failed to include prominent Sunni figures in their efforts.

To what extent the demonstration on February 21 that initiated this escalation was a genuine expression of the feelings of Bahrainis who felt unrepresented or even threatened by Pearl Roundabout remains con-

<sup>21</sup> The exact demographic balance is uncertain, but Al-Wifaq obtained well above 50 percent of the popular vote in the two elections it contested in 2006 and 2010, despite calls for a boycott by more radical Shiite groups. See Justin Gengler, *And Then There Were None: Religion and Politics in Bahrain* (April 14, 2011), <http://bahrainipolitics.blogspot.com/2011/04/and-then-there-were-none.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Footage of the rally is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=efRwSoA9qwY> (Arabic). The political group established by the organizers of the demonstration called itself “The Gathering of National Unity.”

<sup>23</sup> For example on March 2, in a speech in Muharraq that was broadcast by a Salafi-leaning Saudi station, former MP Mohammed Khaled alleged that there were plans to rid Bahrain of all Sunnis, and called upon the community to establish vigilante groups, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DK8X47q-tlY&noredirect=1> (Arabic).

tested. As a rally where a manifesto formulated by a small group of (Sunni) political and religious figures was read out, the event necessarily had a top-down character that stood in sharp contrast to the carnivalesque atmosphere at Pearl Roundabout. Yet there is little evidence of coerced participation. Social demands and criticism of corruption included in the manifesto received lively support from the crowd, while statements reaching out to Pearl Roundabout – such as the demand to release all political prisoners – were actually booed. If anything, the crowd appeared to expect a *more* confrontational stance from the emerging Sunni leadership. Certain accounts also suggest that increasingly confrontational and sectarian rhetoric at Pearl Roundabout alienated some (Sunni) activists enough to lead them to defect to the counter-movement.<sup>24</sup>

The regime's preference was clear, however. Security forces and official media that had been mostly hostile to the Pearl Roundabout movement (and at best neutral) gave massive support to the counter-movement. Footage of plain-clothes thugs operating alongside police during the sectarian violence in March 2011 reinforces the impression that certain forces within the regime intended to escalate the situation until a political solution became impossible, at the same time as others were negotiating with the opposition to find exactly such a solution. Many observers attribute this contradiction to fundamental conflicts between rival currents within the royal power structure: the interests of regime hardliners – motivated by ideological anti-Shiite dispositions and concern to hold on to power – coincided with those of the organizers of the Al-Fateh movement, who feared a deal between the palace and the Shiite parties at their expense.<sup>25</sup> External influence, in particular Saudi Arabia's concerns about a possible spread of the movement beyond Bahrain and increased Iranian leverage, finally tilted the balance to the side of the hardliners.

After the mid-March crackdown, official media dropped any pretense of neutrality, and joined a full-blown sectarian witch hunt. Collaboration with Iran or simply "treason" became the blanket accusation, sectarian hate speech was welcomed on TV, and a wave of demolitions targeted ostensibly "unlicensed" Shiite mosques and community centers. In turn, some opposition platforms associate the Bahraini regime or

even Sunni Bahrainis in general with Al-Qaeda. Shiite religious references and sometimes violent protest in Shiite areas again became the trademark of the opposition. Each side uses material produced by the other to portray its opponents as sectarian, divisive, and beholden to external forces, in contrast to their own purported inclusiveness and patriotism. Both thus collaborate, if from a vantage point of vastly unequal power, in generating exactly the sectarian polarization they ostensibly denounce.

<sup>24</sup> Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf* (see note 14), 68.

<sup>25</sup> Gengler, "Royal Factionalism" (see note 11).

## Iraq 2011/2013

Youth protests against poor services, corruption, and heavy-handed policing had been simmering in southern Iraqi cities such as al-Kut and Basra since mid-2010, and increased in intensity after the long-awaited formation of a government at the end of the year failed to bring any improvement. Events in Tunisia and Egypt encouraged their spread to other parts of the country, and activists in various cities increasingly coordinated their activities and messages.<sup>26</sup>

The authorities responded with carrot and stick. While affirming the right to demonstrate and offering handouts and promises, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki issued warnings about terrorist attacks and potential violence. Deployment of riot police predictably triggered such violence in several locations, while on February 20 a nascent protest camp in Baghdad's own Tahrir Square was attacked by thugs, after security forces were withdrawn for unexplained reasons.<sup>27</sup>

In response, online activists and a broad alliance of civil society organizations announced a "Day of Rage" for Friday, February 25. Harsh security measures and a virtual lockdown of downtown Baghdad restricted participation to a few thousand, while tight restrictions on the few media outlets willing to cover the event minimized public exposure. Despite (or in fact because of) the heavy security presence, there were more violence and casualties. Continuous violent repression, including arbitrary detention and threats of murder and rape, succeeded in whittling down the protest.<sup>28</sup> At the end of June, al-Maliki mobilized thousands of supporters from the southern provinces for far larger counter-demonstrations. Around the same time, some of the protest organizers entered into

separate talks with government representatives, causing the movement to split and ultimately falter.

New protests erupted in late 2012, this time restricted to the Sunni-dominated part of the country. While partly framed in the language of social demands and human rights (such as the release of female detainees allegedly subjected to systematic sexual abuse), the main demand was redress for the alleged marginalization of Sunni Iraqis by a government dominated by Shiite parties, and support for Sunni politicians ousted by al-Maliki.<sup>29</sup> On April 23, 2013, government forces killed 50 protesters and injured 110 in Huwajja near Kirkuk (which had also seen significant protests in 2011),<sup>30</sup> leading to the militarization of the movement and a further deterioration of sectarian relations expressed in a new cycle of deadly terrorist attacks. Almost a year on, repeated military attacks against "protest camps" in the western provinces and the reappearance of Al-Qaeda are conspiring to plunge the area and all of Iraq into a new maelstrom of sectarian conflict.<sup>31</sup>

### Sectarianism and Political Conflict in Iraq

Center versus periphery and tribal versus urban power bases were the dominant cleavages in independent Iraq. Most of the south only turned to Shiism in the nineteenth century, when Ottoman policies of enforced settlement of nomadic tribes and an ill-conceived land reform caused social upheaval.<sup>32</sup> In other words, at the beginning of the twentieth century,

<sup>26</sup> For a first-hand account of the 2011 events, see Saad Salloum, *Beneath the Liberation Monument All That Is Solid Vanishes into Air* (2012), <http://www.lb.boell.org/web/52-771.html>. Further background information was obtained from interviews with Salloum (May 2013) and activist Haidar Haidar (April 2013).

<sup>27</sup> Kholoud Ramzi, "Protesters Attacked in Dawn Raid," *niqash*, February 24, 2011, <http://www.niqash.org/articles/?id=2789>.

<sup>28</sup> Amnesty International, *Days of Rage: Protests and Repression in Iraq*, April 2011, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE14/013/2011/en/991ffba-1762-43d1-8b4f-1555eb568d17/mde140132011en.pdf>.

<sup>29</sup> Abdallah Otaibi, "Iraqi Protests Take on Sectarian Tone," *Al-Hayat* (Arabic), January 2013, English version at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/tr/contents/articles/politics/2013/01/iraqi-protests-take-on-sectarian-tone.html>.

<sup>30</sup> International Crisis Group, *Make or Break: Iraq's Sunnis and the State*, Middle East Report 144, 32, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Iraq/144-make-or-break-iraq-sunnis-and-the-state.pdf>.

<sup>31</sup> Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, "The Anbar Protests Crisis: Calculations of the Parties Involved," February 13, 2014, <http://english.dohainstitute.org/release/156d3718-7762-446d-bbe6-43a8646437eb>.

<sup>32</sup> Yitzhak Nakash, *Shi'is of Iraq* (Princeton, 1994), chapter 1.

many Iraqis were Shiites because they were poor and marginalized, not the other way around. Urban Shiites, on the other hand, thrived on the economic boom that came with the start of oil extraction. Both the state, wielding the classical tools of nation-building – education and mass media – and the political opposition – in particular, the once powerful Iraqi Communist Party – saw to it that Arab Iraqis would identify themselves not in sectarian terms, but first and foremost as Iraqis, or as members of a particular social class. Proposals for federalism, let alone dismantling the shared state, never gained significant traction among Arab Iraqis.<sup>33</sup>

Saddam Hussein, who today epitomizes Shiite victimization, embraced bigotry towards Iraqi Shiites only towards the end of his reign, but even then the issue was power rather than sectarian prejudice. Conversely, the reason that Sunnis from the northwest like himself dominated the commanding heights of power throughout his reign was “because they are the friends and kin of those already there, rather than because they attend the same mosque.”<sup>34</sup> As scores of leading officials were purged, unquestioning loyalty became the key to survival, and solidarity of extended families and clans the basic principle of power.<sup>35</sup>

Under Saddam, politicized Shiite Islam remained the only challenger after all other political competitors had been destroyed. Harassment and persecution of the main Shiite party, Dawa, were combined with a strategy of co-opting Shiite institutions and expressions of religiosity into the Iraqi nationalist narrative of the ruling Baath party. A fictitious genealogy tracing Saddam Hussein back to Imam Hussein was even created.<sup>36</sup> The Dawa party’s defection to Iran during the 1980–1988 war allowed the regime to portray it as unpatriotic, and the loyalty of the Shiite population was courted by stressing the Arab essence of Islam, in contrast to Iranian “imposters.” The majority of Shiite Iraqis fought loyally for their country, but when Saddam’s brinkmanship led to humiliating defeat

by the US-led coalition in the 1991 Gulf War, enraged soldiers turned their wrath against the Baath, and were joined by the local population.<sup>37</sup> Since the southern provinces bordering Kuwait are mostly Shiite, so were those who participated in the uprising. The uprising quickly acquired a Shiite coloring, and for the Republican Guard, recruited overwhelmingly from the Sunni north-west, the conclusion was clear: “No Shiites after today”.<sup>38</sup> Utmost violence against the insurrection was followed by a decade of ever-growing anti-Shiite bias, leading to repeated bouts of violence and uprisings.

Regime change in 2003 could have offered an opportunity to open a new page and establish equal access to political representation for all Arab Iraqis.<sup>39</sup> Polls conducted at the time indicated that only a minority of Iraqi citizens wanted politics to be organized along sectarian lines.<sup>40</sup> Likewise, massive demonstrations against the occupation attracted support from Sunnis and Shiites alike.<sup>41</sup> Yet nearly all parties that entered the political process had a clear sectarian profile.<sup>42</sup> For its part, the exiled Iraqi opposition had already applied the principle of explicit sectarian and ethnic quotas in the structures of the Iraqi National Council established during the early 1990s.<sup>43</sup> Saddam’s massacres against Kurds and Shiites had convinced policymakers in the United States and its allies that the problem in Iraq was first and foremost sectarian and ethnic, and that the most straightforward solution would be a formalized structure of equitable power-sharing between the groups. Accordingly, in 2003 the Iraqi Governing Council was formed according to an ethno-sectarian key, setting a

33 Fanar Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity* (London and New York, 2011).

34 Marion Farouk-Sluglett and Peter Sluglett, “Some Reflections on the Sunni/Shi’ Question in Iraq,” *Bulletin of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies* 5, no. 2 (1978): 84.

35 Amatzia Baram, “Saddam’s Power Structure: The Tikritis before, during and after the War,” *Adelphi Papers* 43, no. 354 (2003): 93–113.

36 Amatzia Baram, “Re-Inventing Nationalism in Ba’thi Iraq 1968–1994,” in *Challenges to Democracy in the Middle East*, ed. William Harris (Princeton, 1997), 37.

37 Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq* (see note 33), 65–86.

38 Kanan Makiye, “The Arab Spring Started in Iraq,” *New York Times*, April 7, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/07/opinion/sunday/the-arab-spring-started-in-iraq.html>.

39 Since the Kurdish region was well-established by 2003, including its own security forces, and allied with the United States, Kurdish autonomy was never seriously challenged.

40 Eric Herring and Glen Rangwala, *Iraq in Fragments: The Occupation and Its Legacy* (London, 2006), 148.

41 Khalil Othman, “Trans-sectarian Moral Protest against Occupation: A Case Study of Iraq,” in *Democratic Transition in the Middle East*, ed. Larbi Sadiki, Heiko Wimmen, and Layla Al-Zubaidi (London and New York, 2013), 42–65.

42 With the partial exception of the Iraqi National Accord (INA) headed by Iyad Allawi; however, his alleged links to the CIA and harsh handling of the Fallujah uprising quickly undermined his appeal to Sunni Iraqis.

43 Ali Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace* (New Haven and London, 2007), 53.

precedent for politics during the occupation period.<sup>44</sup> On the local level, the systematic destruction of any form of independent politics or civil society by the old regime had left religiously based networks as the most easily available matrix for the creation of political communities, and the collapse of the Iraqi state in the aftermath of the war only compounded the problem. The security vacuum, further compounded by the dissolution of the Iraqi army, was then filled by local and hence mono-sectarian militias.

Organizing representation along sectarian lines meant that Sunni Arab Iraqis, accounting for only 20 percent of the population (as opposed to some 60 percent for the Shiites), felt increasingly marginalized. The extremely violent repression of the restive town of Fallujah and the Shiite clergy's open intervention for the unified Shiite list in the 2005 elections "crystallized growing concerns among Sunnis that the dice were loaded against them."<sup>45</sup> Sunni political actors responded with boycott and obstruction,<sup>46</sup> further diminishing their own share of power and amplifying their community's sense of marginalization, which in turn fuelled the insurgency that erupted in 2006.

A combination of counter-insurgency and cooptation allowed Iraqi and occupation forces to defeat insurgents and militias by 2008, and bring representatives of the Sunni population back into the fold. Elections in 2010 yielded a plurality for the Iraqiyya alliance composed of Sunni, secular, and non-Islamist Shiite politicians and again underlined the existence of a constituency for non-sectarian political approaches in Iraqi society. However, internal divisions and Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's acumen in outmaneuvering opponents quickly undermined the new force.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>44</sup> David Gairdner, *Risk and Violence in Iraq's New Sectarian Balance*, NOREF report (September 2012), <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Publications/Detail?lng=en&id=153598>. For details about Iraq's power-sharing arrangements, see Nussaibah Younis, "Set up to Fail: Consociational Political Structures in Post-war Iraq, 2003–2010," *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 4, no. 1 (2011): 1–18.

<sup>45</sup> Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq* (see note 43), 340.

<sup>46</sup> Sunni leaders achieved a near-total boycott of the National Assembly elections in early 2005, and were consequently mostly excluded from the constitution-writing process. They campaigned, and only narrowly failed, to defeat the new constitution in the referendum held six months later. See Toby Dodge, *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism* (London, 2012), 45.

<sup>47</sup> International Crisis Group, *Iraq's Secular Opposition: The Rise and Decline of Al-Iraqiyya*, Middle East Report 127 (July 31, 2012), [http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-](http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north)

## Sectarianism in the 2011 Mobilizations

The wave of protests that peaked in February 2011 had originally started in the Shiite-majority south, and had no sectarian dimension whatsoever. Rather, they were directed against all political parties within the ruling power structure, of which Nouri al-Maliki, a Shiite, happened to be the most prominent and powerful representative. As they evolved, and impromptu networks of youths were joined by more experienced civil society activists, they acquired explicitly anti-sectarian messages. Corruption in particular was linked to politicians' control over sectarian apportionment, and sectarian conflict attributed to their strategies of divide and rule. One of the most widespread protest signs (besides a sea of Iraqi flags) was a red card in the shape of a map of Iraq, alongside many banners proclaiming a "united country." Likewise, the movement appropriated reference points of national – that is, Sunni-Shia – unity, such as the uprising against the British in 1920.

Tahrir ("Liberation") Square, the physical location of the protests, likewise carried a strong symbolic meaning beyond its obvious allusions to the Egyptian precedent and to the shared struggle against British colonialism. While the 2006–2008 violence divided Baghdad into nearly exclusively Sunni and Shiite sectors, the area around Tahrir Square is one of the few still identified with cosmopolitan urbanity. It therefore signifies a sphere of social interaction secured by a sense of civility rather than militarized security, in contrast to the "Green Zone" directly across the river, where government institutions are located and most politicians live. While the orientations of many protestors mirrored this character of the location, a significant section also hailed from religious and conservative backgrounds. For these, mixed (Sunni-Shiite) prayers were organized in the adjacent park, which on normal days serves as a retreat for drunks, thus again underlining the claim that the movement could serve as a model for public responsibility and coexistence alike.<sup>48</sup> Participants emphasized these claims by symbolic actions, such as displaying brooms to express their determination to clean up not only the public space around them, but also the "filth" of official politics.

[africa/iraq-iran-gulf/iraq/127-iraqs-secular-opposition-the-rise-and-decline-of-al-iraqiya.aspx](http://www.africa/iraq-iran-gulf/iraq/127-iraqs-secular-opposition-the-rise-and-decline-of-al-iraqiya.aspx).

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Salloum. On the following, see Salloum (2012, see note 26).

The prime minister's warnings of violence had the potential to destroy this atmosphere of mutual trust and civility. They initially failed to do so, mostly because protestors driven by deep disdain for politicians were especially unlikely to take heed, but also because the organizers were determined to keep the movement peaceful in order to maintain the moral high ground and deny the security forces any pretext for a violent crackdown. Any individual or group displaying provocative behavior was quickly surrounded and neutralized, and on several occasions activists in white headbands formed a human barrier between riot police and protestors seeking confrontation.

The measures to prevent violence and maintain a cross-sectarian discourse and appeal worked, partly due to the presence and determination of an experienced core group of organizers and activists, many with a background in formal civil society, but also because participation never exceeded a few thousand. But the limited numbers set very narrow limits on what the movement could actually achieve. With elections barely a year past and all major political parties joined in a "grand coalition," as is typical for power-sharing systems, mass mobilization would have been necessary to credibly challenge the legitimacy of the political sphere. Yet with nearly all political parties – which also control most of the Iraqi media – and all the clergy – Sunni and Shiite – aligned against it, such mass mobilization was impossible. Its lack of allies in formal politics also deprived the movement of crucial protection from state violence and left it with few practical options as to how and in particular by whom the reforms it demanded were to be implemented. On the other hand, the propaganda of fear worked well in support of the counter-mobilizations that finally broke the back of the protests in the early summer of 2011.

## From Iraqi Spring to Sunni Spring

The protests that began in late 2012 in the overwhelmingly Sunni northwest over the arrest of the bodyguards of (Sunni) Minister of Finance Rafi al-Issawi were clearly directed against alleged Sunni marginalization and the perceived sectarian agenda of the al-Maliki government. Yet their demands initially focused on concrete legal and institutional remedies, included issues relating to social and human rights, such as the situation of female political prisoners, remained peaceful and

explicitly renounced sectarianism.<sup>49</sup> Activists who had participated in the 2011 movement expressed qualified sympathy for the movement,<sup>50</sup> and even paid solidarity visits to the area, but expressed doubts concerning the motives and agendas of some of the leaders.

The latter included local clerics, tribal leaders, and affiliates of the Iraqi Islamic Party (an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood) but also Baathists and former anti-occupation resistance fighters with contact to jihadi groups.<sup>51</sup> Thus, this new movement was not only from the outset almost exclusively Sunni, but bore the potential to take a violent sectarian turn. The violent attack on the Hawija protest camp on April 23, 2013, by government troops seen as "Shiite" units, firmly tilted the balance in that direction. In response, the movement started to militarize, and social media pages that had been used to organize the 2011 protests filled with sectarian hate speech. The escalation of sectarian conflict across the border in Syria further exacerbated those tendencies, and created a growing influx of weapons and jihadi fighters. The parallel surge in attacks on Shiite neighborhoods, mosques, and markets served to dissuade Shiite Iraqis from granting the movement the benefit of the doubt, and removed whatever cross-sectarian appeal its demands could have had.

<sup>49</sup> Ali Issa, "Tipping Towards Iraq's Squares: An Interview with Falah Alwan," *Jadaliyya*, January 22, 2013, [http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/9699/tipping-towards-iraqs-squares\\_an-interview-with-fa](http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/9699/tipping-towards-iraqs-squares_an-interview-with-fa).

<sup>50</sup> Iraqi Civil Society Solidarity Initiative, *Iraqi Civil Society Organizations: "Escalating Political Conflict among Leaders of the Major Blocks Endangers the Unity of Iraqi Society and Reflects Negatively on Civil Peace"*, January 30, 2013, <http://www.iraqicivilsociety.org/archives/1089>; Interviews with Salloum, Haidar.

<sup>51</sup> International Crisis Group, *Make or Break: Iraq's Sunnis and the State* (see note 30), 16–22.

## Lebanon 2005/2011

When Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak resigned on February 12, 2011, Lebanese online forums were already abuzz with calls for mobilization under the slogan "the people demand the fall of the *sectarian* regime." Circulated by a mix of young first-timers, experienced civil society activists, and supporters of non-sectarian parties, these virtual debates soon yielded a first march of some 2,000 on February 27. Participation in the Sunday demonstrations peaked at around 20,000 on March 20, and for slightly more than a month, a conscious focus on social issues maintained an image of "national unity" and non-partisanship. However, the movement was eventually ultimately unable to avoid, still less bridge the major divides of Lebanese politics, nor to insulate itself against the climate of sectarian animosity and fear fueled by the conflict in neighboring Syria. By early summer 2011, internal conflict turned acrimonious and most of the unaffiliated participants withdrew, leaving the movement to fizzle out.

Eight years earlier, Lebanon had already experienced a massive popular movement that some observers at the time believed to be a harbinger of things to come for the region.<sup>52</sup> The assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri on February 14, 2005, galvanized political opposition against the Syrian-controlled Lebanese regime, and following a massive turnout for his funeral on February 16, plans for popular mobilization were discussed. Established politicians were, however, quickly overtaken by activists, some hailing from their own student organizations,<sup>53</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Samir Kassir, "Beirut, Spring of the Arabs," *An-Nahar*, March 4, 2005, <http://samirkassirfoundation.org/documents/articles/Pr000553.doc>.

<sup>53</sup> Youth organizations moved on the initiative of individual mostly university-based leaders who did not wait for their party headquarters to devise a strategy. Some, like the very active supporters of General Michel Aoun (still exiled at the time), were not even part of a formal party structure. Party leaderships initially failed to grasp the political potential of the downtown camp, and therefore left "their" activists largely to their own devices. See Christian Gahre, *Staging the Lebanese Nation* (Master Thesis, Beirut, 2007); Rayan Majed, *L'engagement politique des étudiants dans l'Intifada de l'Indépendance* (Master Thesis, Beirut, 2007); André Sleiman, *Le Camp de la Liberté, plate-forme de la révolution souverainiste de 2005*, *Annales*

and large numbers of politically unaffiliated citizens, who started pitching tents on Beirut's downtown Martyrs' Square on the evening of February 18. Over the following ten months, the camp continued to grow, as did the demonstrations converging on the square, with a first peak on February 28 when a parliamentary debate about the assassination was scheduled. That day, several thousand protesters peacefully defied the ban on demonstrations imposed by the Ministry of the Interior, which the army and the security forces declined to enforce. With his authority undermined and facing withering attacks on his government, Prime Minister Omar Karami announced his resignation in a speech that was televised live and shown on a giant screen in Martyrs' Square,<sup>54</sup> thus creating a sense of victory that boosted the protesters' enthusiasm. International pressure, in particular from the United States, finally convinced the Syrian regime and its Lebanese allies that their situation was untenable, and on March 7 Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad announced the withdrawal of Syrian forces.

But the battle had just begun. Only 24 hours later, Hizbullah gathered its own supporters downtown for a pro-Syrian rally that dwarfed all former demonstrations.<sup>55</sup> On March 14, in response, the opposition upped the ante, now relying fully on the financial and logistic resources of the Hariri family and its political allies to achieve perhaps double the turnout of the week before. Meanwhile, the power of the "Freedom Camp" to generate political momentum and popular legitimacy had become apparent to the political parties. The initial free-wheeling initiative of student activists was replaced by increasingly rigid top-down control, and attempts by some of the unaffiliated

de sociologie et d'anthropologie 18-19 (Université Saint-Joseph, Beirut, 2007-2008), 121-160.

<sup>54</sup> Footage is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VXa0Yk98OXg&noredirect=1> (Arabic).

<sup>55</sup> During his speech, Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah explicitly asserted an equally, if not more valid popular legitimacy for his political line: "I ask the world and our fellow countrymen: Are these hundreds of thousands mere mario-nettes?" For the relevant passage of the address, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ojjuMnbATXw&noredirect=1> (Arabic).



activists to convert the structures established in the camp into a permanent civic movement were suppressed.<sup>56</sup>

The demonstrations of March 8 and 14 – which gave the names to today’s rival political camps – established fundamentally opposing views on Syria’s role in Lebanon, but also reflected sharp differences on Lebanon’s regional orientations and alliances. While March 14 urged neutrality in regional conflicts and turned to the West and the Gulf monarchies for support, March 8 pushed for militant “resistance” against the United States and Israel alongside Iran and Syria. For about a year, the main political actors nevertheless maintained a modicum of cooperation in a shared government, but the Israel-Hizbullah War of 2006 pushed the differences to the fore.<sup>57</sup> By the end of 2006, March 8 had withdrawn its ministers and initiated an 18-month downtown “sit-in” that amounted to a lock-down of government. Finally, on May 7, 2008, Hizbullah mobilized its powerful armed wing, crushed the nascent and poorly organized pro-government militias (as both the army and the security forces watched on), and imposed terms that granted it an effective veto over any government decision. Sectarian tensions between Sunnis and Shiites have festered ever since. For many of the anti-sectarian activists that took to the streets in early 2011, real fear of civil strife was an important part of their motivation.

## Sect and State

Sectarian representation has been a defining feature of Lebanon since the mid-nineteenth century, with local actors, Ottoman rulers, and European powers all working to establish the sect as the defining category for the relationship between the populace and the state.<sup>58</sup> This process was determined by sequences of interaction between domestic social and political conflict on one side, and regional and international strategic interests on the other. As long as Lebanese

political actors were left to their own devices, they would forge shifting cross-sectarian alliances to achieve favorable outcomes in their perennial struggles over power and resources. When regional conflict arose, sectarian rifts served as entry points for external powers to sway the strategically located country to their side. On the back of their support, radical actors increasingly eclipsed moderates, and compromise became impossible.

Thus the Lebanese Civil War of 1975–1990 erupted amidst US-Soviet competition in the region and on the heels of the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli wars. It pitted (mostly Muslim) groups pushing for social equality, support for the Palestinian cause, and a correction of the power-sharing formula, who were supported by the Eastern Bloc, against (mostly Christian) opponents who were defending the status quo, arguing neutrality in regional conflict, and seeking alignment with the West. However, the conflict quickly turned Lebanon into a theater for proxy warfare, with the interests of external actors overriding those of their local clients, that only came to an end when the Soviet empire collapsed and the outcome of the 1991 Gulf war appeared to spell stable US regional hegemony.<sup>59</sup>

Rather than compromise and reconciliation, the post-war order was built on militia leaders assuming positions of power in the political institutions, with Syria acting as a feared enforcer. Resources were allotted according to sectarian quota and the bargaining power of sectarian leaders. Ordinary Lebanese would thus identify personal opportunities with the political fortunes of these leaders. Their mere presence, as well as their perennial jostling for power and resources, also kept alive memories of past conflict and fears of new violence. Behind a façade of pretend national reconciliation and ritualistic condemnations of sectarianism, the 1990s were a decade of sectarian fear and loathing.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, parties were not invited on equal terms. Acceptance of Syrian domination was a non-negotiable condition, leading to exile and imprisonment for the main Christian leaders and the destruction of their parties. Beyond the injury of

<sup>56</sup> Sleiman, *Le Camp de la Liberté* (see note 53), 160.

<sup>57</sup> While the conflict was politically divisive, it generated a remarkable momentum of cross-sectarian solidarity and popular pride in Hizbullah’s performance, which the political actors chose to not capitalize upon.

<sup>58</sup> Ussama Makdessi, *The Culture of Sectarianism* (Berkeley, 2000). For a detailed analysis of the roots of the conflicts in nineteenth-century Lebanon see Samir Khalaf, *Civil and Uncivil Violence in Lebanon: A History of the Internationalization of Communal Conflict* (New York, 2002).

<sup>59</sup> For a detailed account of the war and its background, see Theodor Hanf, *Coexistence in Wartime Lebanon: Decline of a State and Rise of a Nation* (London, 1993).

<sup>60</sup> Opinion polls indicate that the intensity of sectarian attitudes had already increased significantly by 2002, several years before the onset of the current confrontation. See Theodor Hanf, *E pluribus unum? Lebanese Opinions and Attitudes on Coexistence* (Beirut: Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 2007), <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/beirut/04985.pdf>.

losing political privileges through the revised power-sharing formula, Lebanese Christians suffered the insult of being “represented” by leaders they loathed as Syrian stooges.

## Sect, Resistance, and the 2005 Uprising

Syria’s heavy hand however also created the possibility that Lebanese from different sectarian backgrounds would overcome their differences and join forces against the occupiers. The 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister Hariri offered the occasion to forge these tendencies into a shared political platform. Resistance against Syria was transformed from a divisive issue propagated by the (mostly Christian) losers of the civil war into a common cause which temporarily allowed the Lebanese to suspend sectarian rivalry and fear.

Martyrs’ Square was the ideal stage for this particular narrative of national unity. Beyond the highly visible location in the city center and near the main political institutions, its location on the former civil war front line – abutting the Christian area to the east, and the Muslim one to the west – made it a perfect meeting point. Those gathering there imagined themselves in highly emotional terms (and were portrayed this way by the media and by PR professionals contributing their skills to the cause) as a people reuniting and re-establishing a sovereign political community through a genuine bottom-up movement, as opposed to the pretend reconciliation built on foreign domination that had been the hallmark of the 1990s.

Furthermore, the notion of a nation united in cross-sectarian solidarity against foreign domination unfailingly summoned the “foundational myth” of Lebanese independence, the common struggle against French colonialism in the 1940s.<sup>61</sup> One of the central events of the huge demonstration on March 14 was indeed a reiteration of sovereignty in the form of a pledge for Christian and Muslim Lebanese to stay together for better or worse, read out by the (later assassinated) politician and publisher Gibran Tuani. With its ecstatic enactments of national, cross-sectarian harmony and unity, the Martyrs’ Square movement thus mobilized a political resource that enabled an especially powerful claim to popular sovereignty, while at the same time removing the last shreds of

legitimacy from the divisive and foreign-controlled official institutions nearby.

Yet not everybody felt equally invited. Observers soon noted the conspicuously low participation of Shiite Lebanese. More precisely, Lebanese close to Hizbullah (mostly but not exclusively Shiites) from day one considered the Hariri assassination an Israeli false-flag operation designed to discredit Syria,<sup>62</sup> and regarded the events in Martyrs’ Square as American machinations. Yet for nearly three weeks, the party watched from the sidelines.

The reaction in Martyrs’ Square was initially denial. Individual Shiite participants would be paraded to demonstrate that the impression was simply wrong; confidence was expressed that the rest would join soon enough. After Hizbullah finally showed its stance on March 8, denial turned into aggression, and anti-Shiite rhetoric gained a currency that drove even a considerable number of non-Shiite activists away in disgust. Among Shiites themselves, only those unequivocally opposed to Hizbullah or affiliated with ostensibly non-sectarian groups (such as the Democratic Left or the nationalist movement of exiled General Michel Aoun) remained. March 8 raised the stakes, and the masses that flooded downtown Beirut on that day challenged the Lebanese opposition’s claim of national unity. The latter responded in kind, relying on the full scope of sectarian solidarity and clientelist networks at the disposal of the Hariri family and its allies to generate a turnout that would underline political claims through numerical rather than moral superiority. With all other sectarian communities lined up against the Shiites at that point, they eventually succeeded.<sup>63</sup> Within less than a month, the youth movement had fallen under the full control of sectarian political actors once again donning the mantle of Lebanese patriotism, and cross-communal mobilization deteriorated into a sectarian headcount

<sup>62</sup> Interviews conducted by the author in residential quarters supportive of Hizbullah, February 2005. Shiite youths in these areas who somewhat distanced themselves from the party line expressed sympathy for the anti-Syrian agenda, citing competition by cheap Syrian labor. Those who did participate in the demonstrations reported overhearing invective against Shiites, in particular by Hariri supporters hailing from lower middle class Sunni quarters, well before the March 8 demonstration.

<sup>63</sup> Propaganda from both sides inflated participation to numbers that the actual physical locations could have never accommodated (supposedly, one million on March 8 and 1.5 million on March 14), but rendered the *relative proportions* more or less accurately.

<sup>61</sup> Hanna Ziadeh, *Sectarianism and Intercommunal Nation-building in Lebanon* (London, 2006), chapter 5.

faithfully reflecting the demographic composition of the country.

## 2011: Beirut Spring Reloaded

In early 2011, discontent with a political class preoccupied with factional interests came together with enthusiasm for the apparent successes of the movements in Egypt and Tunisia. Since that excitement cut across the sectarian and political frontlines that had divided the Lebanese since 2005, the activists organizing these protests believed that popular mobilization around demands for social justice, more inclusive politics, and resistance against an abusive political class may succeed in breaking down or tempering the sectarian divisions that most of these activists viewed as tools of domination generated by politicians to further their own ends.<sup>64</sup>

Yet the prominent involvement of activists affiliated with ostensibly secular or non-sectarian political parties – namely, the Lebanese Communist Party (LCP) and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP)<sup>65</sup> – rendered the relationship to the “sectarian political system” that the movement vowed to overthrow inherently ambiguous.<sup>66</sup> While the ideological platforms of these two parties are indeed non- or even anti-sectarian, they do engage in strategic alliances with parties that have an unequivocally sectarian profile, and advocate political positions that many Lebanese consider to belong to sectarian agendas. Looking for strong state actors to further its vision of a nation-state spanning the Fertile Crescent,<sup>67</sup> the Lebanese chapter of the SSNP has for decades been a loyal client of the Baathist Syrian regime and after 2005 a faithful ally for Hizbullah (including direct support during the 2008 clashes), a course rewarded with cabinet posts and advantageous electoral al-

liances. Anti-imperialism and anti-Zionism likewise led the LCP into a tacit alliance with Hizbullah despite ideological and historical animosities.<sup>68</sup> Almost from the beginning, party supporters who lionized “resistance” against Israel and the United States as the paramount *national* cause that all of society should rally around argued with activists who rejected the notion that Hizbullah deserved special status for leading the “resistance.” Thus, when some activists pushed for more explicit attacks on the political class – denouncing specific politicians by name as representatives of the “sectarian regime” that was to be overthrown – long battles ensued. They ended in an uneasy compromise: while the list included the top leaders of nearly all relevant sectarian parties, Hizbullah was represented only by the leader of its parliamentary group, leaving Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah as the central icon of “resistance” untouched.

Such equivocation could not escape the practiced attentiveness of the Lebanese media and public for hidden sectarian and partisan agendas, and soon enough the movement was portrayed, in particular by media sympathetic to March 14, as a thinly veiled propaganda effort by March 8. Public support from Nabih Berri, a politician with an especially notorious reputation for exploiting the (Shiite) sectarian public employment quota for clientelist purposes, further entrenched this perception. It also enforced the widespread notion that the demand for an end to the sectarian political system (i.e. abolishing sectarian quotas, veto rights etc.) is nothing more than a code word for (Shiite) majoritarianism.<sup>69</sup>

Internal differences finally turned acrimonious as the conflict in neighboring Syria escalated. Many of the independent activists expressed solidarity with, even enthusiasm for the Syrian movement, and considered it part of a shared struggle against repressive governments across the Arab world. They were dismayed to find that many fellow activists translated their support of Hizbullah’s resistance agenda into support for the Syrian regime.<sup>70</sup> The increasing identi-

<sup>64</sup> Interview with activist Basil Saleh, September 2011.

<sup>65</sup> Activists claim that supporters of these parties already dominated the first meetings of the nascent movement through their superior political experience. Interview with activist Ali Nouredine, September 2011.

<sup>66</sup> Basim Sheet, “The Movement for the Fall of the Sectarian System and Its Symbols,” *Permanent Revolution*, no. 1/2012, <http://permanentrevolution-journal.org/ar/issue1/anti-sectarianism-movement-lebanon-lessons> (Arabic).

<sup>67</sup> The term “Syria” in the party’s name refers to an area stretching from the shore of the eastern Mediterranean to the Persian/Arabian Gulf, and a nationalist vision based on geography and shared cultural history that would accommodate different creeds, ethnicities, and languages.

<sup>68</sup> Many communists blame Hizbullah for the assassination of leftist intellectuals in the late 1980s, and accuse the party of monopolizing resistance against the Israeli occupation by actively sabotaging operations launched by the leftist Lebanese National Resistance Front.

<sup>69</sup> The exact demographic balance is uncertain, but the precise size of the Shiite community remains a cause of anxiety, in particular among Sunni Lebanese who fear for their share of sectarian quota.

<sup>70</sup> Interview with activist Rima Ibrahim, September 2011.

fication of the Syrian uprising with Sunni Islamist extremism (with links to political actors in Lebanon) circulated by media and on social networks sympathetic to March 8 worked to instill fear among non-Sunni independent activists. Caught between party strategists coopting the mobilization and fellow activists succumbing to sectarian fears, the independents among the initiators of the campaign for “the overthrow of the sectarian system” quickly lost the capacity to maintain a cross-sectarian message that would include Lebanese across the sectarian and partisan divides.

# Syria

In late January 2011, small groups of activists began holding vigils in downtown Damascus over social issues and in support of the unfolding Egyptian revolution. They were harassed and dispersed by thugs, and calls for a “Day of Rage” on February 4 circulated on social media but went without a notable response.<sup>71</sup> Some of the more seasoned opposition activists went public with expressions of skepticism, pointing out that the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt had built on years of groundwork that had been impossible in Syria.<sup>72</sup> Before 2011, ostensibly non-political social and cultural activities had provided nearly the only outlet for dissent in Syria. Closely monitored by the ubiquitous security services and occasionally targeted by repression, this “lateral civil society”<sup>73</sup> of leftist, liberal, and secular persuasion enjoyed a narrow margin of tolerance as long as it remained below a fluctuating but always very low ceiling of institutionalization and public presence.<sup>74</sup>

Protest originating from these urban, elite-based networks of dissidents became more audacious in the following weeks, peaking in a demonstration for the release of political prisoners in front of the Ministry of the Interior on March 16, but failed to achieve the momentum of mass participation. Instead, the first major protest occurred on February 17 in the popular Damascene neighborhood of Hariqa after an alterca-

tion between a local resident and traffic police,<sup>75</sup> followed by demonstrations in the southern town of Deraa, where the arrest and abuse of school children for writing “revolutionary” graffiti fueled popular anger against an already resented local governor.<sup>76</sup> Distributed through foreign-based but locally-fed networks of digital activists, the images of the violence against the population of Deraa resonated and triggered protests across the country. Mostly organized by small, spontaneously formed cells of young activists with next to no political experience, over the first three months these mostly peaceful protests were frequent but mostly small and organized at short notice, in order to evade the increasingly harsh security response. In June 2011, the withdrawal of security forces from Syria’s fourth-biggest city Hama opened a space for massively growing protests that took over the city for nearly a month.<sup>77</sup> In Damascus and Aleppo however, the movement remained confined to the suburbs, while counter-demonstrations supporting the regime were staged in the center of both cities. As the security clampdown intensified during the summer of 2011, non-violent protest gradually gave way to armed struggle. With the establishment of the Free Syrian Army in late July, despite repeated international attempts at mediation (amongst others by Kofi Annan), the country was set on a track straight to civil war.

71 “Q&A: Syrian Activist Suhair Atassi,” *Aljazeera*, February 9, 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/2011/02/201129135657367367.html>.

72 Ammar Abdulhamid, “Syria Is Not Ready for an Uprising,” *Guardian*, February 7, 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentsfree/2011/feb/07/syria-uprising-egypt-tunisia-days-of-rage>.

73 This term was proposed to the author in 2007 by a Syrian intellectual striving to stake out a sphere of “independent” public activity protected by reform-minded regime actors. Quite a few of these “lateral” activists later played active roles during the first phase of the uprising.

74 Most NGOs were forced under the umbrella of the Syria Trust for Development established under the patronage of First Lady Asma Al-Assad. Salam Kawakibi, *Civil Society Against All Odds, Hivos Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia*, April 2013, [http://www.hivos.net/content/download/100237/867726/file/Special%20Bulletin%20-Salam%20Kawakibi%20\\_6-5-13.pdf](http://www.hivos.net/content/download/100237/867726/file/Special%20Bulletin%20-Salam%20Kawakibi%20_6-5-13.pdf).

## Sect, Power, and Violence

Alawis make up some 10 percent of the Syrian population but dominate the military and the all-powerful security sector.<sup>78</sup> Their prominence goes back to the

75 Al-Quds Al-Arabi, February 18, 2013. An English summary including video footage is available at <http://syriaintransition.com/2011/02/18/move-you-donkey-sparked-17-feb-damascus-demo/>.

76 Hugh Macleod, “Inside Deraa,” *Aljazeera*, April 19, 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2011/04/201141918352728300.html>.

77 Nour Ali, “Hama – The City That’s Defying Assad,” *Guardian*, August 1, 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/aug/01/hama-syrian-city-defying-assad>.

78 80 percent of officers are said to be Alawis, and there are accounts of non-Alawi officers experiencing difficulty assert-

recruitment preferences of the French colonial administration, but acquired its current shape only through the decade of coups and counter-coups that finally brought Hafez Al-Assad (the father of the current president) to power in 1970.<sup>79</sup>

Like to their ideological twin in neighboring Iraq, the ruling Syrian Baathists found that ties of sect, clan, and family ultimately trumped all other sources of solidarity when it came to consolidating power. The recruitment policies of the regime reflected this experience, stacking the ranks of the army, the security services, and special forces with loyal allies, mostly if not exclusively from the Alawi community. To block potential contenders from within (Assad had himself ousted a fellow Alawi to seize power, and faced off his own brother a decade later), different Alawi clans were balanced against each other, and non-Alawi officers inserted in positions where they would obstruct the creation of autonomous Alawi-controlled networks without being able to create networks on their own. Recruitment into the army and security sector also provided an avenue of social advancement for the historically marginalized community.<sup>80</sup>

At the same time, Assad senior wooed back parts of the predominantly Sunni urban merchant class that his leftist predecessors had alienated, and allocated positions of power to individuals with traditional authority and social capital in the regions. Through the far-flung structures of the Baath Party, provincial elites of all sects could achieve access to the center of power and resources that translated into loyalty to both themselves and the regime, while always remaining under the watchful eye of security officials who would most often be Alawi. At the apex of this structure of patronage and control, all relations of loyalty and privilege ultimately led to an intertwined network of power connecting the extended Assad family,

ing authority over Alawis they nominally outrank. See Reva Bhalla, *Making Sense of the Syrian Crisis*, <http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/20110504-making-sense-syrian-crisis>.

<sup>79</sup> On this section see Volker Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria under Asad* (London, 1997); Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above* (London and New York, 2004).

<sup>80</sup> According to a prevalent discourse in the Syrian opposition, the Assad regime intentionally refrained from developing the Alawite core areas in the northwest so that members of the community would continue to migrate to the cities and seek employment in the public or security sector, thus becoming dependent clients of the regime. See Christa Salamandra, "Sectarianism in Syria: Anthropological Reflections," *Middle East Critique* 22, no. 3 (2013): 303–306.

the security services, and the Syrian business community.<sup>81</sup>

The violent conflict between the regime and the Muslim Brotherhood between 1976 and 1982 both proved the effectiveness of these strategies and entrenched their use. Despite its appeal to religious, social, and indeed sectarian prejudice against the heretic rural upstarts, the Brotherhood failed to break the web of mutual interest spun by the Assads. Thus, significant parts of the Sunni countryside as well as the urban merchant class of Damascus remained aloof from the uprising, or even sided with the regime.

The conflict, and in particular the Hama massacre of 1982, established an economy of fear that the regime carefully managed to restore and maintain its base of social support. The Islamists' targeting of Alawis with no direct links to the regime and fears of future retribution created a collective threat perception that equated any return of Islamism with impending genocide.<sup>82</sup> Other minorities were sometimes courted by means of preferential treatment, and were content to see the Islamists kept at bay. Islamism also remained a concern for Sunnis oriented towards a moderately westernized lifestyle, or any Syrian fearing a return to civil strife.

Beyond proving the importance of keeping the security sector in Alawi hands, the confrontation of the 1980s also provided it with ever wider, indeed lethal powers. Hence the perception that any Alawi, in any position, would be capable of mobilizing powerful connections and getting the better of adversaries and competitors gained even greater currency. While not always accurate,<sup>83</sup> these perceptions imprinted them-

<sup>81</sup> A visualization of the current makeup of this power structure is available at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Maps/Syria-Regime-Chart-20130826>. See also Samer Abboud, *Syria's Business Elite between Political Alignment and Hedging Their Bets*, SWP Comments 22/2013 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, August 2013), [http://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publications/swp-research-paper-detail/article/syrias\\_business\\_elite.html](http://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publications/swp-research-paper-detail/article/syrias_business_elite.html). For an insightful analysis of the regionalization of power in Baathist Syria see Kheder Khaddour and Kevin Mazur, *The Struggle for Syria's Regions*, Middle East Report 269 (winter 2013), <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer269/struggle-syrias-regions>.

<sup>82</sup> Khaddour and Mazur (see note 81) relate the example of a security officer who registered his daughter in the predominantly Sunni Damascene neighborhood of Midan, rather than his hometown Tartous, so that her ID card would not give away her Alawi background in the event of future violent conflict.

<sup>83</sup> There are pronounced differences between regions: most high-ranking Alawi members of the security services hail

selves upon the public reputation of Alawis in general, creating further reason to fear political change even among those who did not partake in any privilege or crime, but were concerned that new rulers might not bother to establish the difference. To some extent, this logic rubbed off onto members of other minority communities (Christians, Druze, Ismailis, Shiites, Circassians) who were seen as preferred clients of the regime, and feared retribution by association.<sup>84</sup>

## Sectarianism in the Syrian Uprising

Deraa and the Hawran area, where the uprising began in earnest, are predominantly populated by Sunni Arabs but traditionally known for unwavering loyalty to the regime; they produced more than their fair share of party and state officials,<sup>85</sup> and did not support the Muslim Brotherhood during the 1976–82 conflict. However, economic reforms introduced since the early 2000s had created considerable social discontent in provincial towns. Thus, when local notables who approached government and security officials to settle the issue of the arrested youths were treated with disdain, pent-up anger and embitterment exploded into open rebellion. The initial protests in mid-March did not target the sectarian character of the regime, but the arbitrary rule of the local governor (whose residence was torched) and rampant corruption, personified in particular by the president's cousin Rami Makhlof (the offices of mobile phone company Syriatel, controlled by Makhlof, were vandalized).<sup>86</sup>

from the coast and the coastal mountains, while many Alawi residents of the central plain around Homs feel treated as second-rate members of the community. See Aziz Nakkash, *The Alawite Dilemma in Homs: Survival, Solidarity and the Making of a Community*, (Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Foundation, March 2013), <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/09825.pdf>.

**84** During the early 1990s, such fears were expressed to the author by many Syrian Christians, while members of Muslim minority communities reported encountering the same kind of resentment as was directed against Alawis.

**85** For example, Vice-President Farouk al-Sharaa, Prime Minister Wael al-Halaqi, Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal al-Mekdad, Information Minister Omran al-Zoghbi, and the late prime minister Mahmoud al-Zoghbi. See Tareq al-Abd, "Tribalism and the Syrian Crisis," *As-Safir*, January 18, 2013, English at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/culture/2013/01/tribalism-clans-syria.html#ixzz2jxuNdLn1>.

**86** On the following see Mohammed Jamal Barout, *The Last Decade of Syrian History*, part 5-5-1 (Arabic), (Center for Research and Policy Studies), <http://www.dohainstitute.org/release/e84a713e-6da3-43d3-99c3-c68f25a4954a>, 13, 20–23, 31.

Mosques provided the most readily available space to congregate, and potential sanctuary when a crack-down occurred. In Deraa, the historical Omari Mosque quickly became a center of the uprising, including a field hospital, and was consequently stormed by government forces on March 23, with a death toll of five. The storming of this particular place of Sunni worship (dedicated to the revered Caliph Omar bin al-Khattab) instantly invested the conflict in Deraa with a strongly sectarian dimension, in particular since the operation was rumored to be the work of Alawi shock troops under the direct command of Maher Al-Assad, the president's enigmatic brother. Influential religious figures in the Salafi and Sufi religious milieus, who had until this moment urged their followers to stay away from protests, reversed their position.

Unlike Deraa, some of the towns that rose up in response (such as Baniyas, Latakia, Homs) had mixed populations of Alawis and Sunnis. On March 25, Latakia teetered on the brink of disaster, as armed groups (said to be members of smuggling rings related to a member of the Assad family) descended from the mountains to support the local Alawi community against the perceived threat, and unidentified individuals appeared in Alawi and Sunni quarters alike warning the residents of impending attack. Traditional leaders from both communities cooperated with the local authorities, and the situation was contained. On March 27, government spokeswoman Buthaina Shaaban poured oil on the fire, claiming that a "sectarian plot" against Syria was unfolding,<sup>87</sup> and President Bashar Al-Assad's speech in parliament three days later again emphasized this line.<sup>88</sup> Sectarian incidents in Baniyas, Jibla, and Homs followed in quick succession, and with spiraling levels of violence (including the first videos of sectarian killers parading and desecrating corpses of victims) that traditional leaders – including Sunnis who still stood with the regime – could no longer control.<sup>89</sup>

**87** "Casualties in Syria, and Accusations That the Target Is the Regime," *Aljazeera*, March 27, 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/pages/750e8e7a-35ab-4811-8c0d-6620195799f0> (Arabic).

**88** Footage of the speech is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=97iMoKAXfwQ> (Arabic). Barout (*The Last Decade of Syrian History* [see note 86], part 5-5-1, 33) counts seventeen mentions of the expression "sectarian strife" during the speech.

**89** Barout, *The Last Decade of Syrian History* (see note 86), part 5-5-2, <http://www.dohainstitute.org/file/Get/4ff91646-1920-41f6-92cc-4f04664405b5>, 9f.

With incidents like these, and the highest levels of leadership and pro-government media fanning the flames, the considerable efforts of many activists to express trans-sectarian solidarity and all-Syrian nationalism, in particular after the president's speech, could only slow down but not prevent the slide into open sectarian conflict. Mounting casualties initiated a cycle whereby public religious rituals of burial and mourning became occasions for further protest and mobilization, leading to further casualties. This steadily expanded the prominence of religious vocabulary and modes of expression among the protestors over the following weeks. Calls for jihad, martyrdom, and the wearing of burial shrouds (demonstrating that the bearer is prepared to die for the cause) first occurred in Baniyas in early April and then spread to Homs.<sup>90</sup> Not only did these expressions feed into the regime's efforts to portray the movement as controlled by Islamist radicals, they also served to increasingly alienate members of non-Sunni communities who had initially supported the movement and participated in anti-regime demonstrations.<sup>91</sup> The protest technique of nightly takbir – whole urban quarters shouting “God is Great” (Allahu Akbar) from the rooftops – borrowed from the 2009 Iranian Green Movement perhaps served the purpose of creating a sense of solidarity and collective empowerment, but also struck terror in the non-Sunni communities.<sup>92</sup>

On the regime's side, paramilitary structures – the feared *shabiha* militias, so-called popular committees, and the “Popular Army” – recruited along sectarian lines, the preferential use of Alawi-dominated army units and special forces,<sup>93</sup> collective retribution and massacres amounting to sectarian cleansing, and the participation of foreign fighters with a distinctive Shiite profile (the Lebanese Hizbullah, the Iranian Al-Quds force) all served to convince many – though by no means all – Sunni Syrians that this was first and foremost a sectarian conflict targeting their religious community.

In the course of nearly three years of conflict, exile and violent death have depleted the ranks of the initial, inclusion-minded protest leaders, while the increasing prominence of radical Islamists within the armed insurrection has given it a clear sectarian imprint, creating a sense that the regime might be the lesser of two evils even among many Syrians with little sympathy for the Assad family. According to the opposition's narrative, this was the objective all along. The release of militant Islamists from jail, placement of artillery next to Shiite or Christian places of worship to draw retaliatory fire, the use of Alawi militias to subdue restive quarters overwhelmingly inhabited by Sunnis,<sup>94</sup> and many more pieces of evidence are cited to argue that the regime was following a conscious and cynical strategy of turning civic contestation into sectarian conflict to prevent the wave of solidarity with the victims of state violence that had fueled uprisings elsewhere, and scared Alawis and other minorities, as well as secular Sunnis, into clinging to the regime.

On the other side, throughout the conflict the regime has consistently asserted a secular Syrian nationalism and cast itself as the only genuine proponent of multi-sectarian coexistence. With sufficient internal cohesion and control over the media, the regime was able to keep its representatives on this message, suppress evidence of sectarian practices including massacres, and parade Christian and Sunni clerics to vouch for its inclusiveness. In turn, lack of leadership and formal structures made it impossible for the opposition to distance itself from extremist voices, allowing the regime to portray the whole movement as dominated by Islamist extremists.<sup>95</sup>

Whether or not the Syrian regime and its counter-insurgency strategy relied on a conscious and deliberate strategy of instigating sectarian conflict, the speed with which the communities were set against one another can only be explained by the ingrained fear of the sectarian other, sown by the violent conflict

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Nakkash, *The Alawite Dilemma in Homs* (see note 83), 13.

<sup>92</sup> Personal communications reported by SWP researcher Petra Becker. During the early phase of the uprising, activists were in direct contact with Iranian activists advising them on protest tactics and strategies. Personal communications, summer 2011.

<sup>93</sup> Nakkash, *The Alawite Dilemma in Homs* (see note 83); Joseph Holliday, *The Assad Regime: From Counterinsurgency To Civil War* (Institute for the Study of War, March 2013), 10, <http://www.understandingwar.org/report/assad-regime>.

<sup>94</sup> Nakkash, *The Alawite Dilemma in Homs* (see note 83), 9f.

<sup>95</sup> Defecting Syrian soldiers report that during the first weeks of the crisis, orders described the protestors as “gangs of terrorists” sent or manipulated by external conspirators linked to Saudi Arabia, and that contacts to the outside world (including relatives) were circumscribed and media access strictly monitored so as to avoid any contradictory information reaching them. See Human Rights Watch, “By All Means Necessary.” *Individual and Command Responsibility for Crimes against Humanity in Syria* (December 2011), [http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/syria1211webwcover\\_0.pdf](http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/syria1211webwcover_0.pdf).



of the 1980s and nurtured by the regime's practices over the three decades since. Even the most meticulously planned and implemented strategy could not have conjured such fear and venom out of thin air: memory of past atrocities and enduring injustice provided a highly combustible fuel, and only a small measure of initial violence was required to set it ablaze.

The Syrian opposition was unable to prevent this slide. One problem was that for the younger generation of activists, the magnitude of the problem only became apparent as it unfolded. At the time, many held the sincere belief that the overwhelming urge to be delivered from oppression would easily overcome sectarian divisions which they often saw (or represented) as irrelevant (many claim that until 2011 they had been unaware of the sectarian identity of many acquaintances and colleagues), and that minority fears could easily be overcome by emphatic expressions of all-Syrian solidarity.<sup>96</sup> Among the older generation of dissidents who knew better, the issue was often denied and wished away, by some well past the point where the surge of sectarianism was plain to see, and frequently paired with adamant refusals to even discuss the issue. Token appointments of Kurds, Christians, and Alawis to the Syrian National Council and later the Syrian Opposition Coalition, and rhetorical commitments to national unity and a "civil state" did little to alleviate concerns,<sup>97</sup> and have been described by some critics as a mirror-image of the regime's own approach.<sup>98</sup> The claim is of course not that a pro-active approach to the question of sectarianism – starting by acknowledging the problem in the first place – could have allowed Syrian intellectuals and oppositionist to stem or significantly slow the slide into sectarian conflict. Rather, the observation is that sectarianism ingrained through long-term authoritarian practice provided the Syrian regime with tools that enabled it

to confine protest and mobilization to one part of society, and frighten other parts of society – that extend way beyond the sectarian group most closely identified with it – into extending their support and condoning, indeed participating in practices that would have been impossible elsewhere, while at the same time presenting the uprising and its tentative leaders with dilemmas they were unable to overcome.

<sup>96</sup> Interviews with exiled Syrian activists, Beirut (October 2012, April 2013), Cairo (October 2013).

<sup>97</sup> As Akram Al-Bunni points out (in *The Syrian Revolution and Future of Minorities*, Arab Reform Brief [April 2013], 6f., [http://www.arab-reform.net/sites/default/files/ARB\\_67\\_Syria\\_A.Al-Bunni\\_April13\\_Final\\_Layout\\_En.pdf](http://www.arab-reform.net/sites/default/files/ARB_67_Syria_A.Al-Bunni_April13_Final_Layout_En.pdf)), such verbal commitments often had the ring of tactical expediency, and did not contribute to the credibility of the opposition.

<sup>98</sup> Research interviews with opposition activists Maan Abdelsalam (October 2011), Salam Kawakibi (July 2013). Salamandra ("Sectarianism in Syria" [see note 80], 305) neatly captures the inability of Syrian dissidents to extricate themselves from the logic of sectarianism with the expression "avowed atheists hurl sectarian accusations against each other."

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The popular movements in 2011 in Bahrain, Iraq, and Syria, and in 2005 and 2011 in Lebanon, all mobilized on a platform of national unity. Since each of these societies had suffered destructive sectarian conflict in its recent past, these were really narratives of national reconciliation in and through the struggle against oppressive rule. Rather than defenders of national sovereignty and unity, regimes and established political actors were cast as the *origin* of factional strife. Removing them would thus eliminate the need to protect sectarian groups from one another, and with it a major source of legitimacy for these actors.

The power of this narrative was most compelling in Lebanon in 2005, for the simple reason that an actual, if superficial, reconciliation of historical rivals – the Sunni Muslim and Christian communities – took place and walls of fear were dismantled at the popular level. Beirut's Martyrs' Square between February 18 and March 14, 2005, provides yet another example of the transformative potential of collective action, and of the resources generated by the transgression of social boundaries that are invested with strong emotions (existential fear, memories of violence). These movements also demonstrate the special relevance of public space in divided societies, as in three of the four cases a highly visible but "neutral" location was an important factor in the narrative of national reconciliation. In contrast, the huge demonstrations that took over the Syrian city of Hama in July 2011 did *not* serve this purpose, despite significant participation from minority communities, because Hama was perceived as a *Sunni* city. Demonstrations of such magnitude in downtown Damascus would have changed the equation fundamentally; instead the regime claimed these spaces for its own loyalist marches.

This points to the crucial predicament that affected all these movements: their inclusive agendas and discourses did not convince everybody in equal measure. Where mass participation occurred, a large majority of at least one sectarian group remained aloof, or sided with the regime. Participation by certain individuals from these groups – often, if not exclusively, drawn from their social elites – initially served to maintain the inclusive narrative. Yet hopes that their presence would attract larger segments of these groups

were shattered when these instead joined counter-mobilizations, and supported or even participated in violent repression.

Some of the reasons for these failures can be attributed to the make-up of these movements themselves. Lack of central and hierarchical leadership was a serious liability. Ad-hoc structures achieved some control over banners and public statements, but radical and indeed sectarian voices still managed to exploit the opening, and were soon enough picked up by hostile (traditional and new) media eager to expose the "real" (sectarian) agenda. These voices became dominant as repression turned violent and casualties mounted. Whereas a coherent organization with a clearly defined leadership might have been able to control or convincingly disown such outliers, a movement speaking with many tongues could not. Moreover, innovative and creative forms of public action were always accompanied by protest repertoires steeped in religious imagery. This was only natural in societies where religious practice constitutes a central element of everyday life and one of the few spaces of limited autonomy. But since religiously inspired repertoires and places of worship revealed sectarian affiliations, they also identified the movements with sectarian groups, again raising doubts about the sincerity of their inclusive discourse.

Political parties, while initially wrong-footed, quickly joined the fray in Bahrain and Lebanon, and played a highly ambivalent role. On the one hand, they clearly pushed up the numbers. On the other, the highly visible participation of political parties identified with particular sects, or platforms perceived as sectarian, again undermined the inclusive appeal, even when these parties marched under non-partisan banners and worked actively to build cross-sectarian alliances. In Syria, the prominent role of the Muslim Brotherhood in the external opposition created the same effect, despite the organization's efforts to pepper its discourse with affirmations of democratic principles. In contrast, the 2011 movement in Iraq rejected any participation by parties that were part of the ruling power structure. This still did not prevent Shiite parties and clerics from slandering it as a front for Baathists and Al-Qaeda, while depriving it of allies that

could have offered protection and bargaining power vis-à-vis state actors. Sunni politicians in turn instrumentalized a movement in north-western Iraq in 2013 for their power struggle with Baghdad, setting the country back on a course to sectarian violence. In Lebanon, sectarian political parties either opposed the Martyrs' Square movement or exploited it for their own ends, thus destroying any potential for a cross-sectarian alternative.

All these handicaps prevented the narrative of national reconciliation from realizing its full potential. To be transformed by collective action in a way that brings down walls of fear and generates cross-cleavage solidarity, individuals and groups from both sides of the divide need to actually encounter each other face to face and practice solidarity in direct action, rather than in rhetorical statements. Hence the importance of physical spaces not inscribed with any particular sectarian meaning, where groups could meet on equal terms. But even during the initial phase when inclusive messages were clearly dominant and established political parties less visible, not enough people from both sides of the divide were attracted to turn the narrative of national unity and reconciliation from a claim into a self-sustaining reality.

The challenged regimes exploited these weaknesses efficiently. Just like their counterparts in Tunisia and Egypt, the rulers of Bahrain, Iraq, and Syria and political actors in Lebanon deployed the propaganda tools at their disposal to discredit opposition movements as dominated by or doing the bidding of Islamist radicals in the service of either Saudi Arabia or Iran. Just as in Tunisia and Egypt, the purpose of this fear propaganda was generating domestic support and international acquiescence for violence and repression. Yet in societies that are divided along sectarian lines, identifying popular movements with extremist Islamist organizations also means that those parts of the population who buy into this discourse will identify the threat scenario thus created with one particular sect (Sunnis in Iraq and Syria, Shiites in Bahrain, both in Lebanon depending on the political camp). In combination with memories of past discrimination and violence, recent regional examples of sectarian conflict, and the described weaknesses of the movements themselves, these arguments succeeded in spreading enough fear to undermine the narrative of national unity and reconciliation.

Use of violence and the radicalization and counter-violence that inevitably followed then made the propaganda ring true, or even turned it into actual truth.

The transformative power of collective action turned negative: Participants who had originally accepted the inclusive narrative changed their perception and withdrew, or even joined counter-movements, which then initiated intercommunal violence. Arguably, (regime) violence in Egypt in 2011 failed to stem the protests because it created common grievances that brought people together, while in the societies discussed here violence recalled old and created new sectarian grievances that drove people apart.

To sum up: Events in 2011 clearly show that divided societies harbor a potential for pro-democracy mobilizations that cut across the dominant cleavage lines, and thus bestow a form of bottom-up legitimacy that challenges established rulers and political leaders. The latter either attempted to hijack and exploit these movements, or tarred the narrative of national unity and reconciliation as a camouflaged sectarian agenda. Such counter-discourses did not rely on falsification and propaganda alone. Rather, they successfully exploited a number of structural weaknesses inherent in these movements. Converting protest movements with a cross-sectarian outreach into sectarian confrontations was not only a result of skillful manipulation from above. Rather, "once sectarianism has become a viable way of tarnishing the image of political adversaries, it moves to all levels of society and becomes as much a bottom-up as a top-down process."<sup>99</sup> While leaders certainly worked hard and in some cases applied brute force to herd their wayward flocks back into sectarian corrals, the quick and resounding success of these efforts relied on dispositions and dynamics already present in these societies.

A historical perspective shows that in all four cases, these dispositions and dynamics are grounded in authoritarian, non-democratic, and violent practices of rule, leadership, and power maintenance applied by or on behalf of political rulers and leaders. Whether the narrative features Druze landlords in nineteenth-century Lebanon mobilizing tribal solidarity to combat an agrarian uprising, Syrian intelligence officers recruiting Alawi youths into popular militias, Sunni Iraqi politicians generating bargaining power by initiating "spontaneous" protest camps, or Bahraini royals encouraging Sunni citizens to take to the streets to prevent a Shiite takeover: the story remains one of enforced top-down solidarity sustained by and ultimately

<sup>99</sup> Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf* (see note 14), 10.

leading to violence, which compromises all social actors and destroys all options for horizontal solidarity that could generate bottom-up pressure. As the events of 2011 and beyond show, divided societies remain divided and indeed become more so as the result of strategies and practices devised by rulers and leaders defending positions of political power, and for this same end, they will continue to generate exactly the divisions and the violence they pretend to contain.

## Recommendations

Based on the above, the most obvious lesson for European policymakers should be that concerns about ethnic or sectarian strife are no reason to acquiesce to or support authoritarian rule. Authoritarian rulers may temporarily suppress such conflicts, but will ultimately resort to exploiting and mobilizing them when seriously challenged, thus adding yet another chapter to a history of internecine violence that is in turn liable to generate more violence. In divided societies, today's authoritarian stability begets tomorrow's civil war, or even genocide.

External promotion of more democratic and participatory forms of rule is of course by nature unlikely to find a welcome among authoritarian rulers, whether they preside over a homogenous or a divided society. But in the latter case, it is also liable to alienate those groups in society who (are led to) believe that democratization will allow the numerically strongest and/or most cohesive group(s) to dominate state institutions, and hence monopolize benefits, impose social values, and exact retribution for past marginalization. Authoritarian rulers and sectarian leaders have proven adept at nurturing such fears and converting them into a rejection of democracy as such.

Rather than operating with normative concepts of democracy and governance, or standard blueprints for state-building, external actors seeking to contribute to long-term solutions that will address rather than suppress the potential for conflict inherent in divided societies therefore will have to seek out and strengthen potentials for cross-cleavage solidarity and participatory governance that exist in these societies. The events of 2011 have thrown these potentials into stark relief, along with the forces and dynamics that are likely to stand in their way.

Liberal civil society, ranging from institutionalized associations and NGOs to informal groups of activists, remains the core support base for democratic govern-

ance and non-sectarian notions of citizenship. In 2011 (and in 2005 in Lebanon), the political experience and intellectual input of individuals and networks created around such groups represented critical contributions to the initially inclusive discourse of the movements and their capacity to create a narrative with cross-sectarian attraction. Any support provided for such groups is a valuable investment in the future of these societies, even if the immediate impact may not be visible. At the same time, it is important to not overburden and then subsequently judge and dismiss such actors on the basis of unrealistic expectations. While the experience of common struggle in civil society may inculcate cross-sectarian orientations in some individuals, such groups do not have the capacity on their own to "knit the society together across ethnic lines and undermine divisive ethnic politics",<sup>100</sup> as expected by some strands of the peace-building literature.<sup>101</sup>

Rather, where these groups achieved a significant impact in terms of popular mobilization, this resulted to a significant extent from cooperation with or parallel efforts by leaders and structures of solidarity or deference constituted by religion, sect, locality, tribal allegiance, and other forms of non-elective community, who were nevertheless prepared to subscribe to the narrative of national unity and reconciliation. Attempts to build cross-cleavage solidarity and political platforms need to engage with such actors and harness the influence and moral authority they wield. Beyond mobilizing for inclusive platforms, they may also help to prevent radicalization and hinder attempts to create counter-movements, even though this capacity finds its limits where and when excessive violence occurs.

A similar observation applies to political parties, which often organize and mobilize according to the

**100** Bruce Hemmer, *The Democratization of Peace Building: The Political Engagement of Peacebuilding NGOs in Democratizing Societies* (PhD Thesis, Irvine, 2009), 61.

**101** An often-cited study proposing a direct relation between cross-cleavage civil society networks and successful conflict prevention is Ashutosh Varshney's *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India* (New Haven, 2003). Evidence that such expectations influenced the American state-building effort in Iraq can be found in Larry Diamond, *Squandered Victory: The American Occupation and the Bungled Effort to Bring Democracy to Iraq* (New York: Owl Books, 2007). For a nuanced account see Thania Paffenholz and Christoph Spurk, *Civil Society, Civic Engagement, and Peacebuilding*, Social Development Papers (New York: Conflict Prevention and Reconstruction Unit of the World Bank, 2006), [http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTCPR/Resources/WP36\\_web.pdf](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTCPR/Resources/WP36_web.pdf).

same logic of communal allegiance and representation. Restricting cooperation to parties with an ostensibly secular, cross-cleavage approach ignores the fact that including such language in platforms and membership in international organizations of political parties – such as the Socialist and the Liberal International – is often but a thin veneer for the fact that these parties represent a single sectarian community. On the other hand, parties that are clearly identifiable as communal representatives (such as the Lebanese Hizbullah, the Iraqi Sadr Movement, the Bahraini Wifaq, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood) have on many occasions adopted inclusive discourses. They need to be engaged and encouraged to make good on such declared intentions, since their influence on the ground means that no solution is possible without their support.

Finally, processes geared to addressing these conflicts in ways that balance the quest for participation with fears of marginalization have been initiated by political actors and international mediators in all countries discussed except for Syria, where attempts at finding a political solution still face huge difficulties.<sup>102</sup> However, these processes and the common platforms they created were abandoned as local actors working against compromise found support from regional powers (in particular Saudi Arabia and Iran) that turned these countries into theaters for their own strategic rivalry. Once external actors can be convinced or compelled to contribute to resolving rather than escalating, internationally sponsored processes of national understanding should revisit these platforms and adopt roadmaps that are formally binding for domestic and external actors alike, and implemented with the help of international institutions.

In *Bahrain*, the National Charter proposed in 2001 by the current king found resounding popular support back then, and was echoed by the opposition's Manama Document of October 2011.<sup>103</sup> Despite this, the "National Dialogue" initiated during the 2011 events has remained stillborn.<sup>104</sup> What appears to be

**102** Muriel Asseburg and Heiko Wimmen, *Geneva II – A Chance to Contain the Syrian Civil War*, SWP Comments 10/2014 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, January 2014), [http://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publications/swp-comments-en/swp-aktuelle-details/article/geneva\\_ii\\_a\\_chance\\_to\\_contain\\_the\\_syrian\\_civil\\_war.html](http://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publications/swp-comments-en/swp-aktuelle-details/article/geneva_ii_a_chance_to_contain_the_syrian_civil_war.html).

**103** <http://www.bahrainjdm.org/2011/10/13/manama-document-english/>.

**104** Guido Steinberg, *Kein Frühling in Bahrain: Politischer Stillstand ist die Ursache für anhaltende Unruhen*, SWP-Aktuell 23/2013

sorely missing is the political will of the ruling dynasty, or, according to some accounts, the capacity of its reform-minded members to prevail over bigoted relatives who are aligned with powerful economic interests. European countries, in particular the United Kingdom, should use their considerable influence to stiffen the resolve of the reformist faction.

Rather than building on the agreement reached in the Kurdish regional capital Erbil in November 2010 in order to address the main structural flaws of the post-2003 political order, in *Iraq* sectarianism has been used as a political weapon to maximize influence and marginalize opponents.<sup>105</sup> While Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has proved most adept in these techniques, the recent violence in western Iraq demonstrates that further concentrating institutional power is unlikely to yield stability, and liable to be self-destructive. On the other hand, a significant proportion of the Iraq's Arab population has consistently supported inclusive approaches based on non-sectarian Iraqi nationalism, even in the face of egregious sectarian violence. Apart from the 2011 Tahrir movement, recent expressions of such preferences include the success of the Iraqiyya coalition in the 2010 elections, and even al-Maliki's own electoral victory in the 2008 provincial elections.<sup>106</sup> What Iraq needs is a process of national dialogue that puts the fundamental understanding achieved in Erbil to the Iraqi public, and develops this into a formula that reconciles the commitment to a unified Iraqi state with solid guarantees against future victimization. Crucially, rather than being restricted to small circles of political actors – arguably, one of the major flaws of the post-2003 political process – this process must be open and transparent to the Iraqi public, thus allowing for effective electoral account-

(Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, March 2013), [http://www.swp-berlin.org/de/publikationen/swp-aktuell-de/swp-aktuell-detail/article/politischer\\_stillstand\\_in\\_bahrain.html](http://www.swp-berlin.org/de/publikationen/swp-aktuell-de/swp-aktuell-detail/article/politischer_stillstand_in_bahrain.html).

**105** The exact content of the agreement is disputed. See International Crisis Group, *Déjà vu All Over Again? Iraq's Escalating Political Crisis*, Middle East Report 176 (July 30 2012), <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Iraq/126-deja-vu-all-over-again-iraqs-escalating-political-crisis.pdf>, in particular note 6. A partial English translation is available at <http://www.easyenglish4u.com/erbil-agreement-s-19-points>.

**106** Major Shiite leaders such as Muqtada al-Sadr and Ammar Al-Hakim have in recent months adopted a discourse that appears to be catering to this voting potential. See Mustafa Habib, "The Next Leader of Iraq? Former Extremist and Islamic Cleric the Most Likely Candidates," *Niqash*, November 7, 2013, <http://www.niqash.org/articles/?id=3322>.

ability. It must also include all actors with real legitimacy on the ground – in particular, tribal leaders in the northwest, whose support is needed to win the war against Islamist extremism – as well as their regional sponsors, in particular Saudi Arabia and Iran. Europeans should attempt to build on the recent positive momentum in relations with Iran to initiate a process that leads to an internationally sponsored Iraq conference. Convincing Iran's clients in Iraq to reverse their exclusionary course and open up to substantial participation by the Sunni part of the population may also serve to convince Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries that improved relations with Tehran will lead to regional stabilization rather than Iranian hegemony.

Until 2005, Syrian strategies of divide and rule prevented the implementation of the roadmap to abolish political sectarianism included in *Lebanon's* "Document of National Understanding" (the Taif accord); the entanglement of local actors in regional conflicts and the resulting deep polarization have proved equally debilitating since, and the "National Dialogue" established in 2006 (with active European support) has gone nowhere. No solution will be possible until regional tensions, and in particular the civil war in neighboring Syria, are brought under control. In the meantime, the performance of the Lebanese Army will be crucial to save Lebanon from sliding into the Syrian abyss and exploding into sectarian conflict. Besides mediating between the two political camps to help prevent violence, external actors should offer direct material assistance to the armed forces.<sup>107</sup>

At the same time, commitment to the Taif accord and to coexistence in a (religiously and politically) pluralist society cuts across all segments of the Lebanese population. No political actor, not even Hezbollah, pursues an agenda designed to marginalize others on a sectarian basis. On the popular level, constituencies that are potentially susceptible to sectarian hate propaganda do exist in communities that lack coherent leadership, as is the case for the Lebanese Sunnis. Yet even these radical tendencies are mostly fueled by discourses of sectarian fear, and will recede once the objective reasons for such fear abate. Taif also includes elements designed to reduce sectarian threat perceptions through more rather than less democracy

(decentralization, additional safeguards, and avenues of redress against the abuse of power), which may be further expanded. Once regional tensions recede and politics again becomes a matter of Lebanese affairs rather than conducting the conflicts of others, the road ahead is clearly laid out in the Taif document. Its final implementation will require precisely the kind of resourceful bargaining and acumen for imperfect yet workable compromise that Lebanese politicians – indeed, Lebanese from all walks of life – excel in. Once the Lebanese themselves are finally in charge of the process, the best external actors can do is to leave them alone.

A settlement along the lines of the Lebanese Taif accord, including a locally adapted form of sectarian power-sharing, has been proposed as a solution to the conflict in *Syria*.<sup>108</sup> Such ideas misread the intentions of political and militant leaders on nearly all sides, as well as the nature of their claims to political leadership. Only the PYD, the decisive power among Syria's Kurds, builds its claims on the distinct character of a certain part of the Syrian population; accordingly, it will go along with any solution that awards formal recognition to the factual autonomy it has to a large degree already achieved on the ground. The ideological and political agendas of all other sides explicitly rule out awarding any legitimacy, let alone a share of power, to actors on the other side of the regime/opposition divide, and in the case of some actors on the opposition side, for anybody who does not subscribe to their particular interpretation of Islam.

Organizing political representation along sectarian lines would also fail to reflect the complex loyalties, preferences, and fears of most of the Syrian population. Even after nearly three years of war and sectarian atrocities, there is little indication that a significant proportion of Syria's Sunni majority defines itself primarily in sectarian terms or awards legitimacy to leaders on the basis of their communal allegiances. Significant numbers of Sunnis continue to support the regime, live in regime-controlled areas, or flee there for safety, while populations in the "liberated" areas resist groups that impose themselves on the basis of extremist Sunni religious ideology. Likewise, it is not clear that the fear of retribution and Islamist extremism that has forced Alawis and other minorities to

<sup>107</sup> Heiko Wimmen, *Lebanon's Slow-Motion Self-Destruction*, SWP Comments 21/2013 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, August 2013), [http://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publications/swp-comments-en/swp-aktuelle-details/article/libanons\\_langsame\\_selbsterstoerung.html](http://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publications/swp-comments-en/swp-aktuelle-details/article/libanons_langsame_selbsterstoerung.html).

<sup>108</sup> Stephan Rosiny, "Power Sharing in Syria: Learning from Lebanon's Taif Experience," *Middle East Policy* 20, no. 3 (fall 2013), <http://www.mepc.org/journal/middle-east-policy-archives/power-sharing-syria-lessons-lebanons-taifexperience>.

lend support to the Assad regime has led more than a small part of these groups to define themselves in communal terms, let alone accept the Assad regime as the true representative of communal interest. While this should be good news, it may also mean that proposing sectarian power-sharing would create strong incentives for political leaders to create precisely the homogenous identification and unified representation of sectarian communities upon which such systems are predicated in order to maximize their own claim to power. Amidst a violent conflict, the most effective means to this end would be more violence, also within communities; in a post-conflict situation it would lock Syrian citizens into these categories for generations to come.

At any rate, events on the ground make it appear highly unlikely that this or any other master plan to re-engineer Syria's political system will be on the agenda any time soon. Instead, a gradual stabilization of front lines and an uneasy cohabitation of regime- and rebel-held areas may be the least bad scenario available in the medium term. In the absence of a comprehensive solution, it would be both sensible and urgent for Europe to focus on humanitarian cease-fires and humanitarian access, and on persuading all combatants to commit themselves to respect international humanitarian law. That would require at least indirectly engaging with all rebel groups with considerable influence on the ground: alongside the so-called moderate rebels of the FSA also parts of the Islamist spectrum and the PYD. Where stabilization succeeds, humanitarian aid should be combined with support for the establishment of inclusive local self-governance structures that create an effective practical alternative to the rule of the Assad regime, and rebuild Syria one region at a time. Such strategies may raise concern over consequences for the unity of the state, yet if local structures of governance could be made inclusive and participatory, investing them with real power may provide a much more resilient and reliable check against authoritarian tendencies and marginalization than tinkering with arrangements at the level of central executive power ever could.