LONDON POLITICA

The Strain of Sectarianism

Challenges of Governance and Conflict in the Middle East

26 April 2023

Project Leads
Mariam Morsy, Ethan Dinçer, Abid Zaidi, Sharif Fatourehchi, Amaar Lone

Research Analysts
Yazan Azab, Jean Franco, Hassan Kabalan, Emily Lewis, Barbara Listek, Viddhi Thakker

Table of Contents

Executive Summary **2**

Sectarian Politics in Iraq and Lebanon's Democracies: Complexities of Governance **3**

IRAQ **3**

A History of Democracy in Iraq 4

Iran in Iraq: Militias, Shi'ism, and Soleimani 8

Current State of Affairs: al-Sudani and the "end of sectarianism"? 10

LEBANON **12**

The Background of Sectarianism 12

Lebanon's Political and Sectarian Struggle 14

Sectarianism in Yemen and Syria's Conflicts: The Impacts of Regionalism **16**

YEMEN **16**

The Background of Sectarianism 16

Sectarianism and Foreign Actors 17

Yemen Today 19

SYRIA **21**

The Background of Sectarianism 21

Sectarianism and the Civil War 22

A Regional Sunni-Shiite Rivalry 24

Current Situation in Syria and Changing Political Dynamics 25

Executive Summary

Sharif Fatourehchi

This report provides a detailed analysis of the challenges faced by countries like Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen and Syria with regards to sectarianism and its impact on governance and conflict. We present an overview of the history of democracy in Iraq and the power-sharing system known as the Muhasasa Tai'fia, which has led to disenfranchisement of Sunnis and corruption among the political elite. We also highlight the emergence of the "militant periphery," a constituency dominated by Arab Sunnis, which has contributed to the growth of militias. Moreover, we examine sectarianism in Lebanon, Yemen, and Syria and its impact on political and sectarian struggle, civil war and involvement of foreign actors.

The section on Lebanon establishes the political and sectarian struggle in the country, where political systems have virtually collapsed due to sectarian squabbles. The economic crisis has also highlighted the political system's inability to operate efficiently. Due to political disagreements among the main political factions, the investigation into the Beirut port explosion that killed 202 people was temporarily halted. In Yemen,we present an overview of the background of sectarianism, instability, and the impact of foreign actors. We also examine the current situation in Yemen, where the country continues to suffer from civil war, an ongoing humanitarian crisis, and the active involvement of foreign actors.

The section on Syria offers a detailed analysis of the causes of the civil war and how sectarianism has played a significant role in exacerbating the conflict. We highlight the involvement of outside powers, such as the creation of jihadist groups like al-Nusra Front and Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, fueling anti-government sentiment. We also established the involvement of pro-government forces with support from countries like Russia and Iran and its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which have supplied militias to prevent the collapse of the state. Furthermore, it explores how international involvement has further complicated conflict dynamics and led to a high number of casualties, displaced people, and refugees.

Overall, the report provides a detailed overview of the challenges faced by countries in the Middle East due to sectarianism and its impact on governance and conflict. Its comprehensive analysis provides valuable insight to policymakers, academics, and anyone interested in understanding the complexities of governance and conflict in the region.

In its findings, we conclude, by examining the current state of affairs in Iraq, Prime Minister al-Sudani's "end of sectarianism" policy will take time to have major impacts. We also offer several suggestions to mitigate the challenges faced by countries in the Middle East vis-à-vis sectarianism. These include addressing the root causes of conflict, promoting social cohesion, and strengthening democratic institutions, among many others.

Sectarian Politics in Iraq and Lebanon's Democracies: Complexities of Governance

IRAQ

Abid Zaidi and Amaar Lone

April 2003 marked the removal of Saddam Hussein, President of the Second Ba'athist Republic of Iraq for over 20 years, from power by a global, US-led Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). In the aftermath, the CPA drew up plans for democratic institutions of governance in Iraq, heralded by the 2005 parliamentary election. A subsequent five elections (parliamentary or provincial) in the following seven years, to some, pointed to the introduction of a healthy democracy, but to many others, a fractured, incohesive, and unstable system of governance that was unable to pass significant, structural reform packages without irreconcilable legislative contradictions that could only be resolved through a change in the policymaking makeup.

Iraq is home to three predominant, spatially agglomerated ethnoreligious groups, with Kurds dominating the north, Arab Sunnis to the centre, and the majority Arab Shi'i population to the south. During Ba'athist rule, Saddam actively manufactured inequalities amongst these groups, with the government actively using its patronage powers to privilege Sunni groups in the centre, some of whom were recipients of state dividends, and given charge of key industries, such as oil production, which sustained their socioeconomic welfare in the long run. Kurds and Shia's were subject to significant widespread repression and deprivation of basic socioeconomic liberties, particularly in the aftermath of the First Gulf War, or Iran-Iraq War, where Saddam conspiratorially equated Kurdish and Shi'i groups as collaborators with Iranian forces. It was at this time that political parties that dominated post-Saddam Iraqi sectarian discourse came to the fore, the most major of which was the Shi'i Islamic Call Party (al-Dawa Party). They were exiled to neighbouring Iran.

Whilst Kurds and Shi'as were institutionally disadvantaged by the Ba'athist government, the context before the first election in 2005 was also less-than-favourable for Sunni groups as well, who saw significant shocks to their economic power in the aftermath of the Second Gulf War and Saddam's invasion of Kuwait, with Sunnis in oil-rich provinces such as Kirkuk and Nineveh (Saddam's childhood hometowns) facing acute fluctuations to their financial welfare.

A History of Democracy in Iraq

Post-occupation (2005-2013)

Parties in 2005 relied heavily on mobilising already-politicised ethnoreligious identities, resting near-exclusively in their sects' respective strongholds. These strategies were most likely employed in favour of the more fruitful socioeconomic route (later exploited in the 2010s), as ethnoreligious identities were all that these parties had to rely on. Such groups had been distanced from Iraqi society for so long that they were unable to secure strong socioeconomic constituencies, which had exclusively been monopolised and exploited by the Ba'athists. Namely, *al-Dawa* had been in exile in Iran for almost 20 years; its new partner in the election, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), had been entirely developed in Tehran. Thus, these parties deferred to the transnational religious connections they possessed, facilitated by clerics that enhanced the network between Iraq and Iran. Kurdish groups, such as the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), had been formed prior to Ba'athist rule (1946) but were unable to significantly diversify their constituencies for the best part of fifty years, owing to Saddam's monopolisation of the political sphere. Others, such as the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), had been developed in the same vein as al-Dawa; as an institution of mobilising Kurds against Saddam's rule. Alternatively, organisation around the ethnoreligious was a given, considering prominent levels of religious engagement in Iraqi society, particularly amongst Shia's, whose shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala in the south were nodes for religious activism. Political parties, therefore, took a "path of least resistance," playing into the hands of sectarian politics.

Beyond assessing the entities that populated Iraqi politics, electoral institutions also helped facilitate ethnoreligious cleavage formation. The December 2005 election was contested under proportional representation and a closed-list system, encouraging coalition formation. This further amplified sectarian mobilisation practices at a party-level, with Shi'a (al-Dawa and other Shi'i groups) and Kurdish parties (primarily the KDP, PUK, and others) collating under the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) and Kurdish Alliance (KA) respectively. Sunni coalition formation, already hindered by their limited experience in party mobilisation under Saddam, was hit further by splintering coalitions; dependent on their position on Saddam, the Iraqi Accord Front and National Dialogue Front segmented the Sunni vote.

In the aftermath of the ousting of Saddam Hussein's regime, the Iraqi system of government underwent a significant restructuring and transformation based on power-sharing split across sectarian lines. The system of government, known as the Muhasasa Tai'fia, or the sectarian appointment system, was deliberately designed to empower actors within the Shi'a, Sunni, and Kurdish communities in exile.

The Muhasasa, which hoped to distribute power between the major Iraqi-ethnic groups proportionally, came to be during a series of conferences held in the early 90s', with the first one taking place in the Salah al-Din resort in the Kurdish-controlled region of northern Iraq in October 1992. During these conferences, a number of governing bodies, in addition to the designated positions, were formed. The split of positions on these bodies was formulated

based on estimates of the conference regarding Iraqis who were Kurdish, Shi'a, and Sunni, hence paving the way for the Muhasasa.

In the post-Saddam order, the parties which came to dominate, namely the Kurdistan Democratic Party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, the Iraqi National Council, the Iraqi National Accord, the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, the Dawa Islamic Party and the Iraqi Islamic Party, agreed upon the Muhasasa Taifa to consolidate their power over the country. Under the power-sharing system, the Presidency is reserved for Kurdish candidates, the office of the Prime Minister for a Shi'ite official (of which all but one have indeed been Shi'a, the exception being Mustafa al-Kadhimi), and the Speaker of the House for a Sunni. Furthermore, the Muhasasa system formulates the positions for the offices based on success at the ballot box, which translates into a point-based system that awards government positions to the relevant parties.

The Muhasasa system has proven to be inadequate at dealing with sectarian tensions and corruption within Iraq. This has been most obvious in the Sunni repression following the ouster of Saddam's regime. As a result of the proportional-based power-sharing system, Sunnis have felt disenfranchised and have oftentimes taken up arms under the umbrella of ideologically extremist groups, hoping to re-consolidate power in the country. Moreover, the Muhasasa has led to rampant corruption and nepotism by the Iraqi political elite, with critics of the system claiming that the Iraqi form of consociationalism has plundered the nations solely for the benefit of the Shi'a, Sunni, and Kurdish elites.

The Muahsasa was a deliberate design of the CPA model of government; in which they pursued a programme of "de-Ba'athification," attempting to curtail the re-emergence of Saddam-esque sentiments, through the retrospectively erroneous censure of many legitimate Sunni parties, and introducing systems wherein it became unfeasible for Sunni parties to become dominant players in coalitions, indirectly barring them from several executive positions.

Favouritism towards Shias and Kurds translated into improvements in their socioeconomic welfare. This was exacerbated by the Republic necessitating numerous elections to populate provincial governments in its formative years, allowing ethnoreligious groups to consolidate their co-ethnic parties' strength. Sectarian cleavages were thus on the precipice of freezing and solidifying themselves within Iraqi politics.

It is from this context that the "militant periphery" emerged; that is, constituencies (largely Arab Sunni) that dominated the centre-northern oil-generating provinces of Kirkuk and Nineveh, which were harmed by successive socioeconomic shocks during the latter years of Saddam and post-democracy. Unlike Sunnis in the centre, however, these groups were not agglomerated around developed industrial hubs like Baghdad and Ramadi, meaning they were less insulated from these shocks. With the institutional playing field biassed against them, elements in this constituency contributed the most resources towards the growth of militias, ushering in the second period of post-Saddam Iraq (2013-2017).

Militancy and Civil War (2006-2013, 2013-2017)

Members of this "militant periphery," fuelled by ideology, and credible commitments to militant action, viewed the opportunity costs of engaging in violence to be minimal in comparison to socioeconomic destitution. Militancy in democratic Iraq came in three major stages. In the first, reactionary violence to the US occupation prompted militancy from both Sunni and Shi'i groups, sparked by the 2006 bombing of the Shi'i holy shrine of Hassan al-Askari in Samarra, Iraq, igniting the presence of the Iraqi Al-Qaeda chapter under the leadership of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, and Kata'ib Hezbollah, a once loose grouping of pro-Iranian groups after the initial US invasion. For two years (2006-2008), militancy reinforced sectarian cleavages and produced provincial electoral results that defined this; highly concentrated ethnoreligious results in the centre, north, and south for the Sunnis, Kurds, and Shi'a, respectively.

Such violence continued until 2013, with a defining characteristic of Sunni militant groups consistently attacking Shi'i areas towards the south in an attempt to undermine confidence in Shi'i governance under then-Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and al-Dawa. Certain Sunni militant groups also utilised the disenfranchised population of the "militant periphery" to fuel their ranks; made up of ex-Ba'athist sympathisers who were barred from political life, disaffected youths, and everything in between, cadres of Sunni militant groups began to grow.

The biggest of these, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (Da'esh), successfully merged its cause in Syria to develop a transnational insurgency and defined the third period after its capture of Mosul in the North in 2014. Kurdish groups were largely successful in maintaining the sovereignty of their autonomous zone, repelling Da'esh attacks to below their border. However, the group slowly made gains towards Baghdad, coming so close as to border the Shi'i shrine town of Samarra. It was after this point the government declared a state of Civil War.

A hurried armed response to the insurgency did little to quell the advancement of Da'esh. However, it seemed the best course of response to Sunni sectarian mobilisation was the alternative of the Shi'i kind. Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, head of the religious seminary in Najaf and the foremost religious authority of the Iraqi and Shi'i world, issued an infamous fatwa calling on every able-bodied Iraqi man to take arms and fight the Da'esh northern onslaught. Few individuals, least of all government officials, could have had the same mobilising power as al-Sistani, whose call ultimately led to the development of the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF, al-Hashd ash-Sha'abi), a volunteer paramilitary umbrella organisation largely made up of Shi'i, but also Sunni, Christian, and Yazidi forces that answered the call of al-Sistani. The group was present in almost all offensives against Da'esh, and mobilised at its peak 60,000 volunteers. From 2016, its formalisation as a participant in the fight against Da'esh alongside government and international forces led to the subsequent diminishing of Da'esh-run strongholds, and by 2017, the total eradication of Da'esh territory from the Republic of Iraq.

Simultaneous to the militant front, democratic politics were developing cross-sectarian bridges and bonds that transcended original ethnoreligious identities. The electorate

overwhelmingly responded negatively to sectarian conflict, with a majority of the population, and in particular Arab Sunni Iraqis, displaying disdain for the militant groups that supposedly represented their ideas, disproportionately projecting the socioeconomic grievances of the "militant periphery" on those that maybe were not as vulnerable, or did not subscribe to their methods of action.

In tandem, the increased propensity for insurgencies was significantly correlated with deepening economic recession. Significantly dependent on its export of oil, the CPA had made efforts to modernise the economy by privatising key industries like Iraq's oil production, opening up Iraq's fledgling economy to investment. However, most of the nation's oil reserves were located in the north, amongst the Sunni periphery, thus opening up burgeoning oil reserves for insurgency control. This played in conjunction with exogenous pressures from the global economic crisis. Subsequently, any socioeconomic progress made by Shias and Kurds was seemingly for nought by the beginning of the 2010s. 70% of Iraqis were unsatisfied with job availability, 68% were unsatisfied with health outcomes, and a majority were unhappy with their income levels in the face of rising costs of living. Protests subsequently emerged in some of the south's major urban hubs, such as in Basra, Karbala, and Baghdad during this period. Thus, not only were insurgencies reducing the salience of ethnoreligious mobilisation amongst the electorate, but they were also facilitating the development of a socioeconomic discourse. Unlike previously, however, these inequalities were associated with a strong sense of identity and organisation to engage in durable action.

In response to these preferences, Parliament took stock. In preparation for the 2009 governorate elections, al-Maliki attempted to engage in a process of building a coalition of national unity to stabilise the Republic and unify resources towards the fight against militias. Al-Maliki altered existing ethnoreligious quotas for cabinet posts, with ministers with "no experience of being exiled" (i.e., Sunnis) making up 40% of the cabinet posts in the 2010 election. Al-Maliki was thus attempting to elicit greater Sunni participation within executive politics as a means of improving his own legitimacy. Thus, in identifying the need for security and nation-building, the establishment's desire for sectarian mobilisation was waning.

However, by far the greatest factor driving this trend was the presence of opportunistic politicians, acting both in opposition to the establishment status quo of al-Maliki's regime, whilst engaging in supra-ethnoreligious coalition building to take advantage of individuals that had lost the politicisation of their identities.

The strongest evidence of this was found in the mobilising strategies of Shi'i cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, a staunch anti-US activist who had launched attacks against US checkpoints in the south. His movement, the eponymously named Sadrist Movement, and its anti-US rhetoric were largely side-lined during the al-Dawa-led coalition that took power in 2005, in favour of al-Maliki's pro-cooperation stance. Before 2010, however, al-Sadr had developed a distinct constituency amongst Iraqis against US occupation. There were even inter-Shi'a tensions between Nouri al-Maliki's government, propped up by the US CPA and the Mahdi Army led by al-Sadr. The end of the aforementioned period was marked by al-Zarqawi's death in 2006, as a result of a U.S. airstrike. Breaking off from the al-Dawa-led coalition before the 2010 election, al-Sadr launched the Movement as a contesting party, developing in two stages.

First, he attempted to curry favour amongst exclusively anti-US Shi'i groups, before expanding this to include a wider, cross-sectarian constituency by 2014.

It was this policy segmentation that paved the way for the subsequent, richer socioeconomic discourse. The Sadrist Movement, not only opposing the occupation, later developed a policy of centralisation through which it offered an alternative; concentrating power in the hands of the central government as a means to defeat sectarian militias, rather than rely on outsourced US support. From al-Sadr's rhetoric spawned other reactionary coalitions to his position and occupied other "free" policy areas within the electoral space. The State of Law Alliance (SLA), which al-Maliki developed to succeed in his previous coalition, transitioned into an anti-occupation position, but erred on the side of promoting provincial powers as opposed to centralised government as the best means of defeating sectarian groups. al-Maliki's coalition favoured the distribution of public goods to geographically targeted nations in an attempt to curry favour outside his traditional base, strengthening his regionalist policy base.

The electoral outcomes of this are clear. From the near-perfect sectarian mobilisation of 2005, splinters in the initial coalitions, combined with a growing vote share for anti-sectarian parties, broke away the typical stronghold politics that had defined early democratic Iraq. Akin to the policy positioning of the al-Sadr movement, this came in two stages – first, mobilisation turned to policy issues, but still largely operated under the 2005-era sectarian party constructs. Indeed, there was no change in votes for anti-sectarian parties in 2010. However, when parties received amicable indicators from the public that a policy-based discourse was politically tenable (evidenced by higher vote share for policy-diverse parties, and higher turnout in general), parties moved on the macro front, segmenting and forming cross and anti-sectarian coalitions. This extended into 2014, and further entrenched itself in 2017.

Iran in Iraq: Militias, Shi'ism, and Soleimani

Since the fall of Saddam Hussien's regime following America's invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Islamic Republic of Iran has been the most influential foreign actor in Iraqi affairs. The modern history of Iraqi-Iranian relations can be traced back to the Iranian revolution of 1979, when following the establishment of the Islamic Republic, the Ba'athist regime launched an invasion of the fledgling state, leading to the 8-year-long Iran-Iraq war. The Iran-Iraq war is crucial for understanding the Iranian geopolitical psyche pertaining to Iraq as it has played a significant role in shaping Iran's interests in Iraq.

Iran has three primary interests in Iraq: preventing a hostile government from seizing power in Baghdad, driving out American forces from Iraq (and the region at large), and maintaining a geographic corridor to its allies in Syria and Lebanon.

Firstly, as mentioned previously, the Iraq-Iran war played a significant role in Iranian strategy regarding Iraq; fearing a Saddam-esque Sunni regime in Baghdad, Iran has made Shi'ite control over Iraq a priority in its geopolitical apparatus. Additionally, the Islamic Republic has used Iraq as a centrepoint for its (indirect) operations against U.S. forces in the region, aiming to curb American influence in the Middle East. Finally, Iraq serves as a crucial

strategic base for Iran, linking it to the wider Middle East, and, more importantly, to its allies and militias in Syria and Lebanon.

In its attempts at infiltrating Iraqi affairs, Iran has channelled its efforts through four main avenues: religious, political, military, and economic.

To begin with, within the religious realm, Iran has attempted to propagate the concept of *velayat-e-faqih* (rule of the supreme jurisprudence) within Iraq. At the fundamental level, *velayat-e-faqih* argues that the clergy should rule over the state due to the all-encompassing nature of Islam as a religion. Additionally, the Islamic Republic has attempted to increase its religious reach, to the detriment of influential Shi'ite clerics in Najaf, by propping up minor clerics within Iraq, hoping to wrestle away religious influence from clerical actors such as Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.

Within the political sphere, Iran has acted as the main arbitrator and statemaker within Iraqi politics. Firstly, Iran has relations with and funds a number of significant Shi'a political actors within Iraq. Of its allies, Iran has the closest links to the Fatah Alliance. The Fatah Alliance, formed in 2018, is a coalition of eight pro-Iran groups such as the Badr Organisation, Kata'ib Hezbollah, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and Kata'ib Imam Ali. The Fatah Alliance plays a significant role in Iraqi politics, contributing a large number of seats to the ruling Coordination Framework coalition (the coalition that came to power in 2022; to be discussed below). Furthermore, Iran has close ties to the Dawa party and the State of the Law Alliance led by former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, granting them significant influence over Iraq's political affairs. Additionally, Tehran, through the IRGC Quds Force, has acted as the main guardian of the Iraqi state, with former Quds force leader Qassem Soleimani acting as a political arbitrator and state builder, ensuring Iran's political control over its neighbour through Shi'a dominance in the political and military spheres.

Building on Iran's political influence in the state, Tehran has further entrenched its position in Iraq through funding and arming various Shi'a militias (often subsidiaries of the aforementioned parties), to ensure a pro-Iran military presence within the state. Within Iran's network of proxies, four, in particular, have stood out to international observers: the Badr Organisation, Kata'ib Hezbollah, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and Hezbollah Harakat al-Nujaba. The Quds Force has used these militias as a means of countering anti-Iranian forces such as the US presence and the Islamic State and its affiliates.

Finally, Iran has propagated its influence in and control over Iraq by integrating itself into the Iraqi economy. Having transformed the Iraqi economy into a cash cow, the Arab state has played a significant role in contributing to Iran's non-oil exports, placing Iraq as Iran's second biggest import partner after China. As of 2019, the value of Iran's non-oil exports to Iraq was estimated at $9 billion. Additionally, it is estimated that Iraq owes between $2 billion to $5 billion in debt to Iran. Finally, the economic wing of the IRGC, the Khatam al-Anbiya Construction group, has been awarded contracts to repair numerous shrines in Karbala, Najad, Samarra and Kadhimiya, while the vast majority of infrastructure and economic projects are under the control of IRGC-affiliated companies.

Although Iran still maintains a dominant position in Iraq, Tehran's standing has taken a hit in recent years. The primary factors behind Iran's loss of influence in Iraq are the 2019 Tishreen Uprising, the rise of Muqtada al-Sadr as a nationalist actor, and, most importantly, the death of Quds Force General Qassem Soleimani. To begin, the Tishreen Movement started as anti-government demonstrations calling out the Iraqi government's inaptitude and corruption, while also challenging the role of foreign actors, namely Iran, in Iraqi politics. The Tishreen Movement was exceptionally successful, leading to the resignation of former Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi and leading to schisms within the relationship between the Shi'a political elite, Shi'a militias, and Iran. Compounding the role of the Tishreen Movement, Iran's influence in Iraq has been hampered by the Sadrist movement; whilst al-Sadr used to be an Iranian ally, he has re-emerged on the Iraqi political scene as a populist-nationalistic political opportunist with strong anti-imperial leanings pertaining to the role of the US and Iran in the country. al-Sadr has gained widespread popularity within Iraq, especially within the economically challenged urban Shi'a sectors of Iraqi society. The Sadrist movement has played a key role in weakening Iran's allies within the Iraqi political system, targeting former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in particular.

Finally, the assassination of Qassem Soleimani on January 3rd 2020, had a significantly detrimental impact on Tehran's control over Iraq. Soleimani was essential to Iran's strategy in Iraq, leading the Islamic Republic's clandestine operations in the country, setting up and assisting Shi'ite militias, while building up Iran's network of proxies across the region. Soleimani had a devoted following and personal relationship with militia leaders, politicians, and leaders of the Kurdish and Sunni communities. His expertise and abilities facilitated Iran's control over Iraqi politics, allowing him to undertake a guardian-cum-statebuilder role. Following Soleimani's death, the Quds Force has struggled to suitably replace his presence, opting to form a committee of senior IRGC figures responsible for filling in for the deceased general's role. In its efforts, Iran has appointed General Esmail Qaani, Soleimani's deputy responsible for the Asia-facing Ansar Corps, as the new head of the Quds Force. Although Qaani is believed to have a wealth of experience in clandestine operations, he lacks experience in the Arab world, while also, allegedly lacking the ability to speak Arabic. Soleimani's death has posed a significant hurdle for Iran, as they have struggled to replace and build on his leadership and relations with powerful actors and proxies across the Arab world, particularly, within Iraq.

Current State of Affairs: al-Sudani and the "end of sectarianism"?

Taking the aforementioned into light, one may observe Iraq's current chapter of democratic politics as a marked divergence away from the sectarianism that has dogged its democratic history. October 27th saw the apparent end to a year-long deadlock within the Republic of Iraq, with parliamentarians approving a new government, selecting Abdul Latif Rashid as President, who subsequently named former Minister for Human Rights Mohammad Shia al-Sudani as Prime Minister. Since parliamentary elections in late 2021, the Iraqi legislature had seemingly been unable to form a stable coalition government, owing largely to the newly elected parliamentarians under the control of al-Sadr, who rejected both the prevailing

corruption that has pervaded post-Saddam Iraq, as well as the growing Iranian influence pervading Shi'i political movement. With Sadr failing to form a government, he eventually withdrew from the political process, officially retiring from public politics and calling on all Sadrist movement parliamentarians to resign from the Council of Representatives, the lower chamber of Iraq's legislature.

It is hoped that the election of both a new Prime Minister and President will hopefully bring an end to a year of turbulence for Iraqis, which saw attacks on the offices of various political actors, violence in Baghdad's specially designated "Green Zone", and the aforementioned growth of Iran. Haste appeared to be of the essence for al-Sudani, who only used a third of his constitutionally-allotted one month to form a new cabinet from amongst a broad-church of political parties both within his Coordination Framework (a coalition of Arab Shi'a parties that hold significant affiliation to Iran) and externally amongst Kurdish and Sunni groups, even inviting the Sadrists' participation (although these advances were ultimately spurned).

The past few months of al-Sudani's administration have been marked with explicit attempts to move away from the sectarian politics of the past. Whilst his initial cabinet-building process was marred by intra-sectarian disagreements (for example, al-Sudani not being able to choose his desired Minister for Women's Affairs, Ala Talabani, on account of the rivalry between the leaders of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) Bagel Talabani and Lahur Shaykh Jangi, with the former threatening to pull his other ministers from the coalition if the appointment went through), al-Sudani has displayed a marked movement away from sectarian-based conflicts. Indeed, he has actually leveraged the connections developed during groups' warfare with Da'esh to develop new working relationships between groups, now without the influence (or interference) of al-Sadr's Sadrist Movement. His use of advisers harkens back to the days of al-Maliki, but notably without nepotistic appointment practises; rather, this new appointment process places a higher premium on the effective dispensing of the duties of each ministry, minimising waste and corruption—advisers are drawn from a wide pool of individuals, both within the Coordination Frameworks and beyond.

Despite his initial coalition stemming from exclusively sectarian ties, al-Sudani has successfully managed to achieve the beginnings of a chapter within Iraqi democratic politics that rids the country's dependence on sectarian labels. However, whilst the likes of al-Sadr have paved the way for a relatively clear path for al-Sudani to forge a new Iraqi consensus fighting the country's long worn corruption problems, to do so whilst straddling sectarian cleavages will be his biggest test.

LEBANON

Hassan Kabalan and Yazan Azab

The Background of Sectarianism

Lebanon's history is marked by a complex web of sectarian and geopolitical factors that have influenced the state's development and governance. The Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 between France and Great Britain divided the Middle East into spheres of influence, with France being granted control over Lebanon and Syria. Following the First World War, the French Mandate in Lebanon sought to establish a modern state that would serve as a model for the region. However, the French colonial authorities faced significant challenges in reconciling the various religious communities in Lebanon, each with its own distinct identities and interests. In 1920, the French drew Lebanon's borders and combined several religious communities, 18 officially recognised under the present Lebanese constitution, into a single political entity, including the three largest sects; the Maronite Christians, Sunni and Shi'a Muslims. This sectarian distribution of institutional positions has had a lasting impact on Lebanon's political system. Each religious sect was allotted a proportionate share of parliamentary seats, cabinet positions, and other key positions in the state bureaucracy. The confessional system was formalised in the National Pact of 1943, which was negotiated between Lebanon's political elites to end French colonial rule and establish the country as an independent republic.

While the confessional system allowed for the representation of minority groups, it also entrenched sectarian divisions and created a system of patronage politics and clientelism. Political power in Lebanon is exercised along sectarian lines, with sectarian leaders mobilising their communities to secure electoral victories and protect their interests. This has led to a fragmented political system characterised by deep-seated sectarian divides, frequent government collapses, and weak state institutions. Lebanon has endured political and social accords and compromises throughout its history. A similar pattern has emerged: conflicts, negotiations, and periodic skirmishes erupt and persist for a while, followed by a settlement that produces relative peace for a brief period of time until the assumption upon which the settlement was established crumbles, and chaos reigns once more. External powers and regional conflicts have also played a crucial role in moulding the Lebanese state and securing its survival. As Lebanon suffers perhaps the worst economic crisis in modern history, a basic issue that has long plagued scholars has risen to the top of the national agenda: how did the sectarian system affect Lebanon's economic crisis? Addressing this question necessitates a look into the formation of the Lebanese state, as well as the internal and foreign causes that shaped it. Such an assessment also sheds light on the nature of the regime's settlements and the reasons that contribute to them.

First, the Lebanese system is based on a fragile sectarian balance that, if disturbed, can result in strife and dangerous division, which can quickly escalate to violence. For example, the civil war (1975-1990), which led to over 150,000 deaths and Lebanon's 2006-2008 political

crisis, which had a sectarian nature (Sunni/Shi'a) and culminated in violence in Beirut in May 2008.

Second, various factors influence the balance of power between rival sects. They include a sect's demographic size, financial and military resources, external affiliations, and the political leadership's capacity to organise a united front. These factors influence the balance of power when negotiating a compromise or a settlement, and they also dictate the allocation of political quotas among the groups. For example, a sect's cohesion under a single political leadership grants it the power to block any political or economic initiative. If the sect is divided into numerous leaderships, the endorsement of one of them for government action is sufficient to bestow sectarian and national support for any decision.

Third, as demonstrated by the Ta'if Accord and the Doha Agreement, shifts in balance of power, both regionally and domestically, result in concessions in quota allocation. The Ta'if Agreement, signed in 1989, aimed to end the civil war and address the root causes of sectarian violence in Lebanon. The agreement called for the disarmament of all militias, the decentralisation of power, the adoption of a new electoral law, and the strengthening of the national government. The Lebanese would not have implemented the Ta'if Accord if the regional balance of power had not shifted (this explains the gap between the signing of the agreement in 1989 and its implementation at the end of 1990).

Iraq's invasion of Kuwait spurred powerful countries such as Saudi Arabia, Syria, and the United States to hasten a deal to put an end to the Lebanese Civil War and focus their resources on the Gulf War. The Syrian political and military presence in Lebanon—a direct result of an agreement between Syria and the US in which Syria supported Washington's war on Iraq in exchange for Washington handing over the Lebanese file to Syria—lasted until 2005 and played a critical role in forming the post-war republic. Domestically, there was a change in political influence among the major sectarian groups, as the Ta'if Agreement modified the existing formula for power distribution. Sectarian proportionality persisted, albeit with an increase in the proportion of Muslim to Christian parliamentarians to 50-50 (up from 60-50), while the number of parliamentarians also increased from 99 to 128. However, the most important change to the Constitution related to the powers of the (Maronite) President of the Republic, which were drastically decreased and allocated to the Council of Ministers. Moreover, a new power shift occurred when, in May 2008, Hezbollah militants stormed Beirut and large areas of Mount Lebanon in an effort to control the decision-making of the Lebanese government, exerting pressure on the regional powers to negotiate a deal that obstructed what they regarded to be "Hezbollah's domination of the state." The parties involved in the dispute were brought to the negotiating table in Qatar in an effort to avoid civil war and put an end to the issue as soon as possible. This resulted in the Doha Accord, which gave Hezbollah and its allies growing power within the system. Once again, it was evident that the urgency of a crisis compels the interested parties to find an adequate solution that allows the country to enjoy relative, if fragile, political stability that may continue for a decade or more.

Lebanon’s Political and Sectarian Struggle

Indeed, an inspection of Lebanon’s political and sectarian struggles reveals that, despite the gravity of any conflicts, sectarian tension remains the most significant barrier to reform. Lebanon's political system, paradoxically, codified sectarianism in constitutional documents, ensuring the survival and ascendancy of the sectarian elites despite the prevalence of sectarian conflict. Since Lebanon’s independence in 1943, sectarianism has been institutionalised in the form of various consociational power-sharing agreements, especially the 1943 National Pact and the 1989 Ta'if Accord, in the framework of a centralised but institutionally weak state. A coalition of sectarian/political and economic elite controls state institutions and revenues, legitimising a sectarian institutional structure and strengthening complex clientelist networks that seek to co-opt substantial sections of the population while helping to ensure that the Lebanese are treated as unequal sectarian subjects fragmented in self-managed groups rather than as citizens with inherent rights.

There were already signs of political and economic instability in Lebanon prior to the massive demonstrations that rocked the country in October 2019. The common view that Lebanon’s consociational democracy and laissez-faire economy were distinctive and resilient has led many to be stunned by the economic and financial collapse. For a long time, Lebanon’s political elite emphasised the idea of Lebanese exceptionalism to preserve the status quo, of which they were the primary beneficiaries. However, the truth is that Lebanon's exceptionalism was due to its extreme income and wealth disparities, which were maintained by a corrupt political economy. In fact, it was precisely this kind of exceptionalism that fuelled the protests of 2019. The Lebanese government had discussed launching an austerity program earlier that year in order to deal with a looming financial collapse. A variety of ill-conceived policies would have disproportionately harmed the most vulnerable and impoverished segments of the population: cuts in public sector wages and pensions, increased taxes on imported goods, and reduced funding for NGOs, many of which serve the underprivileged. On October 17, 2019, the government added to the confusion by announcing two new measures: a twenty-cent daily charge on Internet phone calls, including those made through the popular WhatsApp app, and a plan to raise the VAT from 11 to 15% by 2022. This was the breaking point: tens of thousands took to the streets to demand an end to a corrupt political system that restricted economic opportunities while allowing the ruling and business elites to enrich themselves. Nonetheless, the failure of the October 2019 cross-sectarian protests to capitalise on a historic event in which a broad large section of Lebanese rallied in their demand for reforms demonstrated the impact of this strong tradition of sectarian complexity. The organisers of these protests were not aware that the sectarian question was lying in the shadows and that abolishing it would need significant work, coordination, and a coherent vision. After a few days of protests, sectarian speech resurfaced, and protesters began to retreat back into their sectarian cocoons.

The economic crisis exposed the political system’s ineptitude in two ways.

First, the political system has virtually collapsed as a result of sectarian squabbles. On October 31, 2022, Lebanese President Michel Aoun stepped down from the presidential palace, ushering Lebanon into a period of presidential vacuum after the political parties failed

to elect a replacement. As of March 2023, there was still no agreement on his successor among the various political factions, as they also failed to form a government. During this period, Christian voices questioned the legitimacy of Najib Mikati's caretaker government's decisions. In January 2023, for example, caretaker Prime Minister Najib Mikati refuted allegations made by Maronite Patriarch Bechara al-Rai that authorities were attempting to confiscate high government positions long dominated by Christians. The patriarch's claims, according to Mikati, were indeed "strange and unfounded."

Second, disputes between state agencies are another symptom of Lebanon's sectarianism and instability. A case in point is the dispute between judicial authorities over the Beirut port explosion investigation file. Almost three years after the devastating blast that destroyed Beirut's port and shocked the world, Lebanon's judiciary system became the latest inept institution. In January 2023, the judge in charge of the investigation into the explosion, Tarek al-Bitar, unexpectedly returned to his duties. Due to political disagreements among the main political factions, the investigation into the blast that killed 202 people and injured hundreds was put on hold for more than a year. Al-Bitar's first decision was to charge Lebanon's top prosecutor, Tarek Ouaidat, two senior intelligence chiefs, and a number of other officials without specifying the nature of the charges. Ouaidat acted quickly, ordering the release of all suspects detained since August 2020, including a number of senior port employees, prohibiting them from travelling, and placing them at the disposal of the Judicial Council. According to the French Press Agency, Ouaidat filed a lawsuit against al-Bitar and "charged him and barred him from travel "for rebelling against the judiciary and usurping power," implying that al-Bitar should not have resumed the investigation. Following Ouaidat's decision, al-Bitar refused to resign from the case, claiming that Ouaidat's decision to release those detained in connection with the case was a "coup against the law" with little legal significance.

As shown, these two examples are the latest in a string of setbacks for Lebanon since the country's economic collapse in 2019. The presidency has been vacant since former President Michel Aoun's term expired in October 2022. With the dollar recently reaching record highs against the Lebanese Lira, these two incidents are the latest chapter in the country's total collapse.

Sectarianism in Yemen and Syria's Conflicts: The Impacts of Regionalism

YEMEN

Barbara Listek and Jean Franco

The Background of Sectarianism

Throughout Yemen's long history, sectarian tensions have not played as strong a role in the local conflict as one might assume. A country divided, largely between north and south, coast and mountain, religious divisions between the Zaydi Shi'a and the Sunni Shafi'i communities have not featured significantly in Yemen's contemporary conflicts and history. The sectarianisation of the Yemeni civil war has been a recent development, following similar geopolitical changes in the wider region. The Iranian-Saudi proxy war, which intensified following the Saudi-led intervention in 2015, has influenced internal politics, exacerbating previously insignificant tensions. Instead of viewing the conflict as an escalation of sectarian tensions, it is necessary to understand the current political situation as the result of power games that primarily involve local groups such as the Houthis (Ansar Allah), the former Saleh regime and its present-day heirs, UAE-backed southern separatists, and Islamists.

Yemen's key fault lines throughout history have been and remain based on class and region. For example, although there is a large tribal majority in the country, classism still persists. This is particularly the case when it comes to lower social classes such as the akhdam (servant) class. On the other hand, religion has largely been considered a private matter separate from one's political views, and thus sectarianism remained a fringe issue relevant only to the few religious fundamentalists in the country.

With regards to religion, Yemen has always been divided largely between the significant Zaydi Shi'a minority, to be found largely in the northern governorates, and the Sunni majority, to be found in the rest of the country. Zaydi Shi'as make up around 35% of the population, with Sunnis making up 65%. However, the differences between the two groups are minimal, particularly in practice. Throughout Yemen's history, both groups have prayed in the same mosques and celebrated the same festivals and most political groups would, on occasion, have a broad base of support from both sects. Despite this, there are key theological differences that inform the contemporary political struggle and feed into present-day sectarianism. The Zaydis are a Shi'i sect that believes in the divine right to the rule of all descendants of the prophet Muhammad, traced through his daughter Fatima. These descendants are known as *sada* (singular *sayyid*). This is the ideological conviction central to the Houthi political project, and indeed, since the Houthi takeover of Sana'a in 2014, senior political positions have been held entirely by the *sada*. As a result, the Houthis main support base is from the *sada*, although this has not stopped the group from harnessing broad, even

non-Zaydi support (particularly following the regime's brutal response in the 2004-2010 wars).

On the other hand, the Sunni population follows the Shafi'i *maddhab* (school of jurisprudence). Politically, however, the Sunni population has largely been represented by the Islah (reform) party, which has consistently received support from Saudi Arabia and has been historically linked with the Muslim Brotherhood. Once again, however, the political role of Islah was not dictated by religious differences or sectarian tensions, but rather by Ali Abdullah Saleh's complex power games: during the 2011 uprisings, Islah and the Houthis joined forces to fight the regime, only for the Houthis to defect to Saleh in 2012. In general, sectarian sentiment among Sunnis remained a fringe concern important only to the groups such as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, Ansar al-Shari'a and other small Salafi outfits in the country. Yemen's general aversion to Salafism was demonstrated when the Saudi-backed *Dar al-Hadith* Salafi school set up by Muqbil al-Wadi'i in the Zaydi heartland had to be evacuated by the government after increasing Houthi strength in 2014. As the government tried to resettle the school, they found that many regions—not just Zaydi areas—simply refused to host them.

Sectarianism and Foreign Actors

The sectarian divide in Yemen has been exacerbated by the involvement of foreign actors. Primarily, it has been Saudi Arabia and Iran, who have backed the sectarian forces and used sectarian rhetoric to advance their own strategic interests. This has led to an increase in sectarian tensions and violence in Yemen as well as possibly prolonging the conflict.

The war in Yemen is often explained as a proxy war between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shi'a Iran, as both fuel the war from their end. On one other side of the conflict, Saudi Arabia and the Saudi-backed Hadi government see Houthis as an extension of Iranian sectarian and political reach. Therefore, they frame their involvement in the war as an effort to counter Iran and limit its influence in Yemen, using mostly means such as air strikes.

After the Houthi takeover of Sanaa in 2014, Saudi Arabia responded, in addition to the UAE, with a military campaign against the group, aiming to restore the internationally recognised government of President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi. The coalition initially received support from the West, with the US providing weapons, logistics and intelligence support. As reported by Human Rights Watch, "though US law prohibits selling arms to abusive governments, consecutive administrations have authorised at least $36 billion in arms sales to the Saudi and UAE governments [...]. In doing so, the US has chosen to ignore or enable serious international law violations, including possible war crimes committed during the conflict."

The coalition has also imposed a naval blockade on Yemen, which has prevented essential goods such as food and medicine from reaching the country. The blockade has been criticised

by humanitarian organisations for exacerbating the humanitarian crisis in Yemen, which has been described as the worst in the world.

Additionally, the humanitarian crisis in Yemen has disproportionately affected areas that are predominantly Shi'a or Houthi-controlled, fuelling further sectarian tensions.

Despite the differences in their religious beliefs, as Iranians follow Twelver Shi'ism and the Houthis follow Zaydi Shi'ism, the Houthis have long been accused of being Iranian proxies, given their shared adherence to Shi'a Islam. Iran's involvement in Yemen can be seen as part of its broader strategy of expanding its influence in the region and countering Saudi Arabia. Yemen is strategically located near the southern entrance to the Red Sea, through which a significant amount of global trade passes. Control of Yemen would give Iran a foothold in the region and allow it to exert influence over the Bab el-Mandeb strait, a critical choke point for global trade.

According to reports, Iran has supplied the Houthis with weapons such as missiles, drones, and anti-tank missiles, as well as military training. Amongst others, in a report by the UN Security Council panel of experts on Yemen, it has been said that "thousands of rocket launchers, machine guns, sniper rifles and other reasons seized in the Arabian Sea by the US Navy in recent months likely originated from a single port in Iran." The boat, coming from the Iranian port of Jask on the Sea of Oman, has been strongly linked to Yemen, citing data from navigational instruments found on board and the interviews with the boat's Yemeni crew. Despite that evidence, Iran denies providing military support to the Houthis; however, providing diplomatic support. "Iran has not sold, exported, or transferred any arms, ammunition or related equipment in contravention of Security Council resolutions," the Iranian mission commented.

Hezbollah, the Lebanese militant Shi'a group, has also been linked to the conflict in Yemen through its support of the Houthis, as the group's ideology and goals seem to align. Despite initially denying involvement, the group has later acknowledged sending "military advisors" to Yemen, and reports suggested that the group might have played an even more extensive role in training and supporting Houthi fighters. While the extent of Hezbollah's involvement in Yemen is not clear, its support for the Houthis is believed to be a part of its broader effort to counter the influence of their regional rival, Saudi Arabia. Therefore, the ties between Hezbollah and the Houthis are concerning to Gulf countries, who view Hezbollah's support as a direct threat to their security and interests in the region. With that in mind, while the ongoing conflict in Yemen has to a degree been used as a proxy battleground for a wider geopolitical rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Hezbollah's involvement adds another layer of complexity to the conflict.

Yemen Today

While the sectarian divides and Saudi-Iran rivalry are important factors shaping the political struggle in Yemen, depicting it as a mere sectarian binary is simplistic. While the Houthis are a part of the Zaydi sect, which is a branch of Shi'ism, it is not accurate to assume that the Yemen crisis is fuelled by identity struggles. Zaydism differs from the Twelver Shi'ism practised in Iran, and the theological disparity between these two makes Zaydis very distinct—they tend to view themselves as a different sect separate both from Shi'ism and Sunnism—but that actually is more similar to Sunni Islam. On top of that, it is important to note that Sunnis who support Saleh from the Yemeni army are fighting alongside the Houthis. Taking that into consideration, it can be concluded that Iran's ambitions in Yemen are limited.

With that in mind, it can be seen that the role of Iran in Yemen has been significantly exaggerated by Saudi Arabia, with the aim to legitimise its military intervention. An argument used to support that claim can be seen in the Houthi movement being strongly rooted in the Yemeni political context, and therefore Iran's impact is limited. This idea has been affirmed by the UN Panel of Experts on Yemen, which in January 2017 affirmed that "there was no sufficient evidence to confirm any large-scale direct supply of arms from the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran." With that in mind, scholars, such as Thomas Juneau, argue that "The Houthis [...] are not Iranian proxies; Tehran's influence in Yemen is marginal." Instead, the Yemen conflict "is driven first and foremost by local and political factors and is neither an international proxy war nor a sectarian confrontation. It is primarily a domestic conflict driven by local grievances and local competition for power and resources." As Juneau sums up, "the Houthis want in, Saleh wants back in, and members of the Hadi-aligned block want to keep them out."

It has also been observed, that while "sectarianism is alien to Yemeni religious culture," the war contributed to "a growing sectarian polarisation in Yemen, that relies on borrowing sectarian slurs from the conflicts in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon." For example, the Houthis are referred to by their opponents as "Twelver Shi'ites," "The new Hezbollah of the Arabian Peninsula", or an "Iranian puppet," while at the same time calling them "takfiris" and "da'eshites" (extremists). Sectarian discourse has therefore been used in order to mobilise international support and resources, locating the civil war in the regional sectarian meta-narrative. Notably, to secure backing from Gulf countries, who see Iran as the biggest threat in the region, President Hadi has employed anti-Shi'ite rhetoric. The Houthis, on the other hand, have used significant symbols like the name of Hussein. Ultimately, sectarianism in Yemen is not a part of the local culture, but rather has evolved into a strategic narrative used by both local and international actors.

Throughout its history, Yemen has been a country characterised by power struggles, rather than sectarianism. However, following the clash of protests and the Saudi intervention, a new phenomenon emerged in Yemen—the politicisation of religious identities. It has been argued that "sectarianism did not start the war, but it has now taken on a power of its own." While Sunni-Shi'a divides in Yemen do not have strong historical roots, they certainly grew to play a significant role in recent years. Following the most recent outbreak of the conflict after the

2011 Arab Spring, the sectarian discourse in Yemen grew increasingly heated, "reorganising Yemeni society along sectarian lines and rearranging people's relationships to one another on a non-nationalist basis." Indeed, the discourse has moved at times to present the conflict in Yemen as a broader struggle between "Arabs and Persians", each bearing a claim to theological purity and, particularly in the case of the Zaydis, eschatological urgency. This divide has been furthered by Iran and Saudi Arabia's Cold War, with modern identity politics, religious symbolism, and rhetoric playing a significant role in shaping the dispute. This has only served to deepen existing sectarian fault lines and fuel violence between different religious communities. It has also made the war less localised and increasingly internationalised, which renders conflict resolution much more difficult.

With these insights in mind, it is intriguing to see how recent events are unfolding. This month, news has emerged about a deal brokered by China between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which seeks to restore their previously severed relations in 2016. This deal represents a potential step towards peace, particularly as Saudi Arabia has been trying to exit the costly war, in which they suffered from missile strikes and drone attacks from the Houthis. This deal has been immediately seen as a momentous development in the region, with questions arising on its political impact especially from the US and Israel. This may also be of vital importance when it comes to the struggles in Yemen and Syria, as the two sides have strong opposing interests. It has also been noted, particularly on the Yemeni side, that the agreement might only be aimed to serve the narrow interests of their current participants. Still, it has been reported, that while the commitment was not included in the brief joint statement, Iran has reportedly agreed to stop arming the Houthis. This has been seen as an attempt of the Islamic Republic to play a constructive role in the region and a move towards stability. As the deal could signal Iran's willingness to de-escalate tensions with Saudi Arabia, it is hoped to lead to a more durable solution to the conflict.

SYRIA

Emily Lewis and Viddhi Thakker

The Background of Sectarianism

In order to understand the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, it is essential to understand the history of modern Syria, and in particular, the very recent rule of the al-Assad family, which began in the 1970s.

To begin, the French mandate of Greater Syria lasted from 1920 to 1943. The French ruling strategy relied on dividing the region into various provinces to weaken emerging sentiments of Arab nationalism that might challenge French control and thus also weaken their control in other colonies in the Maghreb, notably Algeria. The partitioning of provinces began in 1920 with the creation of Greater Lebanon, followed by Aleppo and Damascus becoming regions, while the Sanjak of Alexandretta (now part of modern-day Türkiye) enjoying significant autonomy. Lastly, the Druze and Alawites were given their own regions with governors overseen by the French, largely to counter the dominance of the majority Sunni population. At the end of the mandate, these regions were merged—not without significant controversies (Alexandretta was ceded to Türkiye). Importantly, the French mandate system weakly disguised traditional European imperialism and fostered a climate of separation and difference in Syria, which presented many challenges when the territory eventually shed French control and became Syria. This new nation-state had little national identity but rather multiple varying ethnic and religious groups.

After independence, sparring groups struggled to achieve political unity and stability with various coups between 1949 and 1954. Briefly, Syria was part of a union with Egypt, but a key change occurred when Ba'athist military officers seized power in 1963. This socialist, left-wing, political movement emerged in Syria in 1947 after decolonisation, and spread to other states, like Iraq, championing the ideology of pan-Arabism. With Alawites making up the majority of the military by 1963, and slowly rising in importance within state dynamics, an Alawite military officer, Hafez al-Assad, gained power in 1971 through a coup. President Hafez al-Assad then began to create a Syrian presidential system within one family, a family that only represented a small Shi'a minority in Syria: the Alawites.

As of 2011, at the start of the Syrian Civil War, only 10% of Syrians were Alawites, with the majority 65% being Sunni Arab, with further minorities of Christians (5%), Druze (3%), Ismaili (1%) and 1% other, such as Yazidis. Moreover, within the majority Sunni Arab population are the Kurds, an ethnic group split over four countries of the modern state boundaries: Syria, Iraq, Türkiye and Iran. Sunni Syrians had been part of the post-French mandate system of removing the Alawite autonomous zone to foster Syrian nationalism, but after President Hafez al-Assad gained power, the control of Alawites (they had held many key positions during the mandate) returned. President Hafez did not declare Islamic jurisprudence as the main source of legislation, leading to tensions rising in the Sunni Syrian population.

During President Hafez al-Assad's rule, oppressive tactics were widely used on Syrians and corruption through loyalty to the regime was encouraged, thus creating an unequal society dominated by rivalry and mistrust. Crucially, when President Hafez al-Assad died in 2000, little had been achieved in Syria for the general Syrian population and sectarian rivalries had been entrenched for the benefit of the al-Assad family and ruling elites. President Hafez al-Assad's regime showed little interest in economic affairs, viewing the state budgets for his own power maximisation and for those loyal to the regime to enrich themselves.

Not only were the Alawite regime elites favoured, but also the city Sunni business elites, such as those in Damascus, leaving a rural, marginalised periphery with abundant, growing grievances towards the greed of the regime. As such, inequalities present were not only between the different ethnic and religious groups mentioned above but also between rural and urban Syrians as well as between socio-economic classes. As Balanche states, "class, urban and rural group issues overlap with religious ethnic and tribal divides."

Initially, there were hopes in the West that President Bashar al-Assad would democratise, modernise, and open Syrian society as he had spent time in London studying optometry and married a British-born Syrian, Asma Akhras. However, Bashar al-Assad's initial reforms only favoured a minority of regime elites, which strengthened domestic discontent and disillusionment with the regime. Further, he began to imitate his father by imprisoning a wide range of people, including human rights lawyers. By the time Bashar al-Assad acceded to the presidency, 80% of the military was composed of Alawites; crucially, the intelligence services and militias were dominated by Alawites. Therefore, whilst sectarian divides have been exacerbated since the start of al-Assad's rule, the conflict that broke out in 2011, as the Arab Spring swept across the Middle East, was not purely based on sectarian divides but also as a result of the deep socio-economic inequalities stemming from sectarianism, in addition to widespread political discontent due to corruption and a lack of social justice for ordinary Syrians.

Sectarianism and the Civil War

After Bashar al-Assad gained power, the country ran on a state of inertia for many years. The country faced a growing economic downfall characterised by widespread unemployment and lack of resources. This was further exacerbated by a drought that hit Syria in 2005, which created precarious conditions for a famine that would place millions in extreme poverty and ravage the political and social conditions within the country. Such economic dissatisfaction, in addition to authoritarian rule by the al-Assad family, created the perfect political climate conducive for an uprising. However, when Bashar al-Assad gained power in the 2000s, he did not focus immensely on reinforcing favouritism among the Alawites. Given the precarious domestic conditions within the country, he tried to widen his sphere of influence by courting support from the Sunni and Kurdish elites within the country.

Primarily, problems arose for al-Assad's regime after the onset of the Arab Spring, which began in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011. This wave of pro-democracy, social justice and dignity

protests across the Maghreb managed to impact the domestic milieu of Syria successfully. Protests against acute economic distress within Syria erupted, pressing for regime change and reforms based on equality. During the initial months of the protests, the narrative somewhat focused on bringing about change for Syria as a whole. This is because, even though the Alawites gained preferential treatment from the government, it was restricted towards the elites, and the local population, too, were impacted by such domestic turmoil. The impact of this widespread unrest, in lieu of uprooting his regime, forced al-Assad to reconsider his support base, opting to garner support across the Alawite community. Bashar reacted to the protests with brutal force. By instigating fear between the Sunnis and the Alawites, he deepened the sectarian divide, which would only exacerbate violence within the country.

Al-Assad's Ba'athist party created a narrative blaming the increasing hostility as a movement designed by the Sunnis against the Alawites, with the former attempting to cleanse the existence of Alawites in the country. In order to further deepen the sectarian divide, the government capitalised on fear by spreading false narratives of the atrocities against Alawites committed by the Sunnis. What erupted as a peaceful protest had transformed into a violent clash among various Syrian communities by 2012. In December 2012, a report by The Times Magazine alleged that the Assad regime paid individuals to pose as anti-government forces and inscribe hateful messages against the Alawites. Simultaneously, the government, through its army, security forces and militia, began to undertake rampant killings of the Sunni population. In May 2012, the Houla massacre killed 108 Sunni Muslims, including around 40 children. The following year, the regime killed about 200 civilians in al-Bayda. This warranted the creation of various pro-government forces, such as the Shihab, undertaking violent attacks on areas within Syria that hosted a majority of Sunnis and other minorities. Such actions undertaken by anti-Sunni forces compelled the Sunnis to view the conflict not as an act of atrocity undertaken by the Assad government, but as a move by the Alawites to persecute the Sunnis in the country. As the conflict ensued, the sectarian split increased; other minority groups, such as the Christians and the Druze, feared persecution in the crossfire. By 2012, about 160,000 individuals had fled for safety.

As a response to such unprecedented violence, the cracks of sectarian animosity deepened. Most pro-government forces within the Syrian army continued to fight in favour of al-Assad, while a majority of the Sunnis and other minorities defected, in opposition to firing on their own people. This led to the creation of many armed opposition groups, notably the Free Officers Battalion (FOB), which later transformed into the Free Syrian Army (FSA), one of the most prominent opposition groups at the time with an approximate strength of about 7,000 to 10,000 armed fighters. Despite defectors facing the punishment of execution, many soldiers began to publicly announce their opposition in retaliation to the government and by end of 2012, about 60,000 soldiers had defected.

The anti-Assad sentiment led to the creation of new armed opposition groups every week, such as the Tawhid Brigade (Liwa al-Tawhid), with a strength of about 10,000 fighters, which operated under the FSA. However, this sectarian split did not take place simply between the Sunnis and the Alawites. While initially anti-government forces were created with a broad notion encompassing other minority groups as well, the divide eventually seeped through the social fabric, creating problems among the Sunnis and other groups such as the Druze and

Christians. Some extremist Sunni elements ostracised the Druze from participating in their forces, kidnapped Druze villagers, and also engaged in full-scale military operations against Jabal al-Druze in 2014. In the northern and eastern parts of the country, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), primarily composed of Kurdish ethnic groups and other Arab identities, overtook various sub-provinces in the country and established a de-facto self-governing identity under the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. The Kurds primarily stress their ethnic and cultural identities, not their Sunni religious identity, after repetitive attempts by the Syrian regime to "Arabise" them and break Kurdish strength.

These conflict dynamics were further complicated by the involvement of outside powers. The anti-government sentiment was fuelled further by the creation of jihadist groups such as the al-Nusra Front (Jabhat al-Nusra), which is largely linked with al-Qaeda and believed to have links to Iraq. Terrorist groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) also gained strongholds within the country and began overthrowing the government in various Syrian provinces. This was opposed by the involvement of pro-government forces with support from countries such as Iran and its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which supplied militias in coordination with the Assad regime to prevent the collapse of the state.

In 2015, this international involvement came to the forefront with the intervention of Russia. By March of the same year, the Assad government had lost its second provincial capital, Idlib, in addition to a loss over some of the most important strategic strongholds in the country, including Aleppo, Raqqa, Deir Ez-Zor and Daraa. The Russian intervention contributed to curbing the advancement of opposition troops, who were largely supported by the Gulf and other Western countries. Within two years, with Russian support, the regime had managed to recapture Aleppo and establish approximately four de-escalation zones, pushing back rebel forces. However, by 2017, more than 465,000 people were killed, about seven million had fled the country fearing persecution and about six million were internally displaced.

A Regional Sunni-Shiite Rivalry

The Syrian civil war, whilst beginning in 2011 as a domestic intra-state conflict, quickly morphed into an internationalised proxy war involving other nation-states. The Syrian conflict became a theatre for many powers to seek their own strategic goals and intentions.

Saudi Arabia did, and still does, not wish to see a fragmented Syria for the instability this would create in the region. Lacking close ties to the Assad regime, Saudi Arabia initially favoured preserving the status quo of the Syrian regime at the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011 due to their own concerns large-scale protests would spill over into Saudi Arabia, in particular from their Shiite minority in the eastern provinces. However, Saudi Arabia openly positioned itself against the Assad regime in the spring of 2011 after calls to the regime by King Abdullah to act less brutally on civilians were not heeded. Moreover, with Saudi pressure, Syria was suspended from the Arab League in November 2011.

Saudi Arabia initially delayed becoming actively involved, seeking potential cooperation with the United States. When Washington withdrew its threat of air strikes in response to the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons in August 2013, Saudi Arabia pressed ahead with supporting the Free Syrian Army and a variety of non-state actors. Frustrated by the Obama administration's lack of action towards the aggression of the Assad regime despite their talk of action if Syria crossed the "red line" of chemical weapons usage, and fear that other regional players, like Iran, would perceive weakness on the side of the insurgency. Along with the Free Syrian Army (FSA), Saudi Arabia has been suspected of supporting the Army of Islam (Jaish al-Islam), which joined with other Islamist groups to form the Islamic Front in 2013.

Strategically, Saudi Arabia was unwilling to wait for the United States' support indefinitely as Riyadh wanted to counter Iranian influence in the war. Saudi Arabia and Iran have had fractious relations with each other, especially since the Iranian Islamic revolution in 1979, but also recently over the civil war in Yemen, where both sides back opposing forces. Crucially, the split in the Syrian conflict between Sunni and Shi'a Islam reflected itself through the regional powers which became involved; Shi'a Iran in support of the Assad regime (Tehran does not wish to see Sunni influence gaining in Syria) and Sunni Saudi Arabia in support of the anti-regime insurgency (largely Sunni actors). Iran has sent weapons and oil to Syria and has been a long-time ally of the Assad regime; in the Iran-Iraq war, Syria allied with the non-Arab Iran, largely due to fractious relations with Iraq. Iran has sent Shi'a militias from Afghanistan, and Pakistan and Iraq have acted on the ground in support of the Assad regime under the control of the Iranian Quds forces, a fact which Bashar al-Assad has never openly acknowledged.

Iran also possesses other strategic goals; they wish to counter Sunni Islamic influence in the region, especially that of Saudi Arabia, which is their main adversary. Saudi Arabia and Iran are thus directly confronting each other through their actions in Syria. However, with Iran and Russia on the side of the Assad regime, Saudi Arabian influence has not been overly successful. In 2021, Saudi Arabia expressed a desire for a change in its approach to Syria, stressing "brotherly ties" with Syria. Yet again, regional tactics are at play in this switch in behaviour, as Saudi Arabia wishes to form new ties with Assad, who, over ten years on, appeared to be entrenched in his position, and thus can be an ally in countering perceived assertive Shi'a influence from Iran. As of 2023, Russia has brokered talks between Syria and Saudi Arabia, with talks of each reopening diplomatic embassies.

Current Situation in Syria and Changing Political Dynamics

This involvement of foreign actors within the conflict has pronounced sectarian elements even today, as a result of the use of extensive anti-Alawi and anti-Sunni rhetoric in their media outlets. Due to these difficulties, the Middle East largely continues to be a "uniquely penetrated system" that acts as an "exceptional magnet for external intervention keeping anti-imperialism alive." As of February 2022, the war has led to a documented death of 238,716 individuals, and about 165,490 of those deaths have been attributed to Syrian

government forces. The country has faced widespread destruction, with about 2.8 million displacements and 14.6 million in need of humanitarian assistance. This figure has inflated post the onset of the COVID-19 crisis in 2020.

However, it is difficult to entirely categorise the war today as one driven by a solely sectarian agenda. While clashes have largely reduced in intensity among the local population from various sects, the atrocities committed by the government against its people continue on a destructive scale. Due to support from foreign actors such as Russia, the Assad government has managed to recapture most of the most important cities in the country, leaving some exceptions that are in control of jihadist and Kurdish forces. As of March 2023, strikes on Iranian-linked bases by the United States and its allies continue.

While such efforts are being undertaken domestically, it is crucial to study these strategies in light of the changing diplomatic dynamic within the Middle East. Syria has been attempting to position itself back into the relevant debate of Middle Eastern politics, most notably through its diplomatic visit to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which is seen by many as a move by the latter to shift Syria away from Iranian influence.

More recently, the unprecedented restoration of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia has been predicted to have a significant impact on the political landscape. Syria has been a crucial proxy war for both counterparts, used excessively to alter the sphere of influence between the countries. Many scholars suggest that such a restoration of ties can contribute positively to the cessation of hostilities within Syria. However, it may be soon to build a proposition upon. At present, Iran continues to exert a significant influence in the country, and with no explicit commitment to non-interference in domestic affairs, Iran's influence continues apace.

At the same time, a rather accommodating and cooperative approach by other Arab countries can be seen as an opportunity for renewed peace in the country. In response to the recent earthquakes in February of this year, a parliamentary delegation from Iraq, Jordan, Palestine, Libya, Egypt, Oman and Lebanon pledged to provide assistance. The most notable change also has been the reinstatement of ties between Syria and Saudi Arabia, which may alter the status quo within the country.

Peace in Syria is long overdue, and it cannot be achieved without cooperation and non-interference by regional and international actors. At present, a new openness by Arab countries and the establishment of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia hint towards a more secure future. However, only time will tell whether such positive peace can be established in the long term.

London Politica