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THE SUMMER OF OUR DISCONTENT

Sects and Citizens in Lebanon and Iraq

Maha Yahya



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Summary

Lebanon's and Iraq's political systems are based on sectarian and ethnic power-sharing. In summer 2015, both countries faced popular protests demanding better governance. These protests began over poor service provision but escalated into opposition to the countries' overarching power-sharing systems. These demonstrations were framed as nonsectarian, civic responses to deteriorating conditions and corrupt leadership. While protestors raised hopes that change was possible, their curtailment by the sectarian leadership underlined the challenges of political transformation in divided societies.

Citizen-Sects in Iraq and Lebanon

- Lebanon and Iraq have similar sect- and ethnic-based power-sharing systems. These structures have created an unhealthy alliance between religion and politics, empowering corrupt sectarian and ethnic leaders who have undermined the rights of all citizens.
- The protest movements in summer 2015, triggered by crises in service provision, morphed into condemnations of the political systems, galvanizing citizens across sectarian, class, and regional lines.
- These movements failed to effect long-lasting change in their countries' governance systems. The initial focus on improving quality of life may have mobilized diverse populations, but could not challenge the patronage politics contributing to the poor provision of services.
- In Iraq, amid mounting security problems, protesters fell back on sectarian communal divisions and were co-opted by the Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. This highlighted the difficulties of breaking out of a sectarian communal framework, particularly during periods of political instability.
- In Lebanon, popular dissatisfaction was curbed by the sectarian discourse and even violence deployed by politicians and state institutions, but some civil society activists pursued their aims from within the political system. This approach could provide lessons for Iraq on transcending ethnosectarian politics.

Prospects for Civic Movements in Sectarian States

- Issues-based activism in both Iraq and Lebanon is often necessary when broader reform of the political system becomes impossible.

- While the 2015 protests in Lebanon and Iraq suggest that issues-based grievances can unite populations in mixed societies, it is much more difficult to transform this momentum into a challenge to ethnosectarian power-sharing systems.
- In Lebanon, the experience of civic activists in 2015 highlighted that there was potential for challenging the status quo. For this to be sustained, however, local activists must establish cross-sectarian relations across the country, or create new political formations that can compete in elections at all levels.
- In Iraq, civic activists would benefit from working to build up coalitions around issues that affect the lives of citizens, including corruption and access to adequate services. However, given the considerable polarization in the country, exacerbated by the ongoing conflict against the so-called Islamic State, the challenges of working across ethnic and sectarian divides remains particularly difficult.

Civil Mobilization in Sectarian States

The ethnic and sectarian power-sharing systems in Lebanon and Iraq are in crisis. In recent years, dissatisfied citizens have organized widespread protests demanding better service provision. Among many protesters, this turned into a broader challenge to the countries' governance and underlying power-sharing arrangements. While, for a time, the protests raised hopes that change was possible, sectarian political leaders' containment of these demonstrations underlined the difficulty of political transformation in divided societies.

Generally speaking, the Lebanese and Iraqi power-sharing systems, which were introduced more than six decades apart, distribute high offices and government positions among various sects and ethnic groups. The aim is to guarantee the representation of the two countries' diverse communities in government, mitigate the prospect of communal conflict, and ensure the equitable sharing of resources among these communities.

Despite such laudable aims, these power-sharing systems have other more perverse consequences. They allow for an unhealthy alliance between religion and politics through social contracts that privilege the rights of communities over those of individual citizens. This means that the relationships of Lebanese and Iraqis with their respective states are mediated by their sectarian and ethnic communities, enabling sectarian or ethnic political elites to hijack communal representation. Most political parties founded by these elites are devoid of social or economic programs, even as they claim to defend their communities' access to public resources. Such actions sustain patronage networks at the state's expense, weakening the capacity of state institutions to deliver services and reinforcing citizens' reliance on such networks. These elites have also ignored both countries' constitutions, approving electoral laws that uphold the status quo and rentier economies that place state institutions and resources at their service.

When the failings of the power-sharing systems in Lebanon and Iraq came to a head in 2015, these shortcomings prompted severe breakdowns in public services, national political paralysis, and heightened corruption. Citizens in both countries took to the streets with a seemingly similar set of demands: an improvement in service provision by the state and an end to the corrupt governance practices of their political leaders. In Lebanon, the You Stink (Tal'at Rihatkum) protests were provoked by a halt in trash collection that buried much of the country in garbage.¹ In Iraq, large demonstrations swept across major cities protesting severe electricity shortages in the grueling summer heat. Lebanese and Iraqi citizens believed both these crises to be a result of patronage

politics and clientelistic networks facilitated by their sectarian governance systems. The protests were largely framed as nonsectarian, civic responses to the deteriorating conditions in these countries.

By some measures, these demonstrations were a success. In Lebanon, they galvanized a wide spectrum of citizens across sectarian, class, and regional lines. In Iraq, they underscored the growing challenges that profoundly sectarian or ethnic leaders faced within their own communities. The widespread appeal of the protests initially put pressure on the Lebanese and Iraqi political establishments to undertake much-needed reforms to improve the quality of life for citizens. However, this was not sustained in either country, as the civic movements were overcome by the challenges of operating in environments in which identity politics continued to play a dominant role.

In the aftermath of the civil protests, activists in both countries went in very different directions. In Lebanon, the entrenchment of the sectarian political elite, discord among different groups within the protest movement, and the external pressures brought on by the conflict in neighboring Syria all limited what was achievable in the near term. However, Lebanon's longer history of civic activism and relatively more open social environment inspired potentially constructive efforts to revitalize the country's political scene and challenge the status quo through programmatic alternatives.

In Iraq, too, a combination of factors contributed to the protest movement's failure. The weak alliance between secular and leftist parties, the protest movement's largely Shia character (given that the demonstrations took place in predominantly Shia cities), the minimal coordination among its leaders, and the inability to connect with similar movements taking place in Kurdish cities all allowed the Iraqi protests to be eventually hijacked by the religious-political leader Muqtada al-Sadr. Urgent national security concerns, particularly the military mobilization against the so-called Islamic State, created additional pressures. As a result, the momentum that the movement had created all but fizzled out.

Official reactions to these movements in Lebanon and Iraq also highlighted the extent to which demands for a civic state could represent a threat to civil peace. Despite the dramatically different socioeconomic and geographical conditions in Lebanon and Iraq, demands for reform risked upsetting status quos in both countries that, officially, preserved peaceful polities and protected pluralism. Sectarian leaders—who benefited most from the systems against which the protests were directed—resorted to co-optation, sectarian and class incitement, and thuggery to derail the protestors. At the same time, the widespread resonance of the movements put politicians on notice that the public would not remain silent in the face of their blatant disregard for the needs of citizens. For protestors, improvements in service delivery were a central aspect of political change. This suggests that what seemed to be politically impossible then, and seems so even today, may become possible through long-term strategies that address grievances affecting people's lives.

Hijacked Representation in Lebanon and Iraq

Lebanon, with a population of approximately 3.8 million people (not counting refugees)², includes eighteen recognized religious sects. Iraq, a country of 36 million people,³ contains three principal religious and ethnic groups—Sunnis, Shia, and Kurds—as well as at least eleven ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities.⁴ While both the Lebanese and Iraqi constitutions guarantee the equality of all citizens, by allocating positions in the state according to sect or ethnic group, they also encourage communities to resort to primordial identities. These identities tend to trump other forms of association, whether ideological or political.

The Lebanese power-sharing system was formally established in 1943, the year Lebanon secured its independence from France, even though many of its features were already in place under the preceding Ottoman Empire and French Mandate. This system was established through an unwritten national pact between the political elite of the time, which allocated senior positions to representatives of specific sectarian communities. The president would be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim, and the speaker of parliament a Shia Muslim. Officially, sectarianism has always been regarded as temporary, as the first government after independence identified the end of political sectarianism as a main goal, though this has never been implemented.⁵ To the contrary, political and sectarian divisions in society deepened over time and proved quite resilient in the face of multiple attempts to transform the system.⁶

This power-sharing arrangement was further reinforced by the 1989 Taif Agreement, an accord aimed at bringing an end to Lebanon's civil war, which had started in 1975. The agreement maintained the old arrangement, albeit with some adjustments, including the equal distribution of parliamentary seats and top-level civil service posts between Christians and Muslims.⁷ While Taif outlined a process for the abolition of political sectarianism, it did not include a road map or timeline for implementation. Critically, the accord allowed Lebanon's sectarian former wartime leaders to become the principal power brokers of the postwar system. This brought a conflict-oriented mindset to the governance of Lebanon after 1990, when the civil war ended, and to state institutions ravaged by the war. The public good was sacrificed in favor of private interests as former warlords established independent fiefdoms within state institutions. An unwritten principle of Taif, later confirmed through a general amnesty law in March 1991, was that no one would be held accountable for most crimes committed during the war.

Two other aspects of the system put in place after Taif played a central role in derailing any prospect of moving toward a civic state. First, even though

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Taif stipulated a two-year deadline for a Syrian military withdrawal from Lebanon, the conditions for doing so were so difficult to implement within this timeframe that it effectively allowed the Syrians to remain in the country, facilitating their postwar tutelage over Lebanon.⁸ And second, postwar governments permitted certain political-military groups, notably Hezbollah, to retain their weapons to fight Israel's occupation of the south of the country.

This situation gave Syria considerable leverage to shape Lebanon's political landscape to its advantage. This it did by relying on the sectarian elites in power, most of whom supported the Syrian presence and benefited from it. And by approving of Hezbollah's retention of its weapons, the state effectively allowed a subnational actor to maintain territorial and military control over parts of the country. This highlighted another aspect of sectarian societies, namely that they often invite influence from outside countries through the sectarian communities over which those outside actors often hold sway, a dynamic facilitated by the political divisions within society. Through Hezbollah, Iran was able to influence Lebanon's internal affairs almost as much as Syria, effectively usurping the prerogatives of the state, especially in matters of war and peace.

The roots of Iraq's sectarian and ethnic power-sharing system are more recent. The institutionalization of sectarianism came after the U.S.-led invasion in 2003 and the removal of Saddam Hussein from power. A series of postwar decisions made by the new Iraqi leadership and the United States were decisive in shaping the country's future. Prominent among these were the dismantling of the army, the disbanding of the Baath Party, and the establishment of a committee to draft a new constitution.⁹ Members of this committee were selected as representatives of their specific sectarian and ethnic communities by the U.S. occupation authorities and their Iraqi supporters.

Despite its progressive endorsement of fundamental rights and freedoms for all ethnic and sectarian communities, Iraq's new constitution did not embody a nationally endorsed vision for a post-Baath polity. In political terms, it was seen as reflecting the interests of those involved in its drafting—particularly Kurdish and Shia representatives who had opposed the Sunni-dominated order of Saddam Hussein. Because the constitution was not the fruit of a social and political consensus, and was devoid of implementation mechanisms, it became another divisive factor in Iraq's already fractured governance system. As one civil society activist would state, “[T]he constitution in Iraq is a matter of perspective.”¹⁰

This approach to the drafting of the country's new constitution underlined that sects and ethnicities had become the new elements around which a post-Saddam Hussein Iraq would be organized. The sectarian power-sharing system put in place went even further than that of Lebanon. Not only were senior government positions allocated according to sect, but each representative had two deputies from other ethnosectarian groups. The president, who had to be a Kurd, had Sunni and Shia deputies; the prime minister, who had to be

Shia, had Sunni and Kurdish deputies; and the speaker of parliament, a Sunni, had Kurdish and Shia deputies. This pattern was repeated throughout government at multiple levels. At the same time, the Kurdistan Region in the north was officially recognized as autonomous, with its own government, including a president and parliament.

As in Lebanon, this system of identity politics opened the door to greater external influence, especially that of Tehran.¹¹ Iran's sway over Iraq's political process grew exponentially as it sought to install a friendly political elite. Both Tehran and the U.S. officials governing Iraq allowed this elite to prevail and take advantage of the system to undermine the decisionmaking process and transform political life and institutions into an extension of politicians' personal fiefdoms. This was especially true under the rule of former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki, following a two-year civil war that devastated the country and carved Baghdad up into sectarian enclaves demarcated by dividing walls. Maliki's exclusionary politics affected central and local governance systems, factionalized government services, and eroded public confidence in state institutions. One example was the distrust among Iraqi Sunnis of key institutions such as the judiciary and the security forces, which were widely regarded as being controlled by Maliki.¹²

What Sectarianism Has Wrought

By reducing politics to questions of religion and identity, Iraq and Lebanon effectively established systems that allow for poor governance, the entrenchment of undemocratic practices, and patronage politics. This thoroughly undermined any notion of these states serving the best interests of their citizens—the basis of a truly civic order.

Because the Lebanese and Iraqi power-sharing systems led to a divvying up of the national pie along sectarian or ethnic lines, nepotism, cronyism, and corruption proliferated. Electoral laws in both countries were designed to guarantee the continued election of the sectarian elite, enabling politicians to hijack representation in their individual communities. This also allowed them to maintain control over state institutions, further reinforcing their hold on power. The sectarianization of political life not only made political action outside sectarian confines exceedingly difficult, if not impossible; it also meant that supremacy within one's own sect was the main way of acquiring national power and influence.

This approach allowed for the consolidation of wide-reaching patronage politics in both countries. Sectarian or ethnic leaders have capitalized on historic grievances and sometimes a deepening sense of marginalization among communities to bolster their power. As major politicians, or their appointees, are viewed as representing a given

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community, there is virtually no accountability. Any reaction against their poor performance can be perceived as being directed against their sectarian or ethnic community. At the same time, the mere suggestion of establishing technocratic governments, with qualified individuals or experts, is repeatedly rejected on the pretext that it would be apolitical and therefore unrepresentative. The implicit assumption of such doubters, and their fear, is that technocrats may be more inclined to implement reforms to improve public-sector performance rather than cater to the sectarian leaders' whims.

In both countries, sectarianism extended into the economic and financial spheres, helping drive immense levels of corruption. Mutually beneficial alliances between politicians and businessmen created environments conducive to crony capitalism. In Iraq, lax oversight measures during the post-2003 period led to unprecedented levels of theft, as billions of dollars were siphoned off by the political elite, government employees, and American companies.¹³ This situation drove a former minister to describe the Iraqi system as "institutionalized kleptocracy."¹⁴ In 2016, Iraq was ranked 166 out of 177 countries in Transparency International's global corruption index.¹⁵ The Lebanese system has also seen extraordinary levels of nepotism and clientelism. Politicians have no shame in calling for the appointment of relatives to public posts and regularly demand services-oriented ministerial portfolios, portraying this as a defense of communal or sectarian rights. In reality, their demands are mainly aimed at allowing them to engage in patronage. Lebanon recently ranked 136 out of 176 in Transparency International's corruption index.¹⁶

Equal-Opportunity Abuse

Though sectarian power-sharing appears to ensure that all communities benefit equally, Lebanon's and Iraq's tendency to resort to subnational identities has not privileged any one community. In the broader picture, everybody has lost. While certain communities have undoubtedly benefited more than others at specific periods of time in both countries, the power-sharing systems are run by coalitions of oligarchs whose influence derives mainly from their ability to use state institutions to distribute favors to their clients, often at a significant cost to a majority of citizens.¹⁷ As a result, many Lebanese and Iraqis face high levels of inequality and poverty, irrespective of sect or ethnicity. Such inequalities have hardened sectarian divides, further strengthening the role of sectarian leaders.

In Lebanon, with the launch of the post-civil war reconstruction process during the 1990s, the principle of equitable development was interpreted, or rather misinterpreted, as a division of spoils between previously warring politicians who each represented separate sectarian constituencies. The prevalence of sectarian interests in government precluded the development of a truly national development strategy. Rather, infrastructural investments and budgetary allocations tended to be guided by sectarian quotas and electoral priorities. In

practical terms, this meant, for example, that the building of a hospital in one part of the country required the building of another hospital in another part, regardless of whether it was actually needed.¹⁸ More critically, the denial of such equitability was often interpreted through a sectarian lens and regarded as an affront to an entire community.

Then again, economic and financial estimates indicate that sectarianism has really been an affront to *all* communities. According to a 2016 World Bank report, patronage politics have cost Lebanon an estimated 9 percent of its gross domestic product annually.¹⁹ This is in part due to the fact that the state rarely punishes corruption when it is associated with sectarian political elites. While public servants and their superiors “directly pocket” around 25 percent of public-sector funds,²⁰ poverty levels remain high, particularly in parts of the north and south.²¹ Similarly, job creation in Lebanon is constrained considerably by the dominance of political connections in the economy; politically connected firms not only play an important role by turning job creation into an instrument of political clientelism but also by limiting job growth among their competitors.²²

Pervasive inequalities in access to basic services, such as healthcare and education, are also evident across Lebanon. Even though such inequalities are often interpreted in sectarian terms, they tend to be more about center-periphery divides. The hypercentralization of development in Beirut and its surrounding areas means that geographical inequalities in infrastructure and services limit individual opportunities, particularly for those living in peripheral areas of the country. For example, only 53.8 percent of houses in the northern region of Akkar are connected to a public water supply—the national average is 85.5 percent. Around 20.9 percent of houses in Akkar have no running water at all. Similarly, only 24.8 percent of houses in the region are connected to a sewage system, while the national average is 60.2 percent, and as high as 98.9 percent in Beirut.²³ At the same time, the Nabatiyeh District in southern Lebanon, which had a 52 percent poverty rate in 2005, only received 1 percent of total public expenditures. This was compared to Mount Lebanon, where the poverty rate was estimated at 20 percent, but which received 25 percent of total expenditures.²⁴

These inequalities have increased the reliance of Lebanese citizens on their sectarian political leaders for access to essential services. This, in turn, has reinforced the clientelist relationship between them, allowing these leaders to use their access to state services as a source of patronage. At all levels of government, the sectarian system allows for the state to be transformed into a source of personal revenue by sectarian leaders who secure political benefits from this dynamic, even as the state loses credibility.²⁵ For example, free schools associated with religious groups receive government funding to provide access to

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impoverished families for preschool education. Unfortunately, families benefitting remain unaware that this funding is provided by the state. Similarly, most political leaders have set up nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to provide social welfare services to core constituents who also do not know that the state is bankrolling some of these activities. Meanwhile, access to regular state-provided services is often mediated by the political parties or their affiliated NGOs.

A similar story unfolded in Iraq following the 2003 U.S.-led invasion, as the country's newly installed political leaders, along with their American counterparts, captured the spoils of postwar reconstruction. The collapse of state authority and security created an environment ripe for exploitation. Desperately needed investment in social and economic infrastructure—including schools, hospitals, clinics, roads, electrical grids, and water and sewage networks—never saw the light. Meanwhile, politically connected firms were awarded most public contracts, reducing opportunities for everyone else.²⁶

Governance and financial constraints aggravated the situation. The overcentralization of decisionmaking processes in Baghdad allowed little opportunity for self-governance. Revenues from the governorates were, and still are, channeled through the capital, where much of the money often stays rather than being reinvested in the governorates.

These constraints, coupled with the central government's veto power over infrastructure projects, resulted in severe underspending on critical services at the governorate level and paved the way for profound human development deficits. Communities across Iraq remain deprived of basic services, including electricity, adequate water supplies, and connections to sewage networks. For example, in 2011, even in oil-rich Basra, over 10 percent of the population was not connected to the sewage system and 99 percent could not access improved water networks.²⁷ In 2011 and 2014, this led several governorates with both Shia and Sunni majorities to request local autonomy in decisionmaking and spending. Such appeals were promptly rejected by the central government in Baghdad.

As in Lebanon, the impact cut across ethnic and sectarian lines irrespective of who was in charge. In 2007, despite the dominance of the Shia elite in government, the highest poverty headcount rates were recorded in mainly Shia Muthanna Governorate (49 percent) and Babil Governorate (41 percent), as well as mixed Salaheddine Governorate (40 percent).²⁸ Deteriorating development indicators in the country also traversed sectarian and ethnic lines as a center-periphery divide affected access to healthcare and education far more than the sectarian divide. For example, in 2011, the highest percentages of children suffering from moderate to severe stunted growth were found in the predominantly Sunni governorate of Anbar, mixed Baghdad and Diyala, and mainly Shia Najaf.²⁹

As in Lebanon, this lack of access was closely intertwined with corruption and the co-optation of state institutions by sectarian political parties and their monopoly over access to services. One example is how al-Sadr's movement used the public resources of the Ministry of Health, which it controlled after 2006, to finance its own private network of healthcare facilities, giving his movement access to government funding to dispense patronage and increase its base of followers.³⁰ In this environment, it is not surprising that the state has become the principal employer in Iraq. Politicians use state institutions to curry favor with sectarian and ethnic electorates. As a consequence, the salaries of civil servants and those employed in state-owned enterprises account for close to 70 percent of the Iraqi budget.³¹

The shortcomings of the sectarian power-sharing systems in Lebanon and Iraq are increasingly apparent, even among those who have benefited from them. Though initially designed to give all communities a role in national decisionmaking, these systems have become mechanisms that allow sectarian political elites to plunder the state without fear of accountability. The imbalance in the distribution of wealth and services, like the fact that sectarian politics have increased corruption while affecting all communities adversely, has generated underlying dissatisfaction among many Lebanese and Iraqis. In summer 2015, this dissatisfaction reached a boiling point. And while the results were mixed, they reflected the demonstrators' profound discontent with the prevailing political orders in their respective countries.

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A Long Hot Summer in Iraq and Lebanon

By summer 2015, Lebanese and Iraqi citizens were fed up with the deteriorating quality of their lives. On July 16, sounds of dissatisfaction were heard in Basra, Iraq's principal southern city, when thousands took to the streets to protest electricity shortages in the midst of the grueling summer heat. Basra is home to some 2.6 million people, and the governorate of which it is the capital is potentially very wealthy, as it contains some of Iraq's largest oil fields.³² Power cuts throughout Iraq had long been a source of grievance among the population, provoking considerable anger.³³

The protests, which began in poorer neighborhoods, escalated after the death of a demonstrator. Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi quickly announced the establishment of a commission to investigate what had happened. However, within days, the demonstrations had spread across Iraq, with citizens calling for the resignation of both the minister of electricity and the governor of Basra, as well as an end to rampant corruption that was impacting all aspects of their lives, not least delays in the payment of civil service salaries. Some of these protests, such as the one that took place in the governorate of Dhi Qar in southern

Iraq, were billed by the press as being among the largest the country had ever seen.³⁴ By August 7, the protestors had increased their demands from asking for basic services to calling for a reformed government, the abolition of the sectarian and ethnic quota system in the judicial body, the separation of religion from politics, and a revision of the sectarian power-sharing arrangement in the country. Protestors denounced parliamentarians and politicians, chanting, “In the name of religion, they, the thieves, have robbed us.”³⁵

That same month, similar protests erupted in the Lebanese capital of Beirut over an escalating garbage crisis. Protesters mobilized under the You Stink banner, which was a reference to Lebanon’s politicians.³⁶ For weeks, garbage slowly accumulated across the country, overwhelming the Lebanese with its stench in the summer heat and exposing them to mounting health hazards.

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The crisis had erupted by mid-July when the Ministry of Environment closed Na’meh Landfill, south of Beirut, without having first identified a replacement site, leading to the suspension of garbage collection in Beirut and

Mount Lebanon. This was taking place as the contract with Sukleen, the company in charge of garbage collection in those areas, was nearing its end and was about to be renewed. The stalemate that ensued as a result of this interelite dispute, along with the failure of the Ministry of Environment to identify an ecofriendly solution, sparked a nationwide crisis and discussion of the links between the mismanagement of vital services and Lebanon’s crippling corruption. Protests cascaded across the country, culminating in a mass demonstration on August 29 in Beirut’s city center that attracted people from across sectarian, regional, and social lines.

At the heart of both series of protests in Iraq and Lebanon were crises of citizenship. These crises were triggered in part by the nature of the power-sharing systems in both countries. Citizens were angry at the way their rights as individuals had been undermined in favor of a system that largely dealt with them as members of religious communities and ensured that their relationship to their state was mediated by those communities. They were effectively represented by sectarian leaders who, through abuse of the power-sharing system over which they presided, had contributed to making their lot much worse.

Among those who took to the streets in the summer of 2015, most were galvanized by a desire to change the status quo rather than to promote a specific political program. For both Iraqis and Lebanese, the principal desire was to hold their political leaders accountable for the disastrous quality of their daily lives. Their actions challenged not only the authority of the state but also the legitimacy of the political parties seen as occupying and controlling this state. And while many called for an end to the sectarian power-sharing system, they offered no tangible plan for how to accomplish this goal. Only in Lebanon did new movements subsequently emerge to redirect momentum from the street to the political arena, while remaining focused on questions of service delivery.

A House of Many Mansions: Civic Mobilization in Lebanon

The protests of 2015 did not emerge from a vacuum, particularly in Lebanon. Civic activism has long been a central feature of Lebanese society. The country has a well-developed network of civil society organizations, labor unions, professional syndicates, and political parties, with many of them advocating for a citizenship-based governance model.³⁷ One prominent historical example is the Lebanese trade union movement, which in 1958 formed the General Confederation of Lebanese Workers. One of its principal demands was the abolition, or the deconfessionalization, of the sectarian system.

The role and function of civil society organizations in demanding political and socioeconomic change has expanded or contracted according to the changing circumstances in which Lebanon has found itself in the years since independence. During the 1975–1990 civil war, flourishing pre-war civil society groups remained active, but they became much more constrained in terms of the topical and geographic scope of their activities as a result of the conflict. While many focused on humanitarian action, some civic (and cross-sectarian) initiatives emerged such as the Committee of the Relatives of the Kidnapped and the Disappeared, which was established in 1982 to obtain information about loved ones who had disappeared during the conflict.

The rich experiences of Lebanese civil society organizations carried over into the immediate postwar period. In the 1990s, these organizations played a crucial role in pushing for municipal and parliamentary elections and for political reform. Among the more prominent examples was the establishment in 1996 of the Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections (LADE), an election watchdog, despite the initial opposition of the interior minister. Since then, LADE has observed elections at all levels of the government. Another prominent initiative, which took place in 1998, was the “Baladi, Baldati, Baladiyati” (My Country, My Town, My Municipality) campaign that protested the delay in municipal and mayoral elections.³⁸ The campaign circulated a petition along these lines, contributing to a general mood that made it more difficult to again postpone the electoral deadline. The importance of civil organizations was also highlighted in the way the political leadership after 1990 sought to co-opt certain organizations, most prominently labor unions, in order to neutralize any prospective civic opposition to their authority.

A paradox in Lebanon’s geographical makeup has helped allow the Lebanese to mobilize across sectarian lines in favor of civic agendas. The confluence between geography and identity has made it easier for sectarian leaders to make their respective communities more dependent on them. Specific regions in Lebanon can be identified with given sects, and this allows those sects’ political leaders and their parties to better control such areas where a given sect is highly concentrated. However, all Lebanese regions are also mixed, so that different communities regularly interact, facilitating the emergence of cross-sectarian civil movements. So if it’s true that the sectarian system has affected

all communities in a negative way, it is equally true that a foundation exists for Lebanon's citizens to collaborate across sectarian and ethnic groupings in the pursuit of a civil agenda.

Following the assassination of former prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri in February 2005 and, again, after the Arab uprisings in 2011, civic activism gained a new lease on life, appealing to a larger range of actors seeking change. The widespread belief that Syria was behind Hariri's assassination triggered weeks of demonstrations aimed at ending Syria's twenty-nine-year military presence in Lebanon. These cross-sectarian protests electrified a broad spectrum of the population. There were those who interpreted the demonstrations as the formation of a new political community against a common enemy that had kept them divided. To some, it heralded a moment of genuine possibility for political change.

In the two months after the assassination, activists launched numerous initiatives seeking to move beyond the sectarian power-sharing system toward a civil state. By April 2014, there were 8,311 civil society organizations registered with the Ministry of Social Affairs—around 28 percent of them registered between 2005 and 2010.³⁹ Moreover, scores of social initiatives were started but were never officially registered as civil society organizations. Examples of such organizations and initiatives include Nahwa al-Muwatiniyya (Towards Citizenship), the Beirut Spring, Sha'n (Youth for Electoral Reform), and Faiha' Youth Parliament. All espoused a secular civic agenda.⁴⁰ Yet though these were cross-sectarian initiatives, they did not lead to meaningful political change.

In part, this failure stemmed from the political instability that followed the withdrawal of Syrian troops from the country, as well as the frequently violent political polarization that engulfed the country for several years afterward. This polarization, which emerged in the aftermath of the Hariri assassination, led to a split in Lebanon between two broad political alignments, known respectively as March 8 and March 14.⁴¹ Political gridlock set in as the successive assassinations of March 14 figures, car bombs, the 2006 war with Israel, and an armed conflict in Beirut and the surrounding mountains in March 2008 upended the momentum for change. The gradual collapse of the political alignments, particularly after 2011, created spaces for civil society to thrive and operate more easily across the sectarian divide.

The Arab uprisings in 2011, like the Hariri assassination earlier, engendered a general atmosphere of agitation in Lebanon, triggering demonstrations and sit-ins in Beirut intended to bring down the sectarian regime.⁴² However, as political divisions between the movement's leadership surfaced, the 2011 Lebanese protests, while attracting sizable support, failed to gain traction or offer an agenda for meaningful change. In time, they faded, but not without sparking new campaigns across the country.⁴³ Only labor protests continued, prompted by worsening economic conditions, and these were focused on specific demands related to the salaries of civil servants, particularly in the

education sector.⁴⁴ The escalation of political tensions in the country as a result of the Syrian conflict did not help, as predominantly Sunni and Shia political parties supported belligerents on either side of the conflict, and protestors were divided over whether to support the uprising or not.

It was in this context that the You Stink movement took form in summer 2015, giving a new impetus to political and civic activism in the country. Activists who had been part of the 2011 demonstrations, as well as a younger group of activists, sought to distinguish their movement from past protests both in form and content. The initially small demonstrations only reached a tipping point when a video of police brutality went viral on August 19, generating empathy for the demonstrators among large numbers of Lebanese.⁴⁵ On August 29, the largest rally was held, as multiple groups joined the protests over garbage, demanding that the authorities also address a range of other contentious issues, including rent control, healthcare, and electricity provision. By then the movement had grown to include a broad range of actors of varying ideological and political leanings.⁴⁶ Notably, the prominent role of women at the forefront of the protests served as a reminder that the sectarian system was also highly patriarchal, relegating women to secondary roles in the state and society. So while some protesters chanted “The people want to bring down the regime,” other groups had completely different priorities, indicating the absence of a unified political objective.⁴⁷

The broad reach of the protest movement was in part the cause of its demise. Disagreement over whether the aim of the protests was to change the Lebanese political system or merely to address the national trash crisis resulted in the adoption of confused and sometimes contradictory tactics. There was no agreement for instance, over whether to engage with the government, or whether to include Hezbollah among the parties that the protesters were accusing of corruption. Nor did there seem to be any consensus over the occupation of the Ministry of Environment offices by a group operating under the You Stink banner.⁴⁸ As one of the organizers remarked, “We simply were not ready and did not expect the campaign to have such overwhelming popular support. Even though we tried, we were unable to effectively coordinate between the different groups that jumped on the bandwagon of the movement.”⁴⁹

Several things were instrumental in the movement’s slow dissipation. These included the relative youth and inexperience of the movement’s leaders, several of whom were veterans of the 2011 protests; the unexpected size of the crowds; and protest leaders’ inability to reconcile their rejection of hierarchical structures with the need to establish a unified decisionmaking process and produce a coherent and implementable list of demands. These factors also opened the door for the co-optation of the movement by a broad range of actors, including established political parties—such as the Communist Party—and political

On August 29, the largest [Lebanese] rally was held, as multiple groups joined the protests over garbage, demanding that the authorities also address a range of other contentious issues.

figures. It also allowed for sectarian and class narratives to overtake the discussion of the garbage crisis. Remote and impoverished areas, such as Akkar, protested plans to build a garbage dump in their areas calling instead for desperately needed development programs that have long been promised, which—unlike the garbage—the state has never delivered. In one of the debate’s more memorable moments, the Druze leader Walid Jumblatt suggested in a tweet that an independent garbage dump be established for each religious sect in Lebanon—a sarcastic response to a newspaper that had accused him of being responsible for the garbage accumulating in Muslim areas.⁵⁰

Added to this was the reaction of the political leaders, who were also taken by surprise at the considerable resonance of the movement. Their response was to resort to sectarian tactics, or plain violence. Police abuse and the use of live ammunition against unarmed protestors led to the injury of close to 400 individuals in one night.⁵¹ Several weeks into the protests, hooligans—likely directed by certain political figures—infiltrated the demonstrations, provoking fights with security forces in an attempt to discredit the protesters.⁵² At the same time, most political parties verbally smeared the protesters and accused them of serving as pawns in a larger game.⁵³ Meanwhile, calls for the resignation of the environment minister as well as the interior minister were perceived as attacks against the Sunni community, to whom both men belonged. The public calls for these officials’ resignations were also seen as targeting the Future Movement of Saad al-Hariri (who would begin a second stint as prime minister in December 2016); the owner of Sukleen, the company charged with garbage collection, was affiliated with Hariri. As a consequence of these challenges, the government regained the upper hand, while efforts to find a solution to the trash crisis are still far from complete.

The Beirut Madinati Experience

The You Stink campaign took an interesting turn, one that said a great deal about the flexibility of Lebanese civil society and indicated ways in which dissent movements can seek constructive engagement with the political system. The campaign’s calls for change, particularly with respect to public services, were echoed in the May 2016 municipal elections.

In Beirut, the electorate was presented with an alternate choice to the candidate list backed by the political elite. Spurred by the activism of the previous year, a multisectarian group of professionals and civic activists challenged this elite list by forming a list of their own named Beirut Madinati (Beirut My City). It campaigned to change the way things were run in the capital,⁵⁴ opposing the Laehat al-Bayareta (List of the Beirutis), formed by Beirut’s major political forces and backed by former prime minister (at the time) and head of the Future Movement, Saad al-Hariri.

Beirut Madinati concentrated on practical issues, namely how to improve local conditions in the capital. While it did not call into question Lebanon's political order, or its sectarian leadership, Beirut Madinati's appeal stemmed from public discontent with the political class and a general anti-establishment mood. Its principal denunciation focused on the way Beirut was being administered through a corrupt patronage system that privileged private gain over the public good. Beirut is fast losing its architectural and cultural heritage to private development, while its public transport system is based on an inefficient and environmentally unfriendly bus network.

Beirut Madinati's candidates came from different backgrounds, such as the arts, media, business, and engineering, and their ranks included several established architects and urban planners with a history of engagement on public issues.⁵⁵ Its thirty-two-page program addressed Beirut's deficiencies and proposed improving public transportation, increasing green spaces, providing affordable housing, preserving cultural heritage, contributing to the city's socioeconomic development, and expanding recycling initiatives.⁵⁶ Most importantly, Beirut Madinati promised to improve governance in the capital.

The appeal of Beirut Madinati energized individuals across generational, sectarian, regional, and class divides. For the first time, the leading political forces contended with an organized campaign carrying a message that was appealing to their own constituents. Established social leaders and media personalities endorsed the list in the run-up to the election, and crowd funding increased the flow of campaign financing.⁵⁷ Beirut Madinati's allure was strong among the capital's professionals, students, and those active on social media, as well as among wealthy expatriates who saw in the initiative an opportunity to invest in a movement for change in the country.⁵⁸

To many, Beirut Madinati also represented a return to the essentials of politics. Lebanon's political scene had largely been devoid of meaningful political action in the decade prior to the municipal elections. Political polarization in the country had paralyzed governmental and parliamentary decisionmaking, undermining service delivery. This dynamic was exacerbated by an escalating political crisis. After May 2014, the country was without a president (a void that was only filled in October 2016), while parliament, originally elected in 2009, twice extended its own term.⁵⁹ This crisis was further aggravated by the conflict in Syria, which drove over 1 million Syrians to seek refuge in Lebanon.⁶⁰

In this tense, dysfunctional political atmosphere, the nonideological, issues-based program of Beirut Madinati provided a refreshing alternative to perpetual political crises. It also gave impetus to a public discussion of the role of state institutions in addressing the needs of citizens and galvanized a call for elections based on political platforms. The candidates adopted innovative mechanisms for engaging with Beirut's electorate—including organizing

Beirut Madinati concentrated on practical issues, namely how to improve local conditions in the capital.

neighborhood debates over their program, which enabled direct interaction with citizens—as well as advancing local developmental priorities that should be considered by the municipality.

As in the You Stink movement, widespread distrust of existing political parties was also a fault line both within Beirut Madinati and among its supporters. The list's candidates opted to remain equidistant from all political forces, but also decided to meet with and listen to other political actors if invited. However, this created some confusion among those of their supporters who felt Beirut Madinati should refuse entirely to engage with the political establishment. This was perhaps most apparent in the run-up to the elections when

news that the candidates had met Walid Jumblatt spurred a debate as to whether this represented a sellout of Beirut Madinati's values.⁶¹

While Beirut Madinati did not win the election, it received around 30 percent of the vote, a remarkable number when considering the powerful backers of Laehat al-Bayareta, which won 40 percent. These electoral results offered a glimpse into the mindset of Beirut's electorate

The public's apparent displeasure with the sectarian leadership does not necessarily translate into support for overhauling Lebanon's sectarian power-sharing system.

and the extent of public discontent with the political leadership. As in the preceding elections of 2012, only around 21 percent of Beirut's electorate voted, a sign of the public's general apathy. Although Saad al-Hariri (who would become prime minister again a few months later) had backed the Laehat al-Bayareta list, only some 50 percent of his base among Beirut's Sunnis, a majority in the capital, voted for it. Most Christians chose Beirut Madinati, pointing to a startling loss of confidence in political parties among this electorate. In essence, the vote for Beirut Madinati was more of a no-confidence vote in the political establishment. Laehat al-Bayareta won, but its victory appeared to be a Pyrrhic one.

More significantly, Beirut Madinati showed that it was possible to mount a challenge to Lebanon's sectarian leaders by adroitly exploiting the spaces the sectarian system had left open and focusing on what the public considered important. This approach was replicated to an extent in other places across the country, including Tripoli, Baalbek, and even the Hezbollah-controlled southern suburbs of Beirut. Independent lists stood against ones backed by the sectarian politicians and parties, and the results, again, showed that the elite's lock on the political system was not absolute.

However, one has to avoid taking such thinking too far. The public's apparent displeasure with the sectarian leadership does not necessarily translate into support for overhauling Lebanon's sectarian power-sharing system. Beyond the mutual dependencies that have been created between individuals and their sectarian communities, the fragility of the Lebanese political arena and the existential crises it has spurred among different communities—along with a deepening sectarian discourse in Lebanon and the region—are not conducive

to change. On top of this, the tense regional environment and outside interference in the country, which have divided society, have only made a consensus over the path Lebanon must follow away from sectarianism even more difficult.

Iraq's Youth Against the Green Zone

Civic activism in Iraq took a different turn than in Lebanon and was molded by the specific socioeconomic and political context of Iraqi society and institutions. This includes a history of truncated activism under the authoritarian former Baath regime, two Gulf wars, and a decade of sanctions—all of which took their toll on state and society. After the 2003 invasion, civic activism faced new trials, including a political environment characterized by vicious civil conflicts that took on a sectarian hue, the exclusionary mode of governance that former prime minister Maliki adopted, and the more recent militarism and violence that the so-called Islamic State and sectarian militias have directed against ethnic and sectarian communities.

Historically, the growth and development of civic activism and civil society organizations in Iraq was severely curtailed between 1958 and 2003 by three military regimes, especially the Baath-led regime that took power in 1968. The Baath undermined various forms of civic associations, including labor unions and professional associations, by co-opting or closing them. This forced Iraqis to turn to primary forms of solidarity, such as family, tribal, or even religious associations. In this context, mass mobilization in Iraq under the regime of Saddam Hussein, who effectively controlled the country as of 1976, could only be organized through political parties sanctioned by the state.

Moreover, unlike in Lebanon, the foundations for cross-sectarian Iraqi civil movements after the war were restricted by politics and geography. Because of the country's large size, political polarization and sectarian conflict after 2003, Iraqis have been mainly socialized within their own sectarian communities, with minimal access to other groups. As a result, civic-based protest movements had greater difficulty acquiring a broad multisectarian base without forming partnerships with like-minded groups across the country. In time, and despite their civic character and demands, most of the protest movements effectively came to operate within the confines of specific sects and ethnicities. In light of this, the protests of 2015 took place largely inside the Shia community, while earlier antigovernment protests that had taken place in 2013 in Sunni areas were perceived, for the most part, as demonstrations against the Shia, who were dominant in Baghdad. Meanwhile, simultaneous protests in Kurdish areas were viewed as a challenge to the Kurdish Regional Government.

Following the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, a general mood of freedom prevailed in the country. As a longtime Iraqi activist and member of the Communist Party would remark, "Following the toppling of Saddam, Iraqis took to the streets daily to protest anything and everything. It was as if they

needed to express [their] freedom in any way possible.”⁶² At the same time, Iraqi civil society flourished, supported in large part by the increasing amounts of development aid flowing into the country. Because of inadequate oversight, many of these organizations existed mainly on paper. The Non-Governmental Organizations Directorate in Baghdad reported in 2016 that 2,844 NGOs were registered, with a similar number in the Kurdistan Region.⁶³ However, estimates of unregistered NGOs range between 6,000 and 10,000, and it is not known how many are actually operating.⁶⁴ As in Lebanon, many Iraqi NGOs are affiliated with sectarian political parties that use them to distribute favors to their constituents.

Following the dramatic contestations in Tunisia and Egypt in 2010–2011, the impetus of Iraqis to voice their displeasure also rose. On February 25, 2011, anger spilled onto the streets in what was billed as Iraq’s “Day of Rage.”⁶⁵ From Basra in the south to the northern cities of Kurdistan—including the regional capital, Erbil—Iraqi poets, writers, journalists, and ordinary citizens from all ethnic and sectarian backgrounds gathered to demonstrate against corruption, high unemployment, and poor services, as well as to demand greater political and civil rights.⁶⁶ The protestors denounced both the central government in Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government. They drove the governor of predominantly Shia Basra and the city council of mainly Sunni Fallujah to resign. These protests, while they were focused on the inadequacy of service delivery, highlighted the potential for a cross-sectarian civil movement rallying around the same demands.

As prime minister at the time, Maliki initially promised to act on behalf of the protesters, announcing that electricity would be subsidized and giving his government a one-hundred-day ultimatum to respond to demands.⁶⁷ However, the subsequent clampdown by the Iraqi and Kurdish government, which included closing media outlets and repressing further demonstrations, ended the protests.⁶⁸ The Baghdad government’s tactics included spreading rumors of potential terrorist attacks as well as attacking and detaining protestors,⁶⁹ particularly in Sunni areas where people feared being labeled as supporters of Saddam Hussein or terrorists if they participated in protests.⁷⁰ The Kurdish government employed similar forms of repressing protestors.⁷¹

Protests after 2011 mostly took on a sectarian hue despite their initial civic demands. For example, in 2012, protests in predominantly Sunni Anbar Province were initially focused on securing the release of female detainees and other prisoners and on ending the marginalization of Sunnis. This social movement—known as *Hirak al-Anbar*, or the social movement of Anbar Province—directly linked the sectarian system to political marginalization of Sunnis and to judicial corruption facilitating their persecution as a community. Within weeks, the movement had spread across six Sunni provinces, beginning in Fallujah and then on to Diyala, Kirkuk, Mosul, Ramadi, and Salaheddine. These demonstrations were met with initial support by nationwide civil society

groups who issued a statement imploring the government to engage with the protestors' demands.⁷²

Instead, the state clamped down, imprisoning protesters and leaving many others dead. This augmented the Sunnis' sense of frustration and marginalization, particularly among youths, heightening sectarian divisions. According to one journalist involved in the movement, the confrontation became less about inadequate service delivery and rampant inequity and more about Sunni discontent in the provinces with a Shia-dominated political system in Baghdad.⁷³ In effect, the brutal government crackdown, which took on sectarian overtones, not only torpedoed the protest movement's more rights-based civic aspects but also drove citizen frustration to an extreme, setting the stage for the June 2014 emergence of the Islamic State. For many individuals, groups, and tribes, sympathy for these extremists became a vehicle to express their displeasure with a process that had excluded them and stripped them of a key component of Sunni national pride as the community that had founded the modern Iraqi state. Polls before the Islamic State took over Mosul showed that only 30 percent of the city's residents had faith in the government of Iraq, down from 52 percent in 2013.⁷⁴

The mass demonstrations that followed in summer 2015 were triggered by a sense of *haif*, or injustice.⁷⁵ This was particularly true in oil-rich Basra Governorate, which continued to suffer from considerable infrastructural and other deficiencies. While similar protests focusing on electricity shortages had been taking place in Basra since 2009, the 2015 demonstrations took on a life of their own and were difficult for the authorities to contain. They expanded into Baghdad and across predominantly Shia cities in Iraq, such as Najaf, the seat of the Shia religious establishment, and the holy city of Karbala. The protesters went beyond demanding more electricity to covering other exigencies, including better water quality and efficient garbage collection.

According to one of the organizers, the protests were not just about the mediocrity of service delivery and the corruption at the heart of Iraqi institutions, conditions enabled by the country's sectarian power-sharing system. They were fundamentally about the character of the state and whether it should be based on religious or civic affiliation.⁷⁶ Within days, protestors were also demanding reform of the prevailing sectarian power-sharing system. In the eyes of many protestors, these demonstrations were a continuation of the 2011 protests crushed by Maliki's government in Baghdad and the Kurdish authorities in Erbil.

However, the civic aspect of these protest movements was complicated by sociopolitical conditions particular to Iraq. The reverence with which Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani—the highest Shia religious authority in the country and the source of emulation for Shias worldwide—is held in effect compelled

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protesters to engage with the religious leadership. To ensure widespread support for their movement and to bolster their call for reforming state institutions and the power-sharing system, protest leaders reached out to Sistani. In meetings with his representatives, these leaders were encouraged to demand reform of the system rather than radical change such as the secession of southern governorates from Baghdad, a demand that had resurfaced periodically in Basra.

According to one of the leaders of the Najaf protests, Sistani's office refused to openly support the protesters so as not to hijack the movement and give it a religious, as opposed to a civic, shade.⁷⁷ A religious figure close to the cleric argued that the ayatollah's encouragement of the protests stemmed from a desire to see "a state that respects religion, rather than a religious state."⁷⁸ He added that Sistani hoped that the protestors would consider how to shift Iraq from being a sectarian state to one focused on citizens. Protest leaders critical of sectarian politics, whose main slogan was "in the name of religion, the thieves are staying," felt reassured by the cleric's approach.⁷⁹

Sistani's tacit approval added to the momentum of the protest movement. Soon, the cleric, through his spokesperson, called on Prime Minister Abadi to oppose sectarianism and be more courageous in implementing his reforms, which included holding corrupt officials accountable irrespective of their sect, ethnicity, or political party.⁸⁰ Abadi responded by saying he would comply fully with Sistani's requests. He outlined an ambitious program that included the replacement of his party-dominated government with a technocratic cabinet to tackle corruption in state institutions.⁸¹

Yet, within a few months, the reality of Iraqi politics had neutralized any progress. By January 2016, seven months after the beginning of the protests, the closing document of a conference in Baghdad that brought together the protest organizers outlined a list of demands of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of Iraq's government. These included ending sectarian quotas for different state commissions, especially the electoral oversight and judiciary commissions; the establishment of a reform committee composed of technocrats known for their integrity; the active prosecution of cases of corruption; and the formulation of clear policies to address service shortages and the socio-economic needs of Iraqis.⁸²

However, these calls for reform stopped short of demanding a full overhaul of the country's power-sharing formula and did not set out a road map for how the demands would be achieved. Soon, the inability to present a coherent platform, Abadi's failure to offer meaningful political change, and Sistani's decision not to interfere all facilitated al-Sadr's co-optation of the movement in February 2016, effectively plunging it into an inter-Shia struggle over political leadership.⁸³ As a leader of the civic protests stated, "Muqtada al-Sadr was able to reinvent himself as a leader of reform."⁸⁴

Sadr's entry into the fray led to the eventual demise of the protest movement. Sadr's appeal among impoverished Shia youth in the slums of Baghdad caused

a new surge in demonstrations, particularly in the capital. The cleric's supporters numerically overwhelmed those who were focused on pursuing a civic agenda. By April 30, the demonstrations reached a climax when Sadr's followers scaled the walls of the Green Zone, the protected area of Baghdad where most government institutions and foreign embassies are located, and stormed parliament. By taking control of a movement that had been largely civic in character and that did not carry sectarian demands, Sadr pushed the protestors into a direct confrontation with the political elite. He used the demonstrations to show the power of the Al-Ahrar parliamentary bloc he supported with respect to other Shia parties. Many civic-minded protestors blamed the Communist Party, which had played a key role in organizing the Baghdad protests, for allowing this to happen.⁸⁵

Meanwhile, at that time, demonstrations were also taking place in Kurdish areas against the corrupt practices of the Kurdish leadership. Like their counterparts in Baghdad, the Kurdish protestors went from demanding better service provision, as well as payment of their public-sector salaries, to broader reforms to the political system. Despite a crackdown, the general political crisis in the Kurdistan Region, and the preoccupation with the fight against the Islamic State, the protests have not abated much. In the words of one of the principal activists, "The revolution now is that of the hungry . . . it is a war for civil servants, who since August [2016] have not been paid their salaries."⁸⁶

Yet the reality is that, despite their shared disaffection with the country's political leaders, activists throughout Iraq, even in predominantly Shia cities, did not seek to create a unified platform of national demands that would address the frustrations of all citizens. The isolation of many of the youthful protestors in sectarian enclaves and localities rendered the scaling up of their mobilization efforts to a national level incredibly difficult, if not impossible. Moreover, the dispersed nature of the demonstrations effectively meant that there was a lack of coherence when it came to protestors' demands.

In time, the inability of activists to unify their demands and the fragmentation of the main sectarian political parties over the past few years into multiple blocs transformed these movements. From protests calling for reform, they became vehicles for political contestation within specific ethnosectarian blocs. This was perhaps most evident in al-Sadr's takeover of the Baghdad protests and his sidelining of its civic leaders.

The civic aspects of these demonstrations were also undermined by the call to arms around communal identities, particularly in the aftermath of the threat posed by the Islamic State and its attacks against minorities. The conflicts in Iraq and Syria triggered an existential crisis for many Iraqis, as well as Lebanese, especially members of sectarian and ethnic minorities. It also

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reinforced the sectarian mood among the general populace, especially for some of the younger participants in the antigovernment protests in Iraq who had been socialized not through a nationalist movement, but rather through their own sectarian or ethnic communities.

Meanwhile, the collapse of the Iraqi military and security forces during the Islamic State's takeover of Mosul in June 2014, and the partisanship within formal political institutions under the strain of intense sectarian violence, resulted in the emergence of sectarian militias. In Iraq, the Popular Mobilization Forces (al-Hashd al-Shaabi) were formed following Sistani's call to defend Iraq against the Islamic State.⁸⁷ This was a broad grouping of fifty to sixty mainly Shia militias, paid for by the state but operating under different leaderships. This development was similar to what had taken place in Lebanon during its civil war. In both countries, the creation of such militias came as a response to the absence of a central state capable of offering protection to its disparate communities.

In this environment, the pursuit of broad-based national objectives by movements pushing for political change, like efforts to play down sectarian politics,

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were virtually guaranteed to fail. Palpable anti-establishment sentiment and growing dissatisfaction with political elites did not translate into specific efforts to transform the power-sharing system in Iraq—nor in Lebanon for that matter.

However, in Lebanon, it did create an impulse for activists to channel their dissatisfaction through the political process by participating in elections. Beirut Madinati, like other more recent Lebanese initiatives, introduced a new repertoire of social action, indicating the possibilities for moving from the street into the political arena. While there are limits to what such efforts can achieve, they have sparked a sense that change is conceivable. In Iraq, by contrast, civil movements have not been able to move beyond protests.

Prospects for Civic Movements in Sectarian States

In both Lebanon and Iraq, for a brief moment in 2015, the protest movements demonstrating against the conduct of their sectarian leaderships created an invigorating sense of empowerment and endless possibilities for change. Yet the challenges of moving away from identity-based power-sharing systems were always immense, particularly amid the sectarian storms that have been forming in the region.

In a sense both Lebanon and Iraq are victims of their better instincts. In introducing power-sharing systems of government, they sought to preserve peace between their diverse communities. Yet all this really did was transform

the singular strength of both countries—their social diversity—into a fundamental liability characterized by acute societal fragmentation. The prioritization of sectarian interests came at the expense of effective governance and efficient service delivery, which led to the hollowing out of state institutions.

Both countries face pressing developmental challenges, as well as a need to address institutional shortcomings and promote growth, but they have been constrained in large part by the difficulties of reaching consensus. Moreover, the interplay between political institutions and sects has frequently introduced a zero-sum game into the competition over power and resources. While technical solutions to most of these challenges are available, the missed opportunities for reform have resulted in deteriorating infrastructure and the inability of public institutions to provide adequate services.

From this perspective, the new forms of civic activism on display in both Lebanon and Iraq in 2015 challenged both the authority of these states' governments and the legitimacy of their sectarian political leaders, who were seen as occupying and controlling the state. The jury is still out on the ultimate significance of this activism. While they signaled a palpable shift in the public mood, these activists also showed their limits in environments characterized by heightened sectarianism, particularly in Iraq after the advent of the Islamic State.

The central question for civic activists in both countries is what strategies are possible today, and to what ends, especially in view of the capacities of these countries' political systems to absorb shocks. Should activists work from within existing systems, as Beirut Madinati did, or should they limit themselves to demonstrating in the streets? How will they be able to reconcile engaging with the dominant political order and their total rejection of politics as usual? How will they transform anti-establishment sentiment into a force for change? These questions have particular resonance in a broader context shaped by regional conflict, instability, and polarization based on sectarian or ethnic identities.

It is here that Beirut Madinati has offered a valuable lesson. By focusing on local governance dynamics, the electoral list sought to revamp the role of the municipality as a principal arena for the representation of citizens, and in that way reconnect them with their state. In the process, these activists also highlighted the prospects for participatory politics through which citizens could actively engage in the remaking of their city. Indeed, the networks of activists, individuals, and groups seeking to bring about social change continue to expand in Lebanon. Even as they protest, they are also working to build practical partnerships with other concurring social actors, including members of the judiciary.

By grounding themselves and their struggles in local communities and their grievances, [activists] can work toward greater engagement with a broadly alienated public in everyday politics.

Civic activists certainly need to work on restoring faith in the importance of state institutions and rebuilding bonds of trust between communities. By grounding themselves and their struggles in local communities and their grievances, they can work toward greater engagement with a broadly alienated public in everyday politics. In doing so, they may also be able to address some of the center-periphery dynamics that have taken on sectarian dimensions. While some new activists are focusing on very local issues, others are seeking to build links between fragmented social groups. However, without broad-based alliances with other progressive actors, efforts to address mounting political challenges in an atmosphere of deepening polarization are often a step too far.

Notes

1. Maha Yahya, "Taking Out the Trash: Lebanon's Garbage Politics," *Diwan* (blog), Carnegie Middle East Center, August 25, 2016, <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/61102>.
2. Lebanon has not had a countrywide census since 1932. A key reason for this is concern that the changed demographic balance in the country between Christians and Muslims, in favor of Muslims, may lead to demands for changing the power-sharing system that governs the country. Population estimates in 2007 indicate that the total number of Lebanese residing in the country is approximately 3.8 million, alongside an estimated 449,000 Palestinian refugees. With the advent of the Syrian crisis, around 1 million Syrians are now estimated by the United Nations to be living in Lebanon. The World Bank and other organizations estimate the total population living in Lebanon to be around 5.8 million. For Lebanon's population data, see Government of Lebanon, Central Administration of Statistics, "2007 Living Conditions Survey" [in Arabic], 2008, <http://www.cas.gov.lb/images/PDFs/Living%20conditions%20survey%202007.zip>. For the data on Palestinian refugees, see United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), "Where We Work: Lebanon," UNRWA, July 2014, <https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/lebanon>. For the figures on the Syrian refugee population in Lebanon, see "Syria Regional Refugee Response: Inter-Agency Information Sharing Portal," UNHCR, December 31, 2016, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=122>. Neither set of refugees enjoy political, civic, or socioeconomic rights in Lebanon. See "Population," World Bank, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POPTOTL?locations=LB>.
3. "Iraq: Data," World Bank, <http://data.worldbank.org/country/iraq?view=chart>.
4. Lebanon's Christian community, for example, is ethnically diverse and includes Armenians, Chaldeans, Syriacs, and Assyrians. They are also divided along sectarian lines into groups such as Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, Anglican, Baptist, and others. For a breakdown of minority groups in Iraq—which include Yazidis, Turkomans, Kaakais, Mandaeans, Shabaks, Faili Kurds, Bahais, Black Iraqis, Jews, and Gypsies—please see "Minorities," Masarat, <http://masaratiraq.org/minorities/>.
5. "Lebanon National Human Development Report: Toward a Citizen's State," UNDP, 2009, http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/nhdr_lebanon_20082009_en.pdf.
6. These attempts included the Lebanese National Movement, which ran on a leftist and secular platform and eventually took part in the 1975 civil war. The movement was a collection of large and small parties led by Kamal Jumblatt, the leader of the Progressive Socialist Party. It included the Communist Party as well as a host of smaller groups. While operating as a leftist, secular, and pro-Palestinian movement, it was seeking, in the minds of many, to upend a confessional order that privileged the Maronite community.
7. These were meant to be temporary clauses until a committee to eliminate political confessionalism was formed, after which, according to Article 22 of the post-Ta'if constitution, a senate "in which all the religious communities shall be represented"

would be set up. Administrative decentralization was to follow, giving regional and municipal authorities more control over governance in areas under their jurisdiction. Government of Lebanon, “The Lebanese Constitution,” 1995, <http://www.presidency.gov.lb/English/LebaneseSystem/Documents/Lebanese%20Constitution.pdf>.

8. For example, in 1992, then Syrian vice president Abdel Halim Khaddam argued that this included deconfessionalization of the political system, a principle that was impossible to meet within this timeframe, thus justifying the continuation of the Syrian military presence in the country.
9. Public Order Number 1 disbanded the Baath Party. It prohibited individuals who had been in the top four tiers of party membership from occupying government jobs. It also banned all former Baathists from the top three management levels in state institutions.
10. Roundtable discussion, Carnegie Middle East Center, Beirut, September 28, 2016.
11. These included Saudi Arabia, Syria, and the United States, among others. Interference was both overt as it was in the direct U.S. and British involvement in the governance (and atrocities) of post-2003 Iraq and covert, as in the case of countries such as Syria, which allowed the flow of arms and fighters through its borders with Iraq.
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17. “Toward a Citizen’s State,” UNDP, 21–35.
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21. “Toward a Citizen’s State,” UNDP.
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36. Yahya, "Taking Out the Trash." The hashtag is also being used by citizens of different Arab countries protesting their own governments.
37. See UNDP, *101 Stories to Tell: Civic Initiatives in Public Life* [in Arabic], UNDP, 2009, and Karam Karam, *Le Mouvement Civil au Liban: Revendications, protestations et mobilisations associatives dans l'après guerre [Civil movements in Lebanon: post-war claims, protests, and mobilizations]*, (Paris: Éditions Karthala, 2006), <http://www.karthala.com/1717-le-mouvement-civil-au-liban-revendications-protestations-et-mobilisations-associatives-dans-lapres-guerre.html>.
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