

Griffith Research Online

<https://research-repository.griffith.edu.au>

Playing with Fire: Understanding the Sunni-Shi'a 'Sectarian Lifecycle'

Author

Vanessa Newby

Published

2013

Journal Title

Griffith Asia Quarterly

Downloaded from

<http://hdl.handle.net/10072/340302>

Link to published version

<http://pandora.nla.gov.au/tep/141524>

Playing with Fire: Understanding the Sunni-Shi'a 'Sectarian Lifecycle'¹

Vanessa Newby*
Griffith Asia Institute

Abstract: The Sunni-Shi'a sectarian split has in recent years been accused of being the primary cause of the on-going violence in the Middle East. Here I describe the complex relationship this schism has with politics in the region. I explore this phenomenon at three different levels of analysis: the local, regional and international. I argue that in terms of motivating political actors, religion and politics form a hierarchy of importance. At the local level religion has the strongest effect, and is where we see the greatest level of violence. At the regional level I show that politics and religion appear to be of commensurate import. At the international level of Great Power politics religion plays the weakest role in motivating actors, however owing to what I term the 'Sectarian Lifecycle', international affairs still acquire a religious significance. This is due to high media consumption in the Middle East that means international affairs directly touch local affairs in real time and as such have the potential to trigger violence. I also show that at all levels the Sunni-Shi'a divide generates a tension between the short-term and long-term goals of political actors. Finally this article argues that US-Iranian engagement would make it possible to dampen down the sectarian fire in this conflict without recourse to war.

Introduction

The Sunni-Shi'a split in Islam has, in the last thirty years, woken from dormancy and evolved into a hot war that threatens the

* Vanessa Newby is a PhD candidate at the Griffith Asia Institute, Griffith University, Queensland. Her thesis examines the factors that prevent armed conflict in a traditional peacekeeping mission. Vanessa's research is based in Lebanon where she is studying the UN peacekeeping force in south Lebanon (UNIFIL). An Arabic speaker, Vanessa has spent the majority of the last three years living in Syria and Lebanon. Her research interests include peacekeeping, the protection of civilians, peace and security and Middle East politics.

security of the entire Mashreq region of the Middle East.² This schism has often been accused of being dominated by political or ideological considerations,³ or in some cases is cited as lying at the heart of regional political power plays.⁴ For example, at the level of international politics, Proctor argues that the Shi'a crescent is an illusion and that realpolitik combined with a desire to quell Islamic fundamentalism within both sects is at the heart of regional politics.⁵ Delacoura argues that whilst there does appear to be a sectarian divide emerging from the Arab Spring – particularly in light of the Syrian crisis – sectarian interests are trumped by the realpolitik ambitions of regional powers.⁶ Fuller argues that the Arab street is not as deeply polarised as the media and politicians would suggest, and that the discourse of resistance is shared by all Muslims.⁷

Scholarship that places the Sunni-Shi'a divide at the heart of regional politics has been dominated by Vali Nasr, who stated in 2004 that: 'U.S. interests and objectives in the greater Middle East are ineluctably tied to the ebbs and flows of Shi'a-Sunni struggles for power',⁸ and others have followed his lead and described this phenomena further.⁹ Al-Rasheed highlighted how the Saudi regime has increasingly used the schism as a way of preventing the effects of the Arab Spring from affecting the state.¹⁰ Of late, some scholars have taken the issue of the sectarian divide more seriously in light of developments in Syria and Iraq and highlighted the increase in sectarian rhetoric and its potential for igniting violence at the local level, which they attribute predominantly to the existence and emergence of weak states.¹¹ This paper agrees that this is the unfortunate result of sectarian politics at the local level.

What these perspectives do not describe methodically is the relationship between the global and the local in the Mashreq. All focus on either the realpolitik considerations of regional powers or the micro-politics of the 'Arab Street' and what they fail to describe is how they connect up; how global politics are interpreted at the local level and the effect this has on violence and the motivations of actors at the local and national political levels. A review of

recent events in the Levant reveals that the interplay between religion and politics differs depending on the level of analysis. This article examines the Sunni-Shi'a divide as it plays out in the Middle East currently, by examining its dynamics at the local, regional and international levels. It reveals that at the local level, religion plays a significant role in the construction of beliefs about threats and in the motivations of local actors. At the regional level, religious and political interests become more equitable, playing a commensurate role in motivating behaviour or providing political legitimation (depending on your view). At the international level of Great Power politics, political interests predominate, but their effects are fed back to the local level by what I term, a 'Sectarian Lifecycle'. The importance of understanding the phenomenon at these three different levels is that in the Middle East, there exists a media savvy public with full access to 24 hours news, and a strong appetite for discussion of all things political. In this way, the international directly impacts the local in real time and with the potential to have extremely violent effects. Even when political interests predominate in the motivations of Great Powers, their actions are viewed at the local level through a sectarian lens.

This article begins by examining the local effects of the Sunni-Shi'a split by providing a review of the effects of the Syrian civil war on its closest neighbour Lebanon. This analysis reveals that religion plays a significant role in the formation of political alliances, and is the primary cause of localised violence. The second section reviews the relationship at the regional level by examining Hizballah's decision to enter the Syrian Civil War. Here we see how a combination of political interests and sectarian beliefs motivates the organisation and creates a tension between their national goals and their broader strategic objectives. The third section explains how the US unwittingly exacerbate the divide at the local level through their foreign policy choices, even when their motivations are purely political. It also reveals how, like Hizballah, their activities on the ground contradict their broader strategic objectives. Finally the article describes how

further conflict can be prevented by a US-Iran agreement on resolving the Syrian crisis.

Polarisation on the Street

Currently the battle between sect and religion rages in Syria but many eyes are on Lebanon to see if it will finally succumb to the deep reverberations coming out of the bloody civil war, that is well into its third year. Lebanon has long been recognised as being a microcosm of the wider Middle East region by journalists and writers in the region.¹² It comprises a society containing all the different sects in the Middle East whose varying interests are supported by external regional and international powers. The issues at stake in the Syrian crisis are reflected in events on the ground in Lebanon where the spiral of violence is starting to grow. Whether or not the roots of this pernicious weed can be cut before it takes the country over remains to be seen.

Thus far in the past four months, around 85 people have been killed and 1000 injured by four deadly car bombs in Lebanon; two in the largely Shi'ite southern suburbs of Beirut known as Dahiyeh where support for Assad is strong, and two in the country's second city of Tripoli which comprises a large number of Sunnis who oppose Assad's government. The effect on life in Lebanon was to slow everyone down. Shopping malls lay half-empty in the weeks following the attack,¹³ and checkpoints still litter the streets of Dahiyeh, causing substantial traffic jams in the peak hours. Initially run by Hizballah they checked the engine compartment and boot of every vehicle entering certain areas. Foreigners in the form of Syrians and Palestinians, believed to be directly involved in planning and executing the attacks in Dahiyeh, are routinely removed from buses and cars and questioned.¹⁴ However, in recent days, the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and the police have gradually supplanted Hizballah in manning these checkpoints. The rationale for this will be discussed later in the commentary.

What has thus far been notable is that by and large there has been a unified condemnation of these attacks from all political

sides in Lebanon. No direct blame has been apportioned to any one party, with the exception of some statements by those lying outside what can be considered to be mainstream political parties. However, the sentiment on the street is deeply polarised, between those who support Hizballah's intervention in Syria, and those who do not.

In Lebanese politics there exist two main political movements entitled March 8th and March 14th respectively. The first of these movements, March 8th, contains both major Shi'ite parties Hizballah and Amal plus a Christian faction – and sometimes the Druze faction – the Socialist Workers Party. The March 14 movement comprises the two other major Christian parties; The Lebanese Forces and the Kataeb Party, and the largest Sunni party: The Future Movement. It is well known that at the international level the March 14th group is aligned with: the US; the Gulf States of Qatar; the Emirates and Saudi Arabia. Equally, March 8th finds its support from Syria and Iran and indirectly Russia. This situation is clearly sectarian in nature with the Sunni dominated states aligned on one side and Shi'a dominated states on the other. The minorities – mainly Christians and Druze have the option - in theory - to move back and forth between the two blocs; an option that the leader of the Druze faction, Walid Jumblatt, chooses to exercise frequently.

The position of these two movements on Syria is straightforward. March 8th supports Assad, and March 14th the rebels. Until recently, this disagreement had been played out at the very local level in the city of Tripoli where Alawite supporters of the regime fought regular street battles with Sunnis in the districts of Jabal Mohsen and Bab al-Tabbaneh respectively. In recent months however, the contention over Syria has spilled out of the confines of street fights to affect Lebanon as a whole.

The division in sentiment in Lebanon over Syria whilst political is also deeply sectarian. The Shi'a by and large support the resistance movement – al-Muqawimah – led by Hizballah and Amal. The resistance had until recently been predominantly a movement of resistance to US domination of the region and of

Israeli aggression towards Lebanon and the Palestinians. However, as the Syria crisis unfolded, it has evolved to include resistance to Salafism, which is an offshoot of Sunnism. As such, it is perceived by many non-Shi'a as a sectarian movement whose goals include Shi'a domination of the region at the expense of the Sunnis and other minority religions. This alienates a large number of Sunni's who currently lack credible leadership in Lebanon. Beyond the borders of Lebanon the Sunnis do not have the equivalent of a Hizballah-Iran relationship. The people of the Levant do not take any of the Gulf States seriously as ideological leaders. The Gulf monarchies are resented for their fiscal power and viewed as backwards and self-interested and therefore any support from the Gulf States in the Sunni community here in Lebanon means simply money. It is this leadership vacuum that is enabling the more radical elements within Sunnism to attract funding, weapons and a modicum of support from Sunni's and some Christians who ordinarily reject Salafist ideology.¹⁵

The sectarian battle in the Middle East is no longer between Christians and Muslims. The decimation of the Christian population across the Middle East, largely through migration means that their voice is very much in the minority. Currently they have escaped the violence in Lebanon and the Christian areas remain the safest in Beirut. The majority of Christians in Lebanon are deeply unhappy about the engagement of Hizballah in Syria because of their fears of being sucked into a larger regional war that may draw more Salafis into Lebanon. These concerns are based on two main issues, firstly a strong disinclination for a return to civil war (which exists across all the sects), and secondly the fear that war this time may lead to their expulsion from Lebanon as it has in Iraq.

But the Christian population itself is divided. Some support Assad and the leadership of Michel Aoun who is broadly aligned with the March 8th movement. One of the important aspects to note about Shi'ism, as a minority within Islam itself, it has the potential to accept syncretism within Islam and pluralism more broadly. As such all of the many offshoots of Islam – Alawite,

Ismaili, Sufism and the Druze are - accepted by most Shi'a as are other religions. Hence some Christians feel that when it comes down to it, they are better off throwing in their lot with the Shi'a who feel and act like a minority and hence seek to build bridges with other minorities. Politically however, the two other major Christian parties, who arguably have the largest following, are aligned with the March 14th movement that supports the Sunni point of view. The reason for this is in part historical when you consider that for decades in Lebanon, the Christians dominated culture and education, and Sunnis the trade and business; relegating the Shi'a to the lower socio-economic strata of the population. But it is also due to a belief amongst the Christians that they should align themselves with the West (which the March 14th movement also does), in part because many would prefer Lebanon to be more of a European state than an Arab one.¹⁶ However, with the increase in extremism at grass roots level amongst some parts of the Sunni community, it is hard to imagine this alliance could survive an all out war between the movements if Salafists represented the Sunni and therefore the March 14th movement. Hence the fact that March 14th openly supports the opposition in Syria, which consists of many different extremist Sunni factions, reveals a deep inconsistency between the interests of the Christians and some of their Sunni allies. But inconsistency in objectives between allies in the Arab world has never been an impediment to their formation as current events demonstrate.¹⁷

Hizballah's Involvement in Syria

In the mess that is the Syrian crisis, the major issue of political contention within Lebanon is Hizballah's now openly stated involvement in Syria. Strategically, this poses a great risk to Hizballah on two main fronts: Firstly to its Lebanon-wide support base; and secondly to its strongest core support base located among residents of Dahiyeh.

Hizballah conceives its role in Lebanon as providing security for all Lebanese and not just the Shi'a. This is because over the past 35 years Lebanon has endured successive episodes of Israeli

aggression. This consisted of five invasions where a disproportionate use of force was employed resulting in: over a thousands civilian deaths; a 22-year occupation of the south which included a torture facility; and the use of illegal weapons, specifically white phosphorous and cluster bombs.¹⁸ It was the sustained efforts of Hizballah which succeeded in driving the Israelis out of southern Lebanon in 2000 and again in 2006. As a result, Hizballah has over the years received support from many elements of Lebanese society and not just the Shi'a simply because it is regarded as the only military force capable of defending their land.¹⁹ (See endnotes for an expansion of this particular issue).

But Hizballah's legitimacy in Lebanon, particularly amongst its non-Shi'ite supporters, rests on its ability to keep Lebanon out of any further confrontations with Israel. Support for Hizballah as a defensive force is high, but not to the extent that the Lebanese wish to see it engaged in foreign wars allegedly on their behalf. However Nasrallah's recent speeches in May, June and August made it clear that Hizballah intends to assist the Assad regime for as long as it requires its help. The consensus outside the Shi'ite community, and from many at the official political level across all sects, is that the Lebanese do not want a return to the civil war and wish to remain disassociated with the Syrian crisis. The Baa'bda Declaration was a written agreement signed by all the political parties in 2012 including Hizballah, confirming this policy of dissociation. As such, Hizballah's political opponents argue that they are in violation of it.

The second risk posed by this strategy is its potential to ignite sectarian violence in Lebanon and threaten the personal security of its strongest supporters. Nasrallah's early statements on Hizballah's involvement in Syria were rewarded by a rocket attack on the Shi'ite neighbourhood of Shiyyah (part of the southern suburb of Dahiyeh) in April. In July and August two car bombs were detonated in the areas of Bir al-Abed and Ruaiss in the centre of Dahiyeh killing over 40 people. The group claiming responsibility for the second Dahiyeh bomb was called 'The Sons of Ayesha'. This name was used to send a clear message to the

Shi'a that the bombs had been delivered by a Sunni group in retaliation for Hizballah's military support for Assad.²⁰

The bomb attacks in Tripoli that followed a week later are believed to be the work of groups deliberately seeking to re-ignite a civil war.²¹ On this occasion this proved to be a failure owing to the lack of appetite on all sides for another civil war. But should more attacks be launched in the coming months, there may prove to be a limit to civilian tolerance to these very real threats to their security, posing the risk to Hizballah of losing popular support in its heartland, Dahiyeh. In the absence of a strong state, the Lebanese will doubtless, as always, turn to their sect for protection or worse, revenge. Should sectarian violence recommence, which would undoubtedly target Dahiyeh, Hizballah would receive the blame owing to its Syrian adventure.

Hizballah's Syrian Strategy: A Balance of Political and Sectarian Motives

Whereas at the local level, we can see how sectarianism clearly delineates the political spectrum, at the regional level, political interests start to play a far larger role in motivating actors to the extent they are at the very least on a par with religion. Hizballah's interests in bolstering the Assad regime are no secret. They are dependent on Syria for their supply of weapons. The battle that raged in Qusair is direct evidence of the importance of the rural mountain tracks that weave their way between the two states which have been used for decades to supply weaponry to the group. In addition, having a friendly power next door that enables the organisation to fly in weapons from other parts of the world is no small thing. The absence of a friendly government in Syria renders Hizballah's supply line extremely vulnerable as the Mediterranean is heavily policed by its opponents, and the only other country on Lebanon's borders that might be available for overland transport of weapons is Israel. Thus, any threat to Assad is regarded by Hizballah as an existential one to the organisation itself.

However, a review of the recent history of the fate of the Shi'a in regional conflicts shows that Hizballah at the very least has some cause for concern at the religious level; irrespective of whether or not it chooses to magnify potential threats in order to justify its actions. Commentators on the Middle East have noted for some time that Salafist movements are growing throughout the region, and Lebanon has not escaped this phenomenon.²² In Lebanon Salafist movements are thought to be developing predominantly in Tripoli, the Beq'aa Valley and in the Palestinian camps of Ein-al Hilweh and Burj al-Barajneh as well as some areas of Beirut such as Tariq al-Jadidah.²³ It should be remembered that these movements do not just pose a risk to the Shi'a. All sects within Islam, moderate Sunnis, and other religions are considered non-believers according Salafist ideology. However, currently Hizballah is primarily concerned with the consistent threats made against the Shi'a in Lebanon. The warning signs in fact began in January 2012 with a little known car bomb in Dahiyeh which did not result in any deaths. Al-Monitor reports that many Syrian refugees living in Lebanon support the Salafist movements and have been willing to take the fight to Lebanon against the Shi'a since the early days of the war in revenge simply for their alignment with Assad, prior to their provision of material support.²⁴ Hizballah believe that a number of groups operating in Syria have been making threats to come after the Shi'a (and Hizballah) in Lebanon once they are done with Syria.²⁵ It is these threats that Hizballah argue were serious enough for them to get involved.

Initially, Hizballah's intervention is believed to have been restricted to protecting Shi'ite shrines that have come under attack in the civil war.²⁶ The partial destruction of Sayyida Ruqiyyah in Damascus was regarded by Hizballah as sufficient evidence that more attacks would be launched against Shi'a holy sites in Syria.²⁷ This was followed by pro-Syrian elements attacking the Shi'ite shrine of Sayyida Khawla in Ba'albek in the Beq'aa valley in Lebanon.²⁸ Hence, why Hizballah installed themselves in one of the holiest Shi'a sites, Sayyida Zaynab in Damascus in order to

protect it. In addition, Shi'a villages in Syria near the less-than-formal border area between Lebanon and Syria were subject to violent abuse by groups like Jabat al-Nusra, and again Hizballah states they are acting in their defence. Shi'a discourse is deeply ingrained with the idea that they have historically always been subject to persecution and that attacks upon Shi'a signifies the existential threat to their sect that has always existed from the beginning of the split from Sunnism.²⁹ Sacrifice and blood are considered to be part and parcel of being a Shi'ite Muslim, but Hizballah clearly feels there is a limit to how much the Shi'a should endure before they fight back.

Compounding this belief in the existence of a regional Salafist witch-hunt are the threats to Shi'ite security across the region. In Bahrain and Eastern Saudi Arabia, Sunni governments have demonstrated their willingness to repress their Shi'a populations at the first whiff of political protest.³⁰ Then there are the violent attacks on the Shi'a of Iraq and Pakistan. There, the collaboration of the Pakistani intelligence services with the Taliban and al-Qaeda groups has led to the growth of Salafism and consistent attacks against the Shi'a (and in recent days other religious minorities).³¹ Even in Egypt, where Shi'ite exist in small numbers, prior to the latest revolution a Salafist-led movement against Shi'ism has been reported.³² In Iraq, the sheer volume of Shi'a deaths in Iraq in recent months through the use of almost daily car bombs makes the recent death toll in Lebanon pale into insignificance.³³ And during the American occupation, the Shi'a of Iraq also suffered significant attacks on their holiest sites of Karbala and Najaf. The fact that the Shi'a dominated Iraqi Government has not been inclusive of Sunnis since taking over is not taken into account here, rather the thinking among many Shi'a is that even when they are politically in the majority, Salafist elements within Sunnism will seek to destroy them.

Hizballah also argue some opposition forces in Syria are brutally violent and that preventative military action is required in Syria in order to avoid these groups moving into Lebanon. Evidence for this claim is based on: unprovoked attacks in

Lebanon by opposition groups, and numerous You Tube videos showing opposition fighters committing atrocities. For example, several months ago three LAF soldiers on Lebanese territory were shot and murdered in an unprovoked attack at a checkpoint in the Syrian-Lebanese border village of Aarsal.³⁴ YouTube videos have shown opposition fighters eating the hearts of those they had killed in battle, and conducting summary executions of children. Of note, is that as yet, there have been no reports of Hizballah militia committing atrocities against civilians or other militias in Syria.

It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that the only military faction in Lebanon capable of protecting the Lebanese from foreign invasion should feel duty bound to do it. In other words, Hizballah, with some justification (if we consider the cases of Pakistan and Iraq), feel that they need to pre-empt Salafist movements in Syria before they come for the Shi'a³⁵ in Lebanon, which for them is a question of when – not if. Cynics who argue the threat of Salafi terrorism is a Hizballah construction, should note that there are reports of the CIA providing some information to Hizballah about the risk of terror attacks in Dahiyeh.³⁶ This can only be attributed to the fact that both the US and Hizballah share a strong interest in preventing the rise of Salafism. Both recognise that this ideology does not accept pluralism, secularism, democracy or syncretism within Islam. As such, its growth is a direct threat to the human rights of the millions of Arabs who do not conform to it. Furthermore, it would appear that the US also recognises that the region itself would serve as a launching pad for attacks further abroad and at Western and US interests in the region. The main point here is that both sides are convinced that the crisis in Syria does not begin and end there. Both accept, it would appear, that if left unchecked, the Salafis are coming after them next. However, in the case of Hizballah, as a Lebanese organisation, the immediacy of the threat is greater. Perhaps this explains why thus far Hizballah have demonstrated more consistency and determination in their approach to Syria than the

US: the threat is quite simply a lot closer to hand both temporally and geographically.

Aside from the above events, one point to note about Hizballah's involvement in Syria is this. The Syrian crisis has been raging for over two years. Very early in its inception, arms have been flowing to the Syrian opposition believed to be funded by the Gulf States Qatar and Saudi Arabia predominantly;³⁷ and it is also believed that Turkish and Western sponsored arms have been made available to opposition fighters for some considerable time.³⁸ Hizballah stayed out of the conflict for a long time relative to other regional and Western powers. Now that they have been drawn into the fight, they are at the very least being open about it which is more than can be said about the involvement of many other parties. It is hard to see the rationality of the Western-led argument that Hizballah has no right to strike pre-emptively at potential threats, when the West is regularly involved in 'pre-emptive' drone strikes in Afghanistan, Yemen and Pakistan; and Israel on Syrian/Hizballah weapons movement. One explanation for the international community's outcry at Hizballah's involvement could be due to fact that Western powers are concerned Hizballah's assistance to the regime has been the cause of recent gains by the Syrian Army.

The extent to which the Shi'a of Lebanon themselves support Hizballah's involvement in Syria remains unclear as those who support Assad's regime are very vocal as compared to those who do not.³⁹ There are small signs that there is dissent regarding the policy at the most senior levels of the March 8th Alliance. In a speech delivered on 31 August, by Nabih Berri the leader of Amal, indicated that resistance movements should stop at the borders of Lebanon. Nabih Berri holds significant weight amongst the Shi'a, however as Amal is closely aligned with Hizballah he must have felt confident enough of a significant presence of dissenters within the Shi'ite community to make such a statement. A direct indication of Hizballah's concern over this potential problem is reflected in their decision to allow the LAF and now the police to take over many of the security checkpoints in their heartland,

Dahiyeh; reflecting their need to demonstrate their commitment to Lebanon as a multi-sectarian state with national institutions.

In sum, the main problem for Hizballah, is that their regional interests directly contradict their local interests within Lebanon – that of defending all Lebanese. They could help Assad win this war in Syria, but the cost could be losing all legitimacy outside of their own religious community and large sections within it. In terms of the balance between religious concerns and political ones, what we see in Hizballah’s regional policy is a more pragmatic political policy aimed at ensuring the survival of the organisation, but this is combined with very real concerns about future sectarian attacks on their home turf owing to the growth in Salafism across the Mashreq. As such the Sunni-Shi’a schism remains an important factor in their considerations.

How Great Power Policy furthers the Sunni-Shi’ite Divide at the Local Level

Thus far this commentary has described how the Sunni-Shi’ite divide motivates actors at the local and regional levels. However, as noted in the introduction: in the Middle East, the high consumption of media means the local is often deeply affected by events at the international level. As such the actions of Great Powers in the region is a key third dimension in the Sunni-Shi’a split. Below I present a simple diagram to show how events at the international level are fed back into the local level and interpreted through a sectarian lens. I term this, the Sectarian Lifecycle. As the most significant Great Power involved the Middle East,⁴⁰ the US plays a key role influencing public sentiment on the ground. The following section will now address how US foreign policy is motivated by political interests, yet unwittingly exacerbates the sectarian schism across the region.

The motivation for US alliances is based on a very pragmatic interest in the resource rich regions of the Gulf; and of course the need to find allies in the Arab World who are lackadaisical in their stance on Israel. Religion is by and large, not a factor in these political affiliations. However, owing to the religious affiliations

of the Gulf States (Sunni), versus the 'axis of resistance' (Shi'a); US policy also ends up also being interpreted as sectarian in nature at the local level.

From a purely political perspective, US foreign policy is unpopular across all sects in the Middle East. It should by now be clear that the issue of human rights is not the issue at stake in Syria. Yes, Assad's government (and his father's before him) have engaged in cruel repression against his own people. Torture and the abuse of human rights were commonplace and even mass atrocities if one considers what occurred in Hama in 1982. However, little things like torture or lack of human rights has never hindered the formation of alliances between Western and Middle Eastern states before, (think Mubarak, Ben-Ali, Saddam Hussein before 1990). As such, US determination to rid Syria of Assad is viewed by many in the region as a further example of US hypocrisy and based on neo-imperialistic desires to control the region (taking over from the French and the British). Locals are also deeply distrustful of US rhetoric on human rights when they continue to ally themselves with some of the least democratic regimes in the region, such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar. The belief here therefore is that the only reason the US supports the Gulf states is because of their oil interests, and the fact that these states display no open aggression towards Israel, almost to the point of accepting its presence. There is a feeling amongst all the confrontation states (Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Egypt) that the Gulf States' mentality stems from a lack of direct experience of aggression from Israel and a highly developed sense of self-interest that excludes any sense of pan-Arab solidarity. US use of the Gulf States as a kind of Arab Consensus for their actions infuriates those in the Confrontation States who are by and large opposed to Gulf policies in the region.

However, US foreign policy still manages to become bogged down in the sectarian trap owing to its alliances with the predominantly Sunni Gulf States. These alliances provide opponents of the US, in particular the Shi'a dominated 'axis of resistance' with plenty of rhetorical ammunition by enabling them

to point out the inconsistency and hypocrisy of US policy in the region. It is no secret in the Middle East that the Gulf States provide funding and support to extremist Sunni groups in the region.⁴¹ It has always been incredible to locals that the US cannot see what they can see: that supporting Gulf States is tantamount to supporting the growth of Salafism in the region. The idea being of course that the Gulf States consider that by supporting these groups overseas, they will avoid trouble with them at home.⁴² Leaving aside the issue of Israel, Arabs simply cannot understand how the US fails to see how their support of the Gulf States is actually working to destabilize the region.

At the tactical level, it is obvious where this policy can go astray. In the case of Syria, where opposition to the Assad regime consists of multiple factions, some of whom are openly linked with al-Qaeda, the increase in arms *and training no less* can only bring to mind the case of Afghanistan – and look how well that turned out. In an environment of anarchy, there can be no guarantees that weapons destined for – let's say the Free Syrian Army (FSA) - will reach only the FSA over whom a question mark already hangs.⁴³ The corollary of this is that Western Powers will potentially end up arming the very people they have spent billions of dollars fighting since September 11. Pakistan and Afghanistan are such very clear examples of what happens when Al-Qaeda or so-called Global Jihadists are funded. You can ride the tiger for a while, but eventually it will turn around and bite you. The short-termism of such a cynical policy is brutal when applied on the ground.

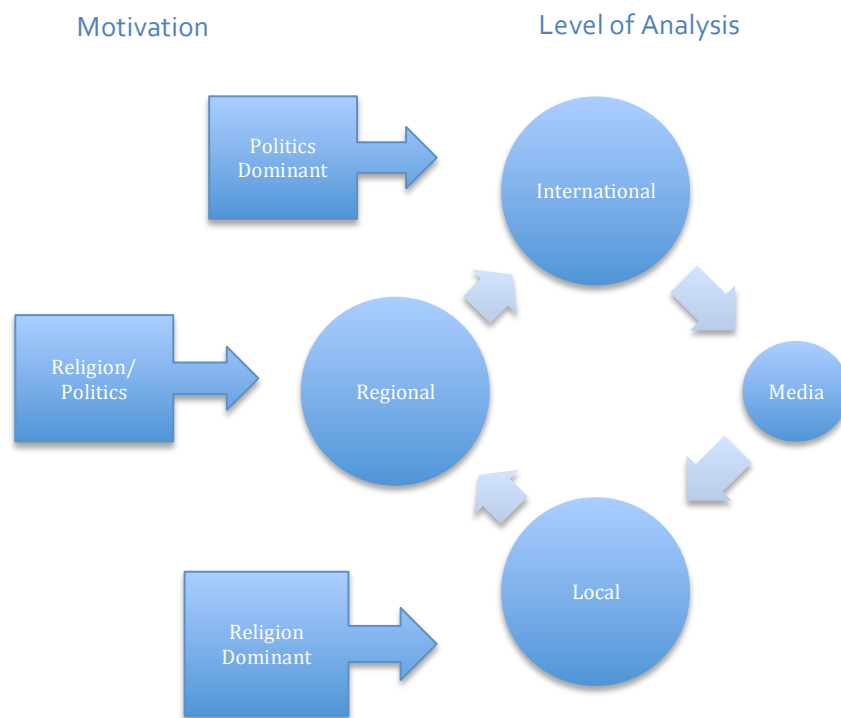
An interesting example of how much of a blind eye some US politicians are prepared to turn towards the actions of those they support occurred in June. US Senator John McCain came to Syria (via Turkey) and played the starring role in what appeared to be a remake of Charlie Wilson's War by conducting a secret mission to meet with Syrian opposition elements. During his visit, he was photographed and reportedly entertained by one of the men responsible for the abduction of nine Shi'a pilgrims who are currently being held by Syrian rebels; until recently for unspecified purposes.⁴⁴ It was not until Nasrallah specifically requested the

kidnappers state their demands, that any conditions around their release were outlined.⁴⁵ There thus far appears to be have been no loud condemnations of the hostage taking of Lebanese citizens by the US and this lack of criticism leads to the conclusion for people in the region that terrorist activities are OK, as long as the US approves them.⁴⁶

The Sectarian Lifecycle

Thus far I have analysed the strength of the relationship between the religious and the political in the Middle East by using a three level analysis. I have shown that at the local level, religion plays a dominant role in guiding decision-makers and sentiment on the street. At the regional level both phenomena are of commensurate import, and at the international level religion has the weakest influence over Great Power politics. Nonetheless, the international politics of the region are relayed back to the public through the media to a culture where the political plays an important role but is inextricably linked to religion. The explosion of 24-hour news media in the Middle East merely reflects an interest that was always present and which technological advances have now facilitated. The effect of this is that the actions of international actors are fed back into a society that interprets them largely through a sectarian lens. The sectarian lifecycle (Figure 1) demonstrates this simple idea.

Figure 1: The sectarian lifecycle



Can an Iran-US Agreement on Syria alleviate the Sectarian Divide?

So what should the US be doing to reignite some credibility in the region and more importantly, to assist in putting out this sectarian fire? Much of this determination to bring down Assad and reluctance to include him in any peace process is what is stalling progress on this issue, and the cause of it in part lies in the deeply dysfunctional nature of the Iran-US relationship.

Within the US executive there appears to be an inability to forgive Iran for the Embassy hostage crisis of 1979-1980. The recent revelations that the US was complicit in the chemical attacks against Iranians during the 1980 Iran-Iraq war;⁴⁷ increasingly stringent sanction programmes and US treatment of Iran's nuclear program relative to other states like Pakistan; further illustrates the presence of a long standing determination to destroy Iran at all costs that continues to exist within the US government to this day. This is due in part to the fact that Iran went from being one of the US's closest regional allies to one of its most vocal opponents overnight. There is a deep sense of betrayal on both sides however.

For decades the US glossed over its significant role in the fall of one of the most democratic regimes in the region at the time, that of Mossadeq's government,⁴⁸ which left Iranians back in the hands of the despotic regime of the Shah. This feeling of betrayal has been reflected in post-revolution Iranian rhetoric against the US which is often deeply vitriolic and aggressive.

The result of US resentment towards Iran, is that the US never appears to seriously consider that as one of the largest states in the region, Iran has legitimate justification for wanting to be involved in Middle Eastern affairs. The asymmetrical warfare engaged in by Iran is symptomatic of their lack of a seat at the table of power; it does not necessarily reflect their ability to act responsibly as an international player. But US refusal to afford Iran this respect is what causes the regime to interfere in regional affairs using asymmetric tactics via the axis of resistance (Hizballah, Syria and Iran). Given levels of US interference in the region over the years, there is some hypocrisy to be detected in this view.

US dislike of Iranian influence in its stomping ground of the Middle East is driving it to turn many a blind eye to the atrocities committed by the opposition in the Syrian civil war and there is evidence that the US is covertly supporting the rebels.⁴⁹ The most obvious disadvantage of this policy – historically proven – is that increasing the flow of arms to any civil conflict has never reduced the level of violence, at the cost of the lives of innocent civilians, nor has it brought the parties involved any closer to resolving their differences. It is a classic case of throwing fat into the fire.

At the date of submission of this article, no irrefutable evidence has been released which supports the accusations of either side in the Syrian civil war; although it is widely believed in the West to have been ordered by the regime. That a political agreement is the only solution to the Syrian crisis is something that all sides state they are in agreement with since it became clear that a military stalemate was emerging. The lack of concrete action taken by the international community on Syria has revealed a deeply cynical battle between the Great Powers; predominantly

the US and Russia, for influence in the region. This has manifested itself in numerous standoffs in the UN Security Council; an arms race in support of both sides; and a failure to agree on the terms and conditions of a peace conference. However, genuine commitment to peace and reconciliation necessarily demand the inclusion of all parties, however distasteful they may appear. In peacekeeping literature, it is recognised that where there is no consent amongst all the parties involved, international, regional or local, sustainable peace is unattainable.⁵⁰ There is now an urgent need, especially in light of the recent chemical attack on civilians in Damascus for all parties to come to the table. Iran and the US hold the key to the solution to this problem because it is these two parties who have sufficient influence over all of the players on both sides of the Sunni-Shi'a divide. Russia too plays a major role, but it would be more helpful if the US and Iran could resolve their political differences as they are more deeply involved in the region.

In the view of this author, aside from the ever-present issue of Israel/Palestine, the US inability to accept Iran's regional involvement is what is preventing genuine progress. Acknowledging Iran has the power to assist and a right to be involved in its own backyard might go a long way to assuaging the fears of Russia (and to a lesser extent China) of a US dominated solution to the Syrian crisis. It should be noted that as yet, whilst the US and Russia agree for now on how to deal with Assad's chemical weapons cache, the larger issue of the Syrian conflict remains unresolved.

Prior to any peace conference therefore, the most useful move the US could make now is to hold bilateral discussions with Iran. Even if the larger issues between the two Governments remain unresolved, coming to a working agreement on how to end the Syrian civil war prior to a peace conference involving all parties would be the swiftest path to peace. Aiding the potential for serious dialogue is the recent appointment of the new Iranian President, Rouhani who is widely viewed as moderate relative to some of his predecessors, and who it is reported recently

exchanged letters and a phone call with US President Barack Obama regarding the nuclear issue.

Conclusion

This article has described the dynamics of the relationship between religion and politics in the Middle East, by using a three level model. It has focused particularly on the Sunni-Shi'a sectarian divide as it is currently the one of the more potent causes, if not the primary trigger of violence in the Middle East.

At the local level, this sectarian split is where we continue to see the most blood spilled. Thus far, there is little doubt that the conflict in Syria is widening fissures between Sunni and Shi'a in Lebanon and elsewhere. However, the country continues to withstand the pressure the Syrian Crisis is exerting upon it in the form of terrorism not to mention massive refugee influxes and a swiftly declining economy. Despite the recent sectarian violence, there have been no calls to arms by any of the factions within Lebanon. The desire to avoid another civil war remains strong among the population and their political representation. This is due in part to war weariness but also in recognition of the fact that if war were to break out here there can be no outright winners. And even if there were, the current model of government, ineffectual as it is, is preferable to most than the prospect of the unknown. The results of the Arab Spring thus far have not served to instil confidence in the potential outcome of attempts to alter the status quo. However, until there is some resolution in Syria, those who seek to destabilise Lebanon in pursuit of their own goals will continue to try to sow the seeds of mayhem in the form of terrorist attacks. The extent to which the security forces in Lebanon are able to prevent them may determine their frequency. In turn their frequency will test the determination of the Lebanese to reject further sectarian violence in the interests of maintaining stability in this fragile state.

At the regional level, I have described how political interests play a stronger role in determining actor behaviour. Sectarianism

remains however a key factor, irrespective of whether or not it is genuine and heartfelt, or being used to garner support. At the level of Great Power politics (which I term the International) political interests predominate but ignorance of local sentiment, leads them into the sectarian trap. The reason for this is due largely to the consumption of media in the Middle East that causes the international to touch the local to an extent I believe is rare outside the highly developed Western world. As such, I would argue that politics in the Middle East cannot be divorced from religion and the best that those who chose to intervene can do, is pay close attention to the religious affiliation and rhetoric of state and sub-state actors at a time where all sides appear to want to publicly state their case to win grass roots support.

The recent negotiations between Russia and the US have brought some hope that the issue of chemical weapons can be resolved peacefully. However, if they fail (presumably owing to procrastination on the part of Assad); the US decision to attack still looms. If the US strikes occur two scenarios are envisaged. The first is that they will mainly be symbolic and limited, which reduces the risk of other regional players being drawn into the conflict, but also demonstrates the futility of launching the attacks at all. The result of this could be an increase in terrorism in Lebanon more generally by those keen to see the war spread. However, the other potential scenario is that an attack on Assad has the potential to trigger a retaliatory response from members of the axis of resistance on the state of Israel. This would doubtless engulf war-weary Lebanon once more.

Other regional issues will continue to play out - predominantly the Israel Palestine question that, as always, causes ripples across the Mashreq and beyond.⁵¹ However, it is the Sunni-Shi'a split exacerbated by the Syrian crisis that threatens personal security at the local level. And it is this issue that needs to be resolved as quickly as possible to prevent further death, suffering and destruction. The only thing that all can agree on at this point is that Sunni-Shi'a battle is turning the region into

bloody killing field extending from Lebanon through to Iraq. And as it ever was the weak - civilians – are suffering what they must.

NOTES

¹ I am extremely grateful to Ms. Jo Gilbert and Dr. Dan Halvorson for their comments and suggestions on this paper. However, any errors to be found are entirely mine.

² The geographical area of the Middle East that extends from the border of Egypt through to Iran, including all of the Arabian Peninsula.

³ See Michael N. Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab Politics: Negotiations in Regional Order*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); and Katerina Dalacoura, 'The Arab Uprisings Two Years On: Ideology, Sectarianism and the Changing Balance of Power in the Middle East', *Insight Turkey* 15 (1) (2013), pp. 75-89.

⁴ Vali Nasr, *The Shi'a Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007).

⁵ Pat Proctor, 'The Mythical Shi'a Crescent', *Parameters*, (Spring 2008), pp. 30-42.

⁶ Dalacoura, 'The Arab Uprisings Two Years On'.

⁷ Graham Fuller, 'The Shia Vs. Sunni Split? Not on the Arab Street', *New Perspective Quarterly*, (Fall 2007), pp. 34-36.

⁸ Sayyed Vali Reza Nasr, 'Regional Implications of Shi'a Revival in Iraq', *Washington Quarterly*, 27 (3) (2004), p. 8.

⁹ 'The Widening Gulf: Shia's and Sunnis', *The Economist*, 3 February 2007 ; Nosheen Ali, 'Sectarian Imaginaries: The Micropolitics of Sectarianism and State-Making in Northern Pakistan', *Current Sociology*, 58 (5) (2010), pp. 738-754.

¹⁰ Madawi Al-Rasheed, 'Sectarianism as Counter-Revolution: Saudi Responses to the Arab Spring', *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 11 (3) (2011), pp. 513-526.

¹¹ Aaron Reese, *Sectarian and Regional Conflict in the Middle East*, Middle East Security Report 13, (Washington: Institute for the Study of War, July 2013); Gregory Gause III, 'Sectarianism and the Politics of the New Middle east', Up front Blog, Brookings institution, June 8, 2013.

¹² See for example Hussein Sirriyeh, 'Lebanon Dimensions of Conflict: International Involvement', *The Adelphi Papers* 29 (243) (1989), pp. 51-61; David Hirst, *Beware Small States: Lebanon, Battleground of the Middle East*, (New York: Nation Books, 2011); Sandra McKay, *Mirror of the Arab World: Lebanon in Conflict*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009).

¹³ Jaoude Rayane Abou and Obeid Ghinwa, 'Citizens Wary of Malls after Bomb Attacks', *Daily Star*, 31 August, 2013. Beirut, Lebanon.

¹⁴ Five individuals of Lebanese and Syrian nationality have been charged for the Tripoli bombings to date.

¹⁵ Samir Nader, *Al-Monitor*, 5 July, 2013. Accessed 02 September 2013 <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/07/assir-reflects-lebanese-divisions.html>

¹⁶ Some Lebanese Christians describe themselves as Phoenician and not Arab.

¹⁷ One good example of this is the reconciliation of Hamas and Hizballah who have opposing views on the Syria crisis. Another is illustrated by US alliances with the Gulf States who are known to have relations with several radical Islamist groups.

¹⁸ See for example Richard Falk and Asli Bali, 'International Law and the Vanishing Point', in Nubar Hovsepian (ed.), *The War on Lebanon: A Reader*, (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2007).

¹⁹ The other side to this coin argued by the March 14th movement is that Hizballah should now disband and hand over their weapons to the LAF in order to help bolster national unification. They argue that there is no reason for Hizballah to exist now that Israel has been driven out of Lebanon and that their presence continues to exacerbate the Israeli threat rather than ameliorate it. However, Hizballah argue that this is not possible yet for two main reasons. First, the LAF remain ill equipped to defeat a foreign army, particularly one with Israel's capabilities, which some argue, (see middleeastwire.com and the writings of Nicholas Noe) is part of a deliberate strategy by Tel Aviv to keep the confrontation states bordering Israel

militarily weak. Certainly there appears to be a lack of interest across the international community in assisting the LAF in building up their military hardware that is now extremely out-dated. One recent example is a delivery to the LAF from the US of just 79 Humvees. Whilst there may be reasons for that policy at the international level that are considered valid, this gives little comfort to the Lebanese who have suffered at the hands of foreign invasions. Hizballah, probably correctly, assesses that its use of a mix of conventional and guerrilla tactics¹⁹ remain a better deterrent to Israel than a direct military-military confrontation.

Second, there remain serious issues of trust between the LAF and Central Government on one hand, and Hizballah on the other. Whilst the LAF enjoy broad support across all sects and make considerable effort to promote themselves as a disciplined and strictly non-sectarian national institution which represents all of Lebanon, during the 2006 war, the Wikileaks papers revealed that persons within the LAF and other key politicians were advising the Israelis where to bomb in order to hit Hizballah the hardest. See in this regard Nicholas Blanford, *Warrior of God: Inside Hezbollah's Thirty Year Struggle*, (New York: Random House, 2011). Hizballah argue they still cannot trust these parties to ensure that their Shi'a troops won't be discriminated against if they joined the LAF, or worse that if Israel committed aggression against Lebanon again, that the LAF would choose not to confront them and instead follow a US-led agenda. Hizballah and their supporters take the view that many in the March 14th movement prefer to appease Israel.

Two main issues of contention remain between Israel and Lebanon: first, several small pieces of contested land between the two states; and second the existence of Lebanese political prisoners in Israeli jails. Hizballah are concerned that if Israel believes there will be no significant military recourse on any course of action it takes, it may decide to fully occupy these lands and continue to refuse to release the prisoners. Certainly a review of the history of UNSC Resolution 1701 which details the outstanding issues between the two states reveals a consistent refusal by Israel firstly to withdraw from internationally recognised Lebanese land, (of most concern are Shebaa Farms and the town of Ghajar); and secondly to release the remaining Lebanese political prisoners taken during the occupation. It was in fact Hizballah's attempts to address this particular issue, by taking prisoners of their own from the Israeli side, that triggered the 33 day war in 2006. (Hizballah has always argued that they did not plan to start a war with Israel in 2006, but were instead seeking to resolve the political prisoner issue by taking Israeli soldiers in the hope of a prisoner swap and that in fact Israel and the US were simply waiting for an opportunity to take them out. See Stephen Zunes,

'Washington's Proxy War', in Nubar Hovsepian (ed.), *The War on Lebanon: A Reader*, (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2007).

²⁰ Ayesha was one of the most famous of the wives of the Prophet Mohammed and she is particularly revered by Sunnis. The Shi'a do not worship her because they say she actively colluded with other important figures in Islam, Abu Bakr, Uthman and Umar, to prevent Ali (the nephew of the Prophet) from becoming Caliph after the Prophet's death. As such, the use of this name was a clear message to the Shi'a that this was Sunni attack as revenge for Hizballah's involvement in Syria.

²¹ The media have reported that the bombings are linked to members of the Syrian intelligence services, which is extremely problematic again for Hizballah.

²² Genieve Abdo, 'Lebanon's Salafi Scare'. *Foreign Policy*, 17 July 2012. http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/07/17/lebanons_salafi_scare; and Mark Lynch, 'The New Salafi Politics'. *Foreign Policy*, 15 October 2013. http://lynch.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/10/15/the_new_salafi_politics

²³ Nasser Chararah, 'Has Al-Qaeda Infiltrated Lebanon?', *Al-Monitor*, 13 August 2013. Accessed 01 September, 2013 <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/08/lebanon-infiltration-takfiri-groups-al-qaeda.html>

²⁴ Rumour has it that Hizballah were not involved logistically until sometime around the end of 2012. This cannot be confirmed. See Anonymous, 'Lebanon's Sectarian Fall', *Al-Monitor*, 2 July, 2013. Accessed 01 September, 2013 <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/07/lebanon-sunni-shiite-strife-syria-conflict-assir.html>; and Nasser Chararah, 'Hezbollah Defends Shiite Villages in Syria War', *Al-Monitor*, 20 February, 2013. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/02/hezbollah-shiites-syria.html>

²⁵ Anonymous, 'Lebanon's Sectarian Fall'.

²⁶ Alison Tahmizian Meuse, 'Syria Rebels Must Protect Religious Sites: Human Rights Watch', *Daily Star*, 13 January, 2013. Beirut, Lebanon.

²⁷ Anonymous, 'Shrine of Sakina-Bint-Al Hussain Damaged', *Kashmiri Observer*, 16 February, 2013.

²⁸ Rakhan Al-Fakih, 'Deadly Clash Opens New Chapter of Syria War in Lebanon', *Daily Star*, 3 June, 2013. Beirut, Lebanon.

²⁹ Nasr, *The Shi'a Revival*.

³⁰ Steven Sotloff, 'Bahrain's Shi'a Crackdown', *Foreign Policy*, 10 September 2010. <http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/09/09/bahrain>

³¹ See for example, Khurram Shahzad, 'How Sectarian Killers Operate with "Impunity" in Pakistan', *Daily Star*, 14 March, 2013. Beirut, Lebanon.; Maaz Khan, 'Pakistan Arrests Suspects over Shiite Killings', *Daily Star*, 19 February, 2013. Beirut, Lebanon.; and Farhan Bokhari, 'Pakistan Christians Fear More Persecution Following Church Attack', *FT.com*, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/0b4a4ce6-2432-11e3-8905-00144feab7de.html>, accessed 24 September 2013.

³² See Holly Dages, 'The Shiite Scare in Egypt'. *Al-Monitor*, 11 April, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/04/egypt-anti-shiism-scare-protests-salafis-muslim-brotherhood.html>. Accessed 01 September, 2013; 'Human Rights Watch: Brotherhood Inciting Hate', *Daily Star*, 27 June, 2013. Beirut, Lebanon.

³³ See Adnan Duraid, 'Wave of car bombs kills dozens in Iraq', *The New York Times*, 30 July 2013; Tim Arango, 'Car bombings kill scores across Iraq', *The New York Times*, 11 August 2013; and Salam Faraj, '50 Dead in Wave of Iraq Attacks Centred on Baghdad', *Daily Star*, 3 September, 2013. Beirut Lebanon.

³⁴ 'Lebanese Soldiers Killed at Checkpoint', *Al-Jazeera*, 28 May, 2013. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/05/201352852756144767.html>

³⁵ And other minority religions in Lebanon.

³⁶ Mitchell Prothero, 'CIA Tips of Hezbollah About Bombing Plot', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 July 2013. Sydney, Australia.

³⁷ See Aaron Y. Zelin and Charles Lister, 'The Crowning of the Syrian Islamic Front', *Foreign Policy*, (24 June 2013). http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/06/24/the_crowning_of_the_syria_n_islamic_front [accessed 03 September 2013]; Anonymous, 'The Approach of Bandar and the West to Syria: Rockets in the South and Arming the Tribes in the North', *Al-Safir*, 12 July, 2013. Beirut, Lebanon.

³⁸ Oweis Khaled Yacoub, 'Large Gulf Arms Shipment Reaches Syrian Rebels', *Daily Star*, 25 August, 2013. Beirut, Lebanon; Dagalu Turin, 'Salafists Vow to Fight until There Is "Islamic State" in Syria', *Al-Monitor*, 16 January, 2013. accessed 01 September 2013 <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/01/fighter-syria-aleppo-turkey.html>

³⁹ Note, that a lack of support for Hizballah's actions in Syria does not signify a lack of support for Hizballah's longstanding goal of resistance to Israel which enjoys broad support amongst the Shi'a of Lebanon.

⁴⁰ Russia, is of course fast becoming a key regional player, but this is a new development and there is insufficient space to detail that here. However, the same argument could be made about Russia's pragmatic reasons for wishing to retain access to the Mediterranean means they are viewed locally as supporting the Shi'a axis of resistance because they maintain relationships with Syria and Iran.

⁴¹ Suleiman al-Khalidi, 'New Saudi-Supplied Missiles Boost Rebels in South Syria', *Daily Star*, 15 August, 2013. Beirut, Lebanon.; Oweis, 'Large Gulf Arms Shipment Reaches Syrian Rebels'; and Anonymous, 'The Approach of Bandar and the West to Syria'.

⁴² It should be noted however that the extent to which funding for Salafis comes from individuals in these states versus being channelled directly from government funds is unclear; however at best these states do not appear to be working terribly hard to prevent funding from reaching their intended targets.

⁴³ Aside from the discordant band of individuals who represent the Syrian Opposition overseas, as yet there have been no clear statements from any elements amongst the Syrian opposition fighters on the ground that there is an intention to create a fully democratic secular state, or even a democratic confessional system.

⁴⁴ Lauren Williams, 'McCain Crosses Paths with Rebel Kidnapper', *Daily Star*, 30 May, 2013. Beirut, Lebanon.

⁴⁵ The hostages have not been released as a result of Qatari intervention and the provision of a large sum of money.

⁴⁶ The history of Western hostage taking by groups affiliated with the Shi'a is detailed exceptionally well in Robert Fisk, *Pity the Nation: Lebanon at War*,

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). I argue here that this is the local perception. It probably is quite understandable that US policy-makers are less sympathetic to the plight of the Shi'a hostages in light of US nationals' experiences in Lebanon and Iran in the 1980s.

⁴⁷ Shane Harris and Matthew M. Aid, 'Exclusive: CIA Files Prove America Helped Saddam as He Gassed Iran', *Foreign Policy*, July/August 2013.

⁴⁸ See for example Stephen Kinzer, *All the Shah's Men*, (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2008).

⁴⁹ Anonymous, 'The Approach of Bandar and the West to Syria'.

⁵⁰ See for example Duane Bratt, 'Explaining Peacekeeper Performance: The Un in Internal Conflicts', *International Peacekeeping*, 4 (3) (1997), pp. 45-70.

⁵¹ For example, Netanyahu's recent bout of shuttle 'diplomacy' which saw him flying to the US to meet with President Obama on hearing of his telephone conversation with President Rouhani.