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From Iraq to Lebanon and back: the people want the fall of the regime

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12-15 Minuten

In Beirut's Riad al-Solh Square, a group of protestors gather around a beating drum and chant, "From Iraq to Beirut, one revolution and it won't die." In Baghdad, protesters hold a banner with the words, "From Baghdad to Beirut, we shall continue. No Sunni no Shia; our state must be secular." As the two countries erupt in protest, social media brims with such messages of solidarity, sent from Iraq to Lebanon and vice versa.

Some scenes from both countries bear uncanny resemblance: young, working class men revolting shirtless; women leading the chants, standing defiantly in front of security forces; satirical songs, aimed at the ruling elite, spreading like wildfire; previously-deserted concrete buildings occupied, floor after floor, by demonstrators raising flags; and protesters swaying to "Mawtini, Mawtini", Iraq's national anthem, and for many that of Palestine as well, equally emotional and angry, their raspy voices calling out for the downfall of a sectarian regime.

Protestors in Lebanon chanting: "From Baghdad to Beirut one revolution that will not die"

This week, in both countries, the government agreed to resign and protesters took to the streets, once again, jubilant and in tears. They celebrate, but only momentarily, claiming there is still a lot of work left to do before there are real, tangible political results.

Lumping protests in both countries together is dangerous -- given their many historical and structural differences, and their continuous denouncement by Iran-backed politicians as conspiratorial or foreign-influenced. But these protests do have key similarities that explicate important political and regional trends.

“Against sectarianism, against sectarianism”

Sectarianism, despite its straightforward definition, is not easily graspable. It requires zooming into a state's specific history, its institutions, and state-building rhetoric. The way sectarian identities are used by politicians and militias, and the way these identities are experienced and expressed, are not fixed; they are ever-changing and ambiguous. But in both Iraq and Lebanon, sectarianism has been used as a political tool by the ruling elite to maintain and control power.

Lebanon's very foundation, even prior to its independence in 1943, was based on the idea of power-sharing between the country's many different sects. This system of power-sharing, referred to as consociationalism, extends to political representation, legal matters (i.e. personal affairs, such as marriage and divorce, are relegated to the different religious laws instead of a civil law) and public sector job divisions, among others. Political elites provide both 'security' and 'welfare' to members of their sect, thereby tying those in need

of protection and financial support, i.e. the working class and lower middle class, to [them](#). In this sense, sectarian identity is used as a means of trapping people and ensuring they continue to vote for the leaders of their sect.

In Iraq, since the crumbling of Saddam Hussein's authoritarian regime, the political landscape bears a resemblance to Lebanon's system of sectarian power-sharing. However, prior to 2003, the regime repressed modes of religious or sectarian expression and pursued an authoritarian, hegemonic form of governance under the Baath regime. The Iraqi constitution, which was ratified in 2005, changed this: Iraq was re-established as a federal and parliamentary democracy, whereby the country's different religions, sects, and nationalities are acknowledged and legitimized. This switch, from a collective Iraqi identity to sub-identities, enabled regional power players to exploit the power vacuum.

In both countries, sectarian identities are used by the ruling elite to pit people against one another; yet, simultaneously, the project of national unity and state-building depends (since Lebanon's inception and since post-2003 Iraq) on the idea of the sectarian quota (*'muhasasa al ta'ifiyye'*). The regional conflicts and especially in the last decade the revolution in Syria, and its ensuing geopolitical and proxy layers, both sowed and amplified sectarian sensitivities in both countries, especially between Sunnis and Shias.





Iraqi protesters carrying a banner with the slogan 'From Baghdad to Beirut, we shall continue for a civic state, and not for a Sunni or a Shia state'. | Source unknown

Therein lies the key similarity between Lebanon and Iraq: both are sectarian regimes (*'anthima ta'ifiyya*), operating as parliamentary democracies, that aim to “accommodate” the country’s different sects. In the same way that Lebanon’s presidency is reserved for a Maronite Christian, its prime ministership for a Sunni, and its speaker of parliament for a Shia, Iraq’s presidency is for Kurds, its prime ministership for Shias, and its speaker of the house for Sunnis. But, beyond that, and perhaps even more importantly, clientelistic networks and modes of power domination among the ruling elite continue to rest on the exploitation of these sectarian identities (*'hawiyat ta'ifiyya*).

And today, why have protests erupted?

On one level, and perhaps the most rudimentary one, the protests erupted for economic and social reasons -- high levels of unemployment, corruption and the elite’s

pickpocketing of wealth -- and a total disdain of public services -- from both states' weak infrastructure to their lack of tangible insurance or social security. Across both countries, revolts were in the name of the hungry, targeting the political class as one broad face representing those who have led to this nation-wide impoverishment.

In Lebanon, one of the most resounding chants has been "all of them means all of them" (*kelon ya'ni kelon*), to illustrate that all politicians have a hand in this. This chant has also been used as an opportunity to point fingers at Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah, whose supporters refuse the narrative that Nasrallah is one of the corrupt politicians, retorting back to protestors, "all of them means all of them; but Nasrallah is the most dignified of them". In Iraq, it has been "the people rose alone, don't ride the wave" (*hatha al-shai'b wehda tela'a, la terkab al-mawja*). Iraq's slogan is largely directed against the Shia political leader and cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, a veteran of the ethnic-sectarian quota, known for riding the wave of previous protest movements..

But, on a secondary level, the revolts have been against the political system itself. Chants have been against sectarianism, with the aim of bringing down regimes dependent on the mantra of divide and conquer. In both countries, anti-establishment protestors have refrained from using sectarian narratives and, on the contrary, shifted the discourse to one of unity.

Lebanese protesters and analysts have said the revolution has finally ended the civil war: its painful memory of sectarianism and fear of the 'other'. In northern Tripoli, a Sunni-majority city, there have been chants for Sour, a

southern Shia-majority city; and in the Shia-majority city of Baalbeck there have been chants for the Sunni-majority town of Beddawi; and in the Christian city of Jal el-Dib, vigils were held for the Shia-majority town of Nabatieh. Vigils across the country were held for protesters who were attacked and beaten up by Hezbollah and Amal supporters.

Protestors are clear: they do not want reforms, they want a revolution, a revolution that unseats sectarianism and overhauls those who rule in its name. In Iraq, similarly, people stood up against all powerful figures and groups, making it clear that no politician can override this movement as they have done in the past. Protesters spoke out against their corrupt government, against the pressures of Iran's proxy politics in Iraq, against the religious establishment (*Marjaiyya*), and more. This is why Hariri and Abdul Mahdi's set of reforms were not enough; this is why their resignation is not enough.

On a third level, protests have been non-hierarchical, decentralized, and leaderless in a similar vein to the initial phases of the Arab uprisings and the horizontal movements across the world, of which Chile, today, is one of them. This utterly confuses (and frightens) political parties, debunking the entrenched idea of people being sheep in need of a shepherd.

Protests have also happened across different classes. In Lebanon this is distinct from previous protests in the country's recent history - such as the 2015 ones - whereby protests were centralized in Beirut and spearheaded by civil society members and middle-class/upper middle class factions. The biggest shock from the current movement came from the

working class revolting and saying, loud and clear, that they have suffered long and hard from their leaders (*'zu'ama'*). People, from those selling corn on carts to professors from elite universities to yoga instructors, are standing side by side in the country's major cities, demanding change.



From the Feminist Block March in Beirut November 3, 2019. "Power to women". | Picture by Walid El Hour

Protests in Iraq are mostly in Shia-dominated areas, due to Sunni-majority areas in the western and northern parts of the country arguably fearing a government-led propagandist war on them for being "sleeping ISIS cells". Iraq, unlike Lebanon, is still in the early stages of post-sectarianism and continues to recover from its war with ISIL in 2014; and Iraqi protesters have been met with heavier security measures from the government and a certainly bloodier response from militias. Yet, the Iraqi movement has also been leaderless, youth-led, and grassroots, erupting by word of mouth.

And, finally, on the fourth level, these protests have broken a barrier of fear and announced their denouncement of Iran. In Lebanon, people are speaking up against President Michel Aoun and his son in law Minister Gebran Bassil; they are speaking up against Prime Minister Saad Hariri as well as

every other major politician from Lebanese Forces' Samir Geagea, to the Progressive Socialist Party's Walid Jumblat, and despite attacks by supporters of Hezbollah and Amal movement, also against Hassan Nasrallah and Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri .

Nasrallah has made his party's position clear by reiterating in his speeches, following the revolution, that he will continue to defend the current government's mandate and work with other political parties. Iraqi protesters, too, point their fingers at Iran and the militias it backs, attacking and torching their offices and burning Iranian flags in Baghdad. Despite the heavy violence protesters met by protesters from security forces and militias, with around 250 dead since October, they continue to fill up the squares. Last Friday, despite the military grade tear gas, Baghdad's Tahrir Square witnessed its largest protest movement since the fall of Saddam Hussein.

The Arab spring is not dead

From Algeria to Sudan, from Iraq to Lebanon, people continue to march on, demanding social and economic reforms, demanding a revolution, demanding an end to corruption and authoritarianism. Every time there is talk of the Arab spring being a thing of the past, people rise up to say it isn't. In fact, the protest movements across Lebanon and Iraq reflect how much youth have learnt from other Arab countries. Both Lebanese and Iraqis are making it loud and clear that the change includes the entire constitution, judiciary, ruling class, and, most importantly, the system. From the streets, protesters respond to televised speeches of politicians: we will not be fooled. They respond to politicians' adamant

insistence on calling this an uprising or a series of protests: no, this is a revolution and it is a revolution against you. The people are rebelling against sectarianism, asserting a future where their differences aren't used against them by politicians.





Drawing by Salam Alhassan I .

The future is murky. Can systemic change in the current geopolitical status quo be achieved? What will it take? And how will protesters navigate the role of Iran, other external players, and entrenched structures?

What is clear is that protesters are relentless. They say what they have achieved in the streets - from reclaiming public spaces to Iraq's tuktuks rushing wounded protesters to nearby hospitals and Lebanon's protesters recycling waste from demonstrations - the state hasn't been able to ever achieve.