

Breaking the Cycle of Crises in Lebanon

Grassroots Strategies of De-sectarianization Between 2015 and 2020



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ABSTRACT

Inspired by the latest anti-establishment protests in Lebanon, this thesis investigates how and why a pattern of non-sectarian movements emerged in the country's consociational context since 2015. The analysis zooms in on (i) the post-civil war evolution of Lebanon's political economy and the grievances it exacerbated in citizens, and (ii) the strategies by which the new wave of movements re-negotiate their room for manoeuvre within the Lebanese political structure. In order to illustrate these grassroots strategies, the thesis describes and contrasts the discourse, as well as the concrete actions of two non-sectarian movements. First, a 'civil society' political coalition titled Kollouna Watani is introduced that challenged the established elites by competing in Lebanon's 2018 general elections. Second, the mass protest movement starting in October 2019 is examined which demanded structural reforms in the country's sectarian power-sharing order. The author situates her analysis in the recently emerged debate on the process of 'de-sectarianization' in the Middle East that discusses the possibilities for de-constructing instrumentally and institutionally reinforced boundaries in multi-confessional societies. By combining this lens with materials supporting the agency of social movements, the thesis contributes to the understanding of Lebanese grassroots actors' potential and challenges to push for non-sectarian transformation from the bottom up.

Keywords: non-sectarian social movements, grassroots agency, de-sectarianization, consociationalism, anti-establishment protests, political entryism

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1. INTRODUCTION

‘Enough is enough’ – chanted Lebanese protesters as they took over Beirut’s Martyrs Square on October 17th, 2019 at the start of a movement that grew out to be the largest and most durable uprising in the country’s history. Among the reasons that drove them to voice their dissent against the establishment were more than the acute unemployment and the announcement of further planned taxes on internet calls. They were provoked by decades of cyclical relapses into mismanagement and economic malaise in Lebanon’s political schema, particularly in the post-civil war era. While the imaginary lines of division are traditionally drawn between the 18 confessional communities that constitute Lebanon’s societal fabric (see Fakhoury, 2014a; Salloukh et al., 2015), the most recent drive for collective actions uniquely resonated with citizens across confessions – a phenomenon that led reporters and participants alike to optimistically refer to the movement as the ‘beginning of the end of the civil war’ and the *thawra* (‘revolution’) (Vohra, 2020).

That is not to say that cross-confessional movements were an unheard-of phenomenon in Lebanon’s history. In fact, the *thawra* can be considered a milestone in the country’s culture of opposition to which numerous non-sectarian initiatives paved the way. What started out as mass protests against the deterioration of the infrastructure and environment in 2015’s garbage protests have since crystallised an increasingly salient anti-elite discourse (Nucho, 2019). Numerous collectives that formed during this movement continued to exert change and fill in for the state in local communities. Others elevated their agenda to the level of formal politics and debuted as candidates in Beirut’s 2016 municipal elections, and Lebanon’s 2018 general elections (see Haidar, 2017; Waterschoot, 2018). Despite their vastly diverging strategies, all of these movements transcended communal boundaries and explicitly questioned the logic behind Lebanon’s confession-based political system. Their visions can be grouped around a shared aim: to target the frail service provision apparatus of the Lebanese state – particularly an established elite circle’s capitalization thereof – and claim structural reforms.

Movements that seek to challenge the Lebanese political-economic arrangement either through non-political or political routes have faced both deliberate retaliation by the government, as well as structural impediments on their capacity to mobilise cross-confessionally (El Kak, 2019; Khneisser, 2018; Nagle, 2016). The political elites are thought to hold vested interests in preserving communal divides in a consociational – in other words, power-sharing – system that has informally guaranteed proportional representation for Lebanon’s multiple confessional groups since 1943. The power-sharing agreement was later

formally laid down in the 1989 Taif Accords that marked the end of a 15-year period of civil war, and officially enshrined the rights of all communities (Nagle, 2018). Yet, this legal recognition did not translate into the reconciliation of the multiple confessional groups on the micro-level of co-existence, in which the elites ‘juggling with communal grievances’ is considered a significant factor (Fakhoury, 2014b, p. 518). Civil society movements increasingly problematise these unrepaired divides in an emerging discourse of national unity, as well as actions that seek to expose and end the corrupted management of public properties and services (Nucho, 2019; Rønn, 2020a).

1.1 Aim

Since society in Lebanon is portrayed as structurally fragmented, it is considered puzzling on its own that non-sectarian movements could emerge, with eagerness to overcome the communal boundaries. Even more so, since discussions on the Lebanese consociational system predominantly attract primordial and instrumentalist approaches that emphasise the role of regional ‘strongmen’ in maintaining the sectarianized status quo which they portray as static and unchangeable (see e.g. Karam, 2018; Mabon, 2019a). While these works are great contributions for explaining Lebanon’s complex, regionally entangled realities, they offer little in terms of understanding the agency of grassroots movements. The thesis aims to address this complication by investigating the capacity of local non-establishment actors – hereafter referred to as civil society – to develop strategies by which they mobilise supporters and push for transformative change from the bottom up.

The assessment of these strategies is aided by the analytic frame ‘de-sectarianization’. Recently coined and developed into an academic debate, this term denotes attempts to reduce the politically charged aspects of confession-based identities by contesting the institutional divides which are thought to enable their salience (Mabon, 2019b). Authors in this debate opt for a more dynamic approach to how such systems are created in the Middle East and North African (MENA). They conceptualise the sectarian political system as one that was *constructed* and consented to by Lebanese communities’ members and elites alike, thereby presuming the agency and interaction of the two levels in *de-constructing* the system as well (Hashemi & Postel, 2017). By portraying the sectarianized political structure as produced by these actors’ interests and dependence, they hold that formulating visions to reverse the process may also be achieved by the hands of the same actors. This aspect is crucial from the perspective of the thesis, as it permits the assessment of non-sectarian initiatives embedded in the discussion on de-sectarianization.

While offering a useful lens to explore non-sectarian movements through, the de-sectarianization debate contains certain blind spots that will be addressed in the theoretical section. Firstly, it is to some extent affected by the instrumentalist cynicism that characterises most authors' stance towards transformation in Lebanon, despite theoretically supporting and advocating for change. Secondly – although scholars agree that de-sectarianization is a desirable trajectory for states in the MENA (Valbjørn, 2020) – due to the novelty of the debate, it remains ambiguous whether it is to be understood as descriptive of ongoing processes, or a prescriptive agenda for these states. This is amplified by the fact that authors engaging in the discussion primarily focus on outcomes (e.g. tangible policy achievements) as the markers of change, leaving little attention for the dynamics within these movements. To adjust the theoretical framework to assessing grassroots actions, the thesis builds additional articles into the discussion that analyse social movements in divided societies and Lebanon in particular. Such literature pieces serve to nuance this thesis' vision for the grassroots-level dynamics that may play into macro-level developments in the long run. Based on the sum of these works, the following research question is formulated:

How has the de-sectarianization of the Lebanese political system been pushed for by the discursive and concrete strategies of non-sectarian grassroots movements between 2015 and 2020?

Behind this question lies a set of sub-questions that the following chapters will address:

- (i) How have the structural constraints of Lebanon's consociationalism been amplified in the post-civil war era?*
- (ii) What room for manoeuvre can the members of Lebanese civil society make use of, and create, in (i) mobilising jointly and (ii) challenging the sectarianized political elites?*
- (iii) What factors contributed to the salience and spread of a non-sectarian agenda among social movements from 2015 onwards?*
- (iv) Through what frames and actions did (i) the Kollouna Watani election coalition and (ii) the thawra's participants enact their claim for a de-sectarianized political system?*
- (v) What similarities and differences do the two movements show along their organisational capacity and the government responses/clampdown they yield?*

1.2 Methodology

To respond to the larger research inquiry, the thesis discusses two concrete cases of civil society mobilization against the sectarianized political structure. Firstly, the political coalition

Kollouna Watani will be introduced by which actors originally associated with civil society organizations attempted to gain mandates in parliament and challenge the system from within by running in 2018's Lebanese general election. Secondly, the latest anti-government protests will be presented, focusing on their earlier stages from October 2019 until the enforcement of the Covid-19 lockdown in Lebanon on March 15th 2020¹. The selection of these two movements was guided by the fact that they represent different strategies for muting politicised confession-based identities – thus, they can be informative about the perspectives that Lebanese citizens have about their role in de-sectarianization. The former movement demonstrates the strategies and struggles of a civil society organisation (or in this case, multiple ones) to make a crossover into formal politics, while the latter illustrates the fast-paced street dynamic of contention against the sectarianized political system.

A qualitative methodology was chosen to guide the collection of data for secondary research and its subsequent analysis. Due to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the author's plans to conduct part of the research as a fieldwork in Beirut had to be revised² – thus, the thesis is entirely based on secondary literature. Academic materials that unravel the political and socio-economic background of the post-civil war Lebanon were taken as the basis for the contextual chapter. These primarily follow an institutionalist logic, while analyses of de-sectarianization – which served as a backbone to the theoretical parts – originate mainly from instrumentalist thinking. To balance out these approaches, further literature pieces are included that stem from a constructivist epistemology and allow for the assessment of social movements as the units of analysis. In addition to these, the author relies on non-academic materials such as policy briefs and news reports, whereby the factual parameters of the two movements are triangulated to ensure the validity of claims in the case study sections. That particularly applies the *thawra*, of which few academic materials have been published yet. Occasionally, statements and arguments in the thesis are made based on content found on social media or discussions followed in online panel discussions to enrich the fabric of the analysis.

¹ Placing such temporal limitations on the analysis was necessary in order to draw a feasible boundary between the data collection and thesis writing phases of the research. In addition, the protests which renewed in spite of/after the lockdown (see Mackinnon, 2020; Middle East Monitor, 2020) have been transformed by the deepening of the economic collapse due to the pandemic, thus, assessing them falls outside the scope of the present theoretical frame.

² Since this revision took place in the preparatory phases of the fieldwork – which would have only lasted four weeks in total – the thesis was only marginally affected by the travel ban.

1.3 Outline

The thesis is structured as follows. Chapter two provides a discussion on the theoretical works surrounding the concept of de-sectarianization and how the thesis aims to contribute to it. Additionally, chapter three analyses the structural context which cultivated a clientelist economy and deepened confession-based divides in Lebanon. The analysis then turns towards discussing the proximate causes behind the emergence of non-sectarian movements and their salience to mobilise the country's citizens against the elites in chapter four. This is followed by two sub-sections detailing the repertoire of action and cohesion of the two selected movements. Finally, chapter five contrasts their strategies in terms of organizational capacity and synthesises the movements with the scholarly works on the top-down and bottom-up ideas for de-sectarianization introduced in the theoretical part. As a conclusion, the main findings of the thesis are summarised and directions for further research are identified and recommended in the topic of Lebanon's consociational structure and the agency of non-sectarian movements.

2. REVERSING THE ‘IRRIVERSIBLE’? VISIONS OF DE-SECTARIANIZATION IN THE SCHOLARSHIP

The following discussion will focus on an emerging strand of literature on *‘de-sectarianization’* in the MENA region which is set out to counterbalance the primordialist voices that have for long dominated the discussion on politicised sectarian identities. Authors in this debate respond to the simplistic and deterministic ideas about politics and society in this region that are claimed to inform the narrative of leading politicians to this day (see e.g. Di Peri, 2019; Majed, 2019). This tendency that scholars refer to as ‘new orientalism’ attributes sub-national disputes in Lebanon and its neighbouring states to ancient schisms and irreconcilable divides, while paying little regard to the complexity (and intentionality) of these relations (Hashemi & Postel, 2017, p. 1). It is the aim of the scholars contributing to the de-sectarianization debate to move beyond such presumptions and perform multi-level analyses on the socio-economic structure of states in the MENA, and the responses given to these by elites and civil society movements, which may pave the way to reconciling confession-based identities. Taking this approach as its analytical point of departure, this chapter introduces the theoretical lens of de-sectarianization with regards to its ontological assumptions. In addition, it incorporates further literature on boundary-making in the institutional setting of power-sharing democracies, and grassroots strategies to contest these boundaries.

2.1 (De-)Sectarianization

Engaged with the systematic assessment of the processes in which the political salience of communal identities is reduced, studies of de-sectarianization scrutinise institutional and bottom-up reforms that seek to reimagine and transform the role of religion in MENA politics. De-sectarianization is a concept and theory that was established to address recent years’ dynamics of (i) heightened inter-confessional antagonisms due to the rivalry of the predominantly Sunni Saudi Arabia and the predominantly Shia Iran, and (ii) increased popular dissent which brought to life mass anti-sectarian movements (most notably the Arab Spring) (Mabon, 2019a; Postel & Hashemi, 2018). It is defined by Simon Mabon, a chief contributor to the de-sectarianization debate as ‘the broad spectrum of ways in which sectarian identities are contested and the politically charged aspects of sectarianism are reduced’ (Mabon, 2019b). As the privative prefix ‘de-’ suggests, this theory builds on the premise that previously, a process of ‘sectarianization’ has taken place, by which authors understand the ‘mobilization of popular sentiments along [confession-based] identity markers’. (Hashemi & Postel, 2017, p. 3). The concept de-sectarianization was selected to frame the analysis of this thesis for two reasons.

Firstly, it presumes a constructivist dynamic, rather than an essentialist nature behind the confession-based cleavages that characterise such political systems. Secondly, due to its constructivist assumption, it allows analyses to be performed not just on the institutional/elite level, but also in terms of how bottom-up actors react to these.

There appears to be consensus among the authors participating in this debate that sectarianization is a primary impediment to democratizations in the MENA, and that de-sectarianization could be the key to solidifying liberal democratic systems in this region (Mabon, 2020a; Salloukh & Verheij, 2017; Sisk, 2013). However, an area of debate is observable in the literature concerning how authors envision this transition. To start with, there is a divide between scholars that take a descriptive approach to de-sectarianization, assessing it as a process without seeking to facilitate it. A characteristic of this approach is that it leaves room for discussion for whether or not de-sectarianization is possible to achieve at all. Some argue that the politicization of communal identities is so deep-seated in the region's governance repertoire that sectarianism is unlikely to be reduced or eradicated and may only be transformed instead (Valbjørn, 2019, pp. 129-130). Using the scarce success of the Arab Spring as an example, these authors argue that MENA governments have the flexibility to reconfigure their systems to seemingly accommodate policies of de-sectarianization, while still maintaining a status quo convenient for their interests (Gengler, 2020, p.112). High levels of scepticism are reflected in these instrumentalist accounts, which resemble a 'puppets on a string' logic that minimises the agency of non-elite actors. Such arguments go against the aim of this thesis to understand the agency of grassroots actors. Nevertheless, they inform the author's understanding of the extreme difficulties posed by the tight and cemented structures that actors seeking non-sectarian reforms must navigate through in this region.

Other authors reflect a more optimistic outlook on de-sectarianization, by depicting it as a project that will almost certainly be realised, albeit predicting it to last several decades (Postel & Hashemi, 2018, p. 63). Mabon goes to the length of prescribing the criteria deemed necessary for the process to be carried out, by proposing a 'four-stage framework to facilitate de-sectarianization'. These stages outline the necessity to (i) facilitate conflict transformation by optimising resource management to decrease social inequality, (ii) strengthen the rule of law to end the crisis of legitimacy, (iii) garner respect for individual fundamental freedoms to restore trust in political systems, and (iv) construct a regional peace agreement to reduce geopolitical rivalries that seep into local affairs (Mabon, 2019a, pp. 30-32). Notably, there is significant parity between Mabon's account and the demands of non-sectarian protest movements that

emerged in Lebanon since 2015, in that he prescribes a social-liberal reformist agenda. At the same time, his outline of the criteria for successful de-sectarianization primarily demand changes that are heavily institution-focused, and – consequently – rather ambitious to expect to arrive intrinsically from governance structures in the MENA that are accused of having cultivated the sectarianized status quo in the first place.

Due to the parallels between Mabon's four-stage framework and the strategic demands of recent years' uprisings, it is remarkable how underemphasised these movements remain in the scholar's account of the (f)actors that could potentially drive the de-sectarianization process. In fact, this blind spot for the agency of grassroots movements is observable in most works published in the theoretical debate up to this point – albeit their push seems necessary to induce elites' willingness to ease their grip over the fragmented power structures. Besides taking vague notes of the necessity of 'bottom-up paths' (Valbjørn, 2020, p. 13) or 'bottom-up "social cohesion" programming' (Salloukh & Verheij, 2017, p. 172), authors dedicate little space to mapping out the *how* of citizens' ongoing and potential involvement in facilitating de-sectarianization. Instead, they reflect a more result-oriented and evaluative approach that stresses tangible institutional and policy reforms as driving factors behind the transition process (Gengler, 2020, pp. 110-111; Mabon, 2020a, p. 28; Postel & Hashemi, 2018, p. 61). This, on the one hand, is dissonant with the quest of the de-sectarianization literature to offer a balanced account of top-down as well as the bottom-up attempts to deconstruct communal cleavages. On the other hand, it highlights the multi-level complexity that scholars analysing politics in the MENA region deal with, where any actor's manoeuvres must be weighed against, and interpreted vis-à-vis highly resilient political institutions.

Cognizant of this, authors understandably emphasise the institutional context of MENA states as the key instruments for loading communal identities with political competition, antagonism and exceptionalism (Fakhoury, 2014a, pp. 231-233). The post-colonial political scheme of numerous countries over the region, such as Egypt, Iraq and Lebanon were engineered around a form of political power-sharing, which is placed in the core of sectarianization analyses (Cammett, 2019, pp. 4-5). Therefore, the institutional domain is also identified by authors within this debate as the primary level on which de-sectarianization may be carried out. Within this domain, two aspects are essential to discuss in the scholarly debate: (i) views on state weakness and how they affect the boundary making strategies of governments, and (ii) how the implementation of consociationalism in Lebanon's specific political context

amplifies confession-based fragmentations. It is to exploring these questions that the section now turns.

2.2 The Power-sharing Paradox

Political power-sharing, or in other words consociationalism, is a controversial element in the literature focusing on sectarianization, and debates are high around whether it prevents, or perpetuates the politicization of communal identities. Moving away from the notion that homogeneity is a necessary condition for fostering peace in a society, consociationalism relies on an arrangement that accommodates multiple (ethnoreligious) communities by guaranteeing them political representation (Lijphart, 1977, pp. 26-27). Scholars that recognise this form of power-sharing as a feasible practice emphasise its institutional potential to reduce opposition between communal identities which may otherwise lead to conflict. In their view, the confession-based political system's strengths include allocating significant autonomy to the sub-national communities (Kettley, 2001, p. 249), and better protecting the interests of ethnic minorities (Nagle, 2018, p. 1374).

Paradoxically, consociationalism in Lebanon and in the broader region is widely accused in the scholarship for yielding the exact opposite results. The implementation of power-sharing is portrayed as a mediating variable between (i) organically existing communal differences and (ii) the sectarianized status quo that is cemented in Lebanon (Dixon, 2012, pp. 113-114; Fakhoury, 2014a, pp. 234-237; Horowitz, 1985, pp. 564-567). Dividing political power between the multiple confessions is thought to empower communal elites to inflate inter-group boundaries in order to isolate citizens belonging to their respective constituencies and maximise their influence as service providers ('patrons') over them (Baumann, 2016, p. 6). For such boundary strategies to be effective on the elites' part, they require the necessary resources (Borgh & Lasance, 2013, p. 191) – which the Lebanese form of consociationalism seems to provide. How this sectarianized dynamic is sustained is explicable by the hybrid nature of Lebanon's democracy in which the rule of law and accountability of political elites is not fully enforced. Instead, it is often informal agreements and practices that determine how power and resources are shared, resulting in severe inequities and chains of dependence (Valbjørn & Hinnebusch, 2019, pp. 5-6). This problem is compounded by the fact that Lebanon's state apparatus is considered 'weak' by the scholarship, referring to its incapacity to regulate the provision of public services, thus giving way to communal strongmen to supplement for the services. On the other hand, its 'dispersed domination' (Migdal, 1994, p. 9) caused by the lack

of centrality creates a government whose primary purpose is survival, for which purpose it is motivated to crackdown on attempts that seek to challenge it (Hashemi & Postel, 2017, p. 6).

Despite their overwhelmingly negative accounts of Lebanon's consociationalism, authors in the de-sectarianization debate emphasise that there are possible alternative implementations for the same power-sharing arrangement. A distinction is drawn between 'corporate' consociationalism and 'liberal' consociationalism in the literature (Salloukh & Verheij, 2017, pp. 150-151); the former referring to a structure which primarily rewards participation in political processes on the basis of ascribed identities, while hampers initiatives that are founded on neutral (e.g. environmental, regional or gender) visions of belonging. In contrast, the other, liberal form of consociationalism does not fix predetermined identities in the centre of electoral participation. Instead, it facilitates the emergence of candidates that are organised along multi-confessional or secular political identities, thus – while not entirely preventing – it decreases the likelihood of political cleavages coinciding with ethnic boundaries. Scholars argue that transitioning to a hybrid form of consociationalism could already be a considerable leap towards cultivating an institutional context that prioritises interest-based identities – rather than confession-based ones – thereby incentivizing de-sectarianization (Ibid, p. 163).

These are in line with Lijphart's account, who is the chief proponent of consociationalism's potential in mitigating confessional cleavages; he claimed that the power-sharing structure in Lebanon needed to be 'repaired, not replaced' (Lijphart, 2002, p. 42). There is one gap in the logic that is zoomed in entirely on institutional reforms, though. It assumes that implementing a certain form of institutional design can bring predictable outcomes, and while making this argument it overlooks agents whose reactions to the resulting systems may also be transformative. While not doubting the importance of taking the institutional context heavily into account in these states, this thesis advocates that in order to understand the real life implications of power-sharing, it is not enough to assess the institutional structures – it is more informative to assess how relevant actors interact with it and within it.

The consociational system is both exploited (capitalised on) and contested on multiple levels of society, rather than automatic and path-dependent (Nucho, 2019; Rønn, 2020a, pp. 88-89). Non-sectarian movements such as the Arab Spring and more recently, waves of protests in Lebanon and Iraq demonstrate that not only elites use their available resources to broaden their sphere of influence in the Lebanese society (Mabon, 2020a, p. 30). Although civil society involvement is mentioned in many of the scholarly works of de-sectarianization, but only as a marginal, supplementary role as 'bottom-up support' for the political transition. Further

investigations are needed into the repertoires and strategic choices of civil society movements to determine what room for manoeuvre they possess to contest sectarianized governance in Lebanon and the broader MENA region. It is the aim of this thesis to address this gap by broadening the scope of de-sectarianization to encompass grassroots movements' strategies.

2.3 Civil society movements in divided societies

The potential of civil society actors to push for structural changes is illustrated in Ussama Makdisi's historical accounts of elites-versus-commoners dynamics in Lebanon's 1860 civil war. This conflict mobilised peasants to undermine the hierarchy of a (then) highly secularised elite, and posed sufficient threat to the power of elites for them to become willing to let go of some of their privileges and better accommodate the diverging communal interests of the peasants (Makdisi, 2000a, p. 193). Though since then, both the geographic and societal landscape of Lebanon has been significantly transformed – and today's non-sectarian mobilizations aim to mute, rather than emphasise communal rights – this thesis considers the example of this turmoil instructive for two reasons. Firstly, by reaching back to the Ottoman-era historical roots of sectarianization in Lebanon, Makdisi restores the agency of mobilising non-elites in shaping their political environment. His narrative illuminates that the process of charging communal identities with political meaning in the Lebanese society was, to a great extent, a bottom-up practice rather than primordially present or one-sidedly perpetrated by elites. Secondly (and as a conclusion), he lays down the leading assumption of the de-sectarianization discussion with regards to Lebanon, namely that 'sectarianism was produced [and therefore] it can be changed' (Makdisi, 2000b, p. 166).

However, it is essential to take into account that the actors constituting 'civil society' in Lebanon or other hybrid democracies are far from being a homogeneous entity. Scholarly works that contest the use of this blanket concept highlight the fact that multiple 'uncivil' bodies blend into the profile of civil society in such settings (Borgh & Terwindt, 2014, pp. 23-26). These often do not fulfil the purpose attributed to civil society in 'cementing generalised trust and tolerance across different political communities and promoting a genuine sense of the common or public interests' (Edwards, 2004, p. 35). Clarifying the concept of civil society is relevant from the perspective of this thesis too, as it assesses two very different types of civic engagements; the case of the Kollouna Watani election list formation deals with the politicization, in other words, crossover of a movement originating from a civil society initiative. In contrast, the protests starting in October 2019 manifest a more spontaneous movement where there is loose commitment and a high fluctuation in participants, so it

technically cannot be circumscribed as one entity. Since the thesis aims mainly to assess the discursive and concrete action repertoires of the two movements, and less their organizational ‘consistency’, the difference between them in the latter aspect is not problematised here. Hence the usage of the more general concept of civil society, in addition to ‘non-sectarian social movements’, that is able to encompass both protests and independent political candidacy.

It is nonetheless acknowledged that the peculiar condition of democracies is reflected in the ecology of the civic spheres of MENA states. Lebanon’s power-sharing, introduced above as an incubator for confession-based tensions, is considered to pose threats on civil society organizations both vertically (by elites) and horizontally (by competing non-state organizations) (Warren, 2011, pp. 378-387). Recent years’ opposition movements that emerged were considered puzzling by the scholarship studying Lebanon precisely because of their conscious efforts to break the boundaries culminated by this consociational setting (Khneisser, 2019a; Nucho, 2019). It is in the light of this empirical complication that the thesis incorporates the study of grassroots social movements in divided societies into the de-sectarianization lens, which take account of the repertoires through which civil society initiatives navigate through power-sharing settings.

These analyses allow boundaries to be portrayed not as programmed in divided societies, but as subjects of a negotiation that is carried out jointly by actors on the macro-, as well as the micro-level. Civil society actors in these scholarly accounts are observed together with their respective structures as forces that co-constitute each other. What this implies is that in turn for the state apparatus’ inefficiencies or deliberate efforts to divide citizens, civil society can strategise and challenge it in a number of ways. The strategies that movements adopt are informed by both the institutional environment and the distribution of political power within a state, as well as the political networks present in a society (Wimmer, 2008, pp. 987-989 in Borgh & Lasance, 2013, p. 191). In Lebanon’s case, the axis of these three variables outlines a uniquely complex space of consociational fragmentation, dispersed state domination, and clientelist elite networks that capitalise on the dependence of citizens on their services. It is this complex space that provides the room for manoeuvre available for the two movements selected for case studies that is of great interest to this assessment.

Discursive strategies and fostering identities that transcend the structural boundaries are central in the study of non-sectarian movements’ repertoires. Based on case studies conducted in power-sharing new democracies (Lebanon, Northern Ireland, Bosnia and Herzegovina) Nagle offers a typology of the strategies that different social movements are likely to undertake

in order to advance their interests (Nagle, 2016, pp. 21-25). Firstly, so called *transformationist* movements aim for comprehensive reforms rooted in uniform equal rights, with an emphasis on shared functions (e.g. workers) rather than confessions. Then, a segment of movements which Nagle denotes as *pluralists* opt for embracing the diverse character of the state and promote tolerance for sub-national communities (particularly non-confessional minorities such as LGBT groups). Additionally, a third group is identified as *cosmopolitans*, for their engagement with global, rather than local affairs (e.g. climate activists); in their case, ‘going non-sectarian’ makes sense because their agenda transcends not only communal but also national boundaries. Finally, a group of movements is distinguished as *commonists* that typically unite for single issue in whose case overcoming confessional categorisation is a tool for assembling a stronger opposition voice.

While these categories are in many cases thought to be overlapping, they offer valuable insight to what strategies are likely to emerge in the specific settings of consociationalism. This typology will be applied more elaborately to the Kollouna Watani coalition and the thawra in chapter four. Beforehand, it is essential to provide more in-depth understanding of the practical context of how the structural constraints of Lebanon’s consociationalism evolved. To this end, the following chapter seeks to answer the sub-questions:

How have the structural constraints of Lebanon’s consociationalism been amplified in the post-civil war era?

What room for manoeuvre can the members of Lebanese civil society make use of, and create, in (i) mobilising jointly and (ii) challenging the sectarianized political elites?

2.4 Concluding remarks

The aim of this chapter was to introduce the concept, and corresponding theoretical debate, of de-sectarianization. The author justified the selection of de-sectarianization as an analytic frame for the thesis by detailing its constructivist presumption, which claims that loading communal identities with political meaning is not a one-way and deterministic outcome either in the MENA region, or specifically in Lebanon. Instead, the chapter highlighted that looking at sectarianization as a dynamic strategy of actors on the macro- and micro levels of society leaves room to explore how it can potentially be reversed. Drawing on the descriptive and prescriptive approaches in the literature, scholars’ visions were introduced regarding how this reversal may be realised. It was remarked that while considerable analyses were performed on the institutional aspect of de-sectarianization, the existing strategies of concrete social movements,

such as recent years' non-sectarian civic movements in Lebanon have thus far been left underexplored by this theoretical approach. This discussion therefore sought to connect studies on boundary making strategies, as well as civil society movements in divided settings with the findings of the de-sectarianization debate. This required (i) reframing the power-sharing arrangement of Lebanon as the context with whom non-sectarian grassroots actors interact (rather than the principal domain of analysis) and (ii) extend the inquiry of de-sectarianization to the room for manoeuvre that civil society movements possess in challenging the sectarianized Lebanese political-economic system.

3. CONSTRUCTING THE POST-CIVIL WAR CYCLE OF CRISES IN LEBANON

The current chapter is dedicated to providing a contextual understanding of the post-civil war era political-economic dynamics of Lebanon, and how these affected the mobilisation patterns of opposition movements. The signing of the Taif Accords in 1989 was chosen as the temporal starting point of the analysis for both practical and symbolic reasons. Firstly, while many of the grievances that provoked recent years' Lebanese movements can be traced back to the decades preceding Taif (see e.g. Calfat, 2018; Cammett, 2019), due to the limitations on the length of this thesis, mainly the most proximate and direct causes were selected for further discussion. Secondly, intentions to 'end the civil war' have been at the heart of the latest protests' discursive repertoire, signifying citizens' perceptions that the inter-communal tensions characterizing this turmoil have still not been resolved.

3.1 The frailties of Lebanese consociationalism

Before the outbreak of a civil war between the Lebanese Christian and Muslim communities in 1975, consociationalism had already been practiced in Lebanon since the country emerged as a sovereign state due to the National Pact of 1943. By way of this informal agreement, the 18 recognized confessions residing on the territory of Lebanon were guaranteed proportional representation in the country's parliamentary decision-making. In addition, the pact determined certain government positions to be reserved for particular communities – most prominently, the presidential seat was always held by a Maronite Christian, the prime minister was always a Sunni Muslim, while a member of the Druze community was always elected as the head of military (Kettley, 2001, p. 249). There is a consensus in the literature that the civil war was more induced by external influences and rivalries seeping into local affairs, than the consociational arrangement itself (e.g. Lijphart, 2002; Szekely, 2015). However, even the most renowned advocate of consociationalism, Lijphart remarked that the pre-allocation of parliamentary seats hampers the democratic implementation of power-sharing in Lebanon and argued that in order for it to function properly, the system needed to be modified (Lijphart, 2002, p. 42).

The signing of the peace accords after the protracted internal conflict in 1989 was seen by many as an opportunity to make revisions in the power-sharing model. But the political elites were hesitant to seize this opportunity, leading them to be accused of only implementing cosmetic changes that included granting an equal ratio of representation to the Muslim

communities (instead of the National Pact's 5:6), in acknowledgement of their equal – if not larger – number compared to the Christian communities. For contextual accuracy, it is necessary to note that consociationalism was always viewed as a temporary solution that the Lebanese state was meant to eventually move beyond, and never ‘something in which to take pride, even by those who conceived it and have lauded it’ (Bahout, 2016 p. 23). It is for this reason that the political elites’ reluctance to initiate the agreed upon shift (despite the seemingly opportune moment that the Taif Accords provided) is viewed as a ‘failure’ both by the scholarship and by Lebanon’s civil society (Ghosn & Khoury, 2011, p. 381; Fakhoury, 2014a, p. 240). The fact that this promise of temporariness was not kept illuminates that the Lebanese civil society’s push for de-sectarianization is a grounded claim that is deeply rooted in historical grievances.

On what grounds did the political elites reject/postpone the originally envisioned transition until it became a distant ideal? One prominent argument that elites often voiced against beginning a ‘radical secularization’ was that it would injure the representation of minorities. Although, as Nagle points out, preserving the rights of minorities in practice is not a strength of the present system either (Nagle, 2018, pp. 1376-1380). On the other hand, a more feasible, partial and gradual transition kept being pushed off due to acute political and economic hurdles that burdened the system. As a result, the timing and the practical questions of de-constructing the pillarised structure became a ‘minefield’ of contestation among Lebanese stakeholders (Fakhoury, 2014a, p. 242) and led to no considerable steps towards structural changes over the past 31 years. From this stalemate, the least costly solution seemed to be preserving the existing system, despite its foreseeable failures. The term ‘least costly’ is to be understood as ‘least inconvenient for the communal elites’ whose interests were deep-seated in the sectarianized status quo (Ibid, p. 241).

Numerous explanations are provided in the literature for why Lebanon adopted and reserved the sectarianized system. As indicated in the previous chapter, some of these presume that the implementation of the country’s particular (corporate) type of consociationalism automatically yields the mismanagements that are to be discussed below. These works describe the Lebanese political system as one that ‘carries the seed of its own destruction’ (Fakhoury, 2014a, p. 231). Others place the post-colonial order in the centre of their account and trace the institutionalised divides back to the colonial mandate’s politics of favouritism by which they divided and ruled the multi-confessional society (Cammatt, 2019, p. 3; Varshney, 2007, p. 282). However, of greater interest to the inquiry of this thesis are the scholarly works which assess Lebanon’s

power-sharing as an elite-negotiated process with considerable seepage of regional and global affairs. Overall, three complementary domains can be observed in these latter streams of scholarly literature about Lebanon's failed transition, which the author classifies as (i) insufficient post-war justice and reconciliation, (ii) the consolidation of a neo-clientelist economic structure, and (iii) parliamentary decision-making inertia.

Firstly, Lebanese elites are criticised in the literature for avoiding the judicial and societal measures necessary for restoring accountability and trust among the communities after the civil war ended. The measures selected to restore peace neglected to confront the atrocities committed during the war in the form of truth or reconciliation commissions. Instead, a blanket amnesty guaranteed the impunity of former warlords, many of whom maintained/gained significant power despite their involvement in the armed conflict (Szekely, 2015, pp. 97-98). A notable example of such figures is Michel Aoun, army commander at the time of the civil war, and the country's president today. The wide-spread mistrust that characterises Lebanese citizens' attitudes towards the central government institutions is largely attributed to these controversial political appointments (Ghosn & Khoury, 2011, p. 386). In addition to the growing political apathy that the lack of accountability cost to Lebanese citizens, inter-confessional relations also remained unrepaired. These all contributed to Lebanon's weakening resilience to arising external challenges, such as recent years' spillover of the Syrian crisis (Szekely, 2015, p. 101).

Secondly, the country's economic policy revolved around neoliberal reforms in the 1990s which brought about growing economic inequalities and surging national debt. Due to mass privatizations, an elite group, comprised of less than 0.5 percent of the population, was able to establish a stronghold over half of the nation's total wealth (Khneisser, 2019a, p. 1112). They accomplished this through extensive business networks which allowed them to gain large shares in the service provision sector. A prime example of the profiteering management of public services was the case of the private company Sukleen, which was entrusted with organizing waste collection in Lebanon. As a member of former prime minister Hariri's business network, this provider charged four times more for its services than the global average for garbage management (Baumann, 2019, p. 74). Elites' service networks evolved, for the most part, within the confines of each confessional group. Today they not only control a large proportion of Lebanon's wealth, but technically also entire communities by being their primary service providers, or in other words, patrons (Baumann, 2016, p. 6). Areas in which citizens continue

to be dependent on the powerful elite class include obtaining job opportunities and accessing education or healthcare services (El Kak, 2019, pp. 2-3).

The power dynamic of these clientelistic relations gradually undermined citizens' rights and concrete possibilities to demand political accountability or transparency from their leaders. However, the hands of elites were also tied to a great extent by the shockwaves of the global and regional economy that Lebanon became increasingly incorporated into during the post-war period. The un(der)controlled practice of privatizations – that affected public services and public procurement – coupled with the mass in-flow of foreign deposit left confessional elites dependent on a rentier economy (Baumann, 2016, p. 68). Thus, the 'vested interests', which are most often cited as reasons for Lebanese elites not giving in to the demands of reformist movements today, became woven into the fabric of power-sharing and bound both elites and their clienteles to a spiral of currency crises and debt accumulation. As a result, Lebanon ranked among the most indebted countries worldwide by the second half of the 2010s. Furthermore, the ever-increasing prices on basic necessities such as groceries and fuel, coupled with frequent electricity shortages and the deteriorating urban spaces, raised frustration and dissent among citizens (Khneisser, 2019b).

Largely connected to the above is the third weakness of consociationalism in Lebanon, which concerns the parliament's incapacity to reach cross-confessional compromises on vital issues such as how elections should be organised. Six general elections have been held in Lebanon since 1990, and each of them was preceded by the adjustment of electoral laws in ways which would secure that the sectarian status quo of the parliament remains intact (El Kak, 2019, p. 3). When elites failed to find consensus on how to redesign the system before the elections planned for 2013, they simply extended the term until they were able to reach an agreement to hold the elections in 2018 (Calfat, 2018, p. 270).

3.2 Civil society: fragmentation and room for manoeuvre

How did these systemic frailties and mismanagement affect the wide range of civil society actors present in Lebanon? To what extent is their capacity for bridging divides impeded by the cleavages perpetuated by the sectarianized political system? There are several markers reflecting the divisive effects of the political arrangement on the Lebanese civic sphere. Particularly among formally organised actors such as NGOs and associations, a competitive atmosphere is observable; they are constrained by the same confessional boundaries along which the economy is fragmented, and locked in a 'fund hunt' for resources to maintain their

financial viability (AbiYaghi, 2019, p. 7). The lack of centrality and ‘dispersed domination’ of the Lebanese government amplified this dynamic, as it gave communal elites almost exclusive power to define which civic initiatives are ‘worthy’ or ‘unworthy’ of support – which, in turn, enabled the rise of multiple ‘uncivil’ organizations that advocate only for the interests (or even supremacy) of their respective confessions (Haddad, 2017, p. 1752).

Since in the hybrid democratic structure of Lebanon the government or ‘state’ is scarcely perceived as a provisional entity, organizations/citizens working in the civic realm are inclined to seek foreign funding for their activities (either to supplement their resources, or to avoid reliance on local elites’ support). On the one hand, this practice contributed to the development of a lively and vast structure of civil society organizations. Due to Lebanon’s exceptional role in housing the largest number of refugees (compared to its own population), associations engaged in humanitarian care, in particular, have been provided with ample external sponsorship for the past decades (Khneisser, 2019a, p. 361). A distinct characteristic of these entities is that they – thanks to their substitutive roles in service provision – enjoy considerable support and funding from the Lebanese elites as well. Less favourably viewed are those policy- and reform-oriented organizations, whose agenda is considered to pose threats to the current political arrangement (Karam, 2018, pp. 6-8). In their case, acquiring foreign support can become a matter of survival, and simultaneously, a subject to contestation on the local elites’ part.

On the other hand, the impact of foreign sponsorship on Lebanon’s inter-confessional affairs is divisive, as these donors’ ‘helping hands’ are rarely offered without expectations to have their favours returned. In fact, external actors have for long utilised organizational funding to exert their influence over Lebanon, both from the regional (primarily Saudi Arabia and Iran) and global levels (UN and EU) (Ibid, p. 5). Since the alliances between local and international actors is often formed along communal lines, the entanglement of these two levels is considered to solidify chronic antagonisms between confessions. On the domestic level, enhancing the salience of sub-national identities prevents national coherence, while on the transnational level, it opens channels through which neighbouring states’ disputes can penetrate (Calfat, 2018, pp. 274-276). Both the 1975-1990 civil war in Lebanon – which is attributed to spill-overs of the Israeli vs. Syrian opposition dynamics (Szekely, 2015, p. 95) – and the ongoing conflict in Syria confirm the plausibility of such risks.

3.2.1 Capacity for joint mobilisation

The rivalry and fragmentation present among the citizens left its mark on their patterns of mobilisation too. During the Arab Spring, a wave of uprisings which was widely predicted to be a revolutionary step towards the Middle Eastern region's democratization, no large-scale protests escalated in Lebanon. Despite experiencing similar political and socio-economic conditions as the countries that sustained the most significant opposition movements (e.g. Tunisia or Egypt), Lebanon only accounted for sporadic anti-sectarian demonstrations that took place between January and April 2011 (Fakhoury, 2014b, p. 507). Apparently reluctant (or resigned) to challenge the power-sharing arrangement, Lebanese citizens were the outlier throughout the period of regional protests, for which their political system's societal constraints seemed a feasible explanation. Emphasizing communal identities over a shared cross-confessional vision of belonging, it is argued, shrinks the opportunity for collective mobilization for shared aims (Ibid, p. 511). A further factor in the opposition culture of divided societies is identified by Nagle who found that in those states where public service provision is dispersed along confession-based cleavages, mobilization against socio-economic grievances is also more likely to take a sectarian, rather than unitary form (Nagle, 2016, p. 25).

In the light of Lebanon's history of opposition, it counts as even more remarkable that a parallel sphere of representation was able to emerge over recent years. In it, civil society actors define themselves outside of, and against the regime's sectarian framework, opting for 'inclusionary politics' on their own terms. Notwithstanding the above statement about the Lebanese citizens' apathy to protest, members of the new 'wave' constituted the bulk of those who *did* take to the streets in 2011. This reveals another pattern, namely that when mobilization *does* occur in Lebanon, it immediately targets the political system's structural flaws, rather than specific policies/economic grievances (Fakhoury, 2014b, p. 514). Their adoption of a non-sectarian agenda and distancing from the practices of communal elites simultaneously signifies a deep disillusionment of the current system, and readiness to actively participate in reforming it.

A prominent platform of this parallel representation is provided by cyberspace – particularly social media – whose rapid spread from the early 2000s onwards catalysed the spread of online activism in Lebanon too. Being a relatively anonymous, and for a short while, underregulated sphere, cyberspace became an appealing space to co-ordinate mobilization and thus, a tool in the negotiation between civil society and state. From the outside, the movements thus born seem(ed) leaderless and carrying tremendous potential to disseminate counter-hegemonic

opinions, which for a long time captivated the attention of the scholarship as well (Khneisser, 2018, pp. 1117-1118). But since the waning of the Arab Spring – during which these platforms were also largely utilised – governments have been increasingly targeting cyberspace in the region due to their potential threats to the elites' power. In Lebanon's case, these efforts led to the establishment of the Bureau of Cybercrimes, which yielded a crackdown on activists and journalists. An alarming increase was observable in the number of 'defamation' investigations carried out by the bureau over the past four years (Human Rights Watch, 2019), which significantly shaped both movements' strategies that will be discussed below.

A mixture of defensive and offensive strategies through which both state and civil society actors demonstrate their power and resourcefulness are an inevitable part of the negotiation process that determine their room for manoeuvre in both the physical- and cyberspace (Hayes et al., 2017, p. 3). As Edwards highlights in the revised version of *Civil Society*, clampdowns on civil society's attempts to challenge governments in the Middle East are inescapable (Edwards, 2004, p. 44). Perhaps a more relevant question is, how do anti-establishment actors navigate through the remaining, as well as the newly created stages of civic participation? The previous chapter revealed that in the discussion around who gets to define the future of Lebanese politics, regional 'strongmen' (particularly Iran and Saudi Arabia) have been dedicated ample amount of scholarly attention. Less recognised remain the efforts of grassroots activists across the region, albeit they possess skills and resources that may eventually translate into lasting changes on the macro-level (Ibid, p. 45). Recent years' movements in Lebanon and a shift from apathetic sectarian compliance towards two subsequent waves of mass coordinated mobilisation send a clear message: the transformative agency of civil society forces must no longer be overlooked.

Having stated its advocacy argument, the paper will now move to discussing precisely the bottom-up aspect of de-sectarianization. This section provided a contextual understanding of the evolution of Lebanese consociationalism into a divisive rent-seeking apparatus over the post-civil war era, through detailing its three main pitfalls, related to transitional justice and reconciliation, neoliberal economic mismanagements, and parliamentary decision-making inertia. It was argued that the fragmentations in the political system seeping into the civil society sphere has significantly delayed the process of a nation-level political introspection in Lebanon, that is thought to have swept across the rest of the Middle East during the Arab Spring. In the next chapter, the focus will turn towards how members of civil society broke the 'apathy to mobilise' that is depicted above and set into motion powerful non-sectarian agendas by (i) a

crossover to politics for the 2018 Lebanese elections by actors originally associated with civil society organizations, and (ii) the mass uprising starting in October 2019.

4. DIVIDED IN UNITY – THE STRATEGIES AND CHALLENGES OF NON-SECTARIAN OPPOSITION MOVEMENTS IN LEBANON

The concept ‘chronic crisis’ (Deets & Skulte-Ouaiss, 2016, p. 513) poignantly captures the cyclical relapses into disaster that characterise Lebanon’s post-1989 history due to avoidance of addressing the root causes of inter-confessional tensions. As the previous chapter revealed, the makeshift solutions that political elites provided for the challenges of post-war transitional justice, economic and decision-making deadlocks failed to build trust towards the decentralised political institutions. In such settings where the deterioration of the infrastructure and political institutions no longer feels exceptional or revolting, it is argued that citizens are likely to become desensitised to further negative developments. From the elites’ perspective, this fatigue and resignation is clearly advantageous, as it allows for the gradual increase of the threshold up to which they can expand their power without provoking mass claims for accountability (Roitman, 2013, p. 74).

Starting with the assessment of how a new wave of non-sectarian movements emerged in Lebanon since 2015, this chapter goes on to provide the descriptions of two concrete movements; the Kollouna Watani election coalition and the *thawra* of 2019. The selection of these two movements was guided by the fact that they highlight two different visions of agency in muting politicised confession-based identities – thus, they can be informative about the perspectives that Lebanese grassroots actors have about how they wish to accomplish de-sectarianization. By introducing the discursive and concrete actions through which the movements sought to challenge the Lebanese establishment, the aim of this part is to prime the analysis for the subsequent chapter which discusses the movements comparatively.

4.1 The evolution of non-sectarian social movements

Before delving into the two case studies, this section inquires what factors contributed to the salience and spread of the non-sectarian agenda emphasised by both, and which was seen by Lebanon-watchers as a unique development in the country’s political setting. While the country *did* see occasions of mass mobilisation and expressions of mass frustration over the past 31 years too, most such events were recognisably organised around sectarian lines. The ‘Cedar Revolution’ for instance – an uprising ensuing the assassination of then-prime minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005 and seeking to end a 15 years long Syrian tutelage over the country – showed that even reform movements stemming from shared aims can be torn by the divergent interests that the participating confessions represent. Certain examples illustrate this characteristic; for

instance, the number of the Druze community's participants in the protests dropped after their elites managed to 'emerge' from the 2005 political crisis with significant gains in public service provision (Deets & Skulte-Ouais, 2016, p. 525). Such events make it clear that even when the temporary alignment of interests enabled joint mobilization, ultimately it was the self-interest of each constituency that prevailed throughout the post-war opposition culture of Lebanon, making it extremely difficult to sustain cross-confessional movements.

However, 2015 brought a significant turn in the strategy and consistency of protests, starting when citizens blocked Sukleen, the politically involved monopole waste management company's access to a landfill that was – controversially – still being used despite having been exploited far beyond its capacity. The action was designed to call out the government for its inadequate management of public services which, in this case, were manifested in the deterioration of Beirut's public hygiene (Baumann, 2019, p. 74). Although the corrupted management of services such as electricity (by themselves) probably would not have driven many Lebanese to the streets, as there is a well-oiled system for purchasing extra services from private providers (usually within each confession) if public channels fail (Ibid, p. 67). But considering that garbage disposal was an issue that concerned the comfort and morale of all residents and no alternative solutions were available for it, it seemed an ideal domain to re-organise 'confession versus confession' grievances around a different line of contention: a '*citizens versus the state*' narrative (Nucho, 2019).

The significance of the subsequent mass non-sectarian movement (which far exceeded in size the dispersed and obscure protests that emerged in Lebanon during the Arab Spring) must not be underestimated. It revealed that the paradoxical nature of 'chronic crises' can not only work in the favour of elites by conditioning their constituencies into inertia and resignation to achieve changes. On the contrary; breakdowns, when targeting domains that are cross-communally salient can facilitate novel co-operations (Roitman, 2013, p. 39). What this implies in Lebanon's case is that an infrastructural crisis such as the garbage crisis of 2015 can highlight cracks in the sectarianized political system (that would otherwise appear to be malfunctions for each confession to deal with separately) as opportunities for collaboration. The repertoire emerging from this episode of joint mobilisation enabled a discourse that unites heterogeneous groups along a 'shared sense of marginality' (Nucho, 2019).

By chanting 'where is the state?', protesters in the 2015 movement raised a new argument into the negotiation between citizens and the state, one which defines citizenship not in terms of the likeness of the communities, but in terms of common demands for a functioning and

uncorrupted infrastructure (Ibid). This clear bottom-up push for government accountability³ on its own was puzzling in a setting where public service provision had been traditionally outsourced to powerful sectarian elites (thereby catalysing confession-based patronage networks). By questioning the presence of the state, protesters were clearly not asking for stricter control over civic affairs; they demanded the state to take responsibility collectively for its citizens, as opposed to feeding the fragmented clientelist system that is currently in place (El Kak, 2019, p. 4).

Though ‘unsuccessful’ in terms of achieving clear policy resolutions for waste management, the garbage protests laid down the groundwork for the two noteworthy movements discussed below. It is from these 2015 demonstrations onwards that scholars date the crystallisation of explicit non-sectarian discourse in the Lebanese opposition (Rønn, 2020a, p. 89). The production of a shared identity – through grievances related to (i) infrastructure and (ii) lack of citizenship – was key in this crystallisation process, as it provided a channel through which citizens could articulate visions of a de-sectarianized political system. It is this logic that informs the following sections in exploring two significant movements that emerged in the post-garbage crisis era of Lebanon with regards to their claim-making strategies.

4.2 From the streets to the offices of the state – A ‘civil society’ electoral list

Out of the multiple movements that emerged throughout the 2015 protests, some went on to participate in the 2016 municipal elections of Beirut under the coalition name Beirut Madinati (Beirut, My City). Much of their programme revolved around environmental management, envisioning a city council comprised of (civil society) technocrats (Waterschoot, 2018, p. 5). Notably, political elites seemed to consider the civil society-borne initiative a real threat to their power composition, as they even joined forces to weaken the independent coalition’s prospects to gain mandates (Haidar, 2017, p. 67). Despite winning over 30 percent of the votes, Beirut Madinati was unable to make considerable gains in the majoritarian electoral system. When their attempt to break into the political system proved insufficient, much of the participant organisations resigned from formal political engagements and continued to advocate for / bring about environmental reforms on smaller local levels. However, some members of the movement

³ Even captured by the name of one of the prominent civil society organizations that emerged from the protests, ‘*We Want Accountability*’

persisted with their ambitions to enter formal politics, for which the general elections announced for May 2018 provided an adequate opportunity.

The remaining Beirut Madinati members joined forces with 10 other civil society organizations who were previously also engaged in the garbage protests, and under the title Kollouna Watani (We Are All the Nation) submitted an electoral list of 66 candidates across Lebanon (Ghaddar, 2018, p. 6). The list was comprised of candidates described as secular and associated with no interests other than those of ‘civil society’, which was thought to ‘reflect [their] integrity’ (Vohra, 2018). By emphasizing integrity, the members of the electoral list took issue with the more established parties’ practice of uniting their powers along communal lines, rather than common ideas. Their distinction from these parties’ candidates was further enhanced by the fact that almost a third of their candidates were female – while the ratio of women in the Lebanese parliament is traditionally much lower (around 5 percent). With candidates in 9 out of the 15 electoral districts of Lebanon, Kollouna Watani was the largest and strongest – though not the only – civil society electoral list in the election. It is for this reason that it was selected as a case to illustrate the strategies and challenges new and unaffiliated candidates experience when navigating through the Lebanese political system.

As a non-sectarian crossover initiative, Kollouna Watani’s road to formal politics was paved with external, as well as internal challenges. Not only was the 2018 general election the first after 9 years of continuous postponing; it was also accompanied by large-scale electoral reforms⁴ which broke with the majoritarian system and adopted a proportional one instead. This shift raised the hopes of many that the reforms might lower the threshold of entering politics, in favour of more novice and more technocratic candidates – in fact, this is considered the primary reason why a record number of newcomer electoral lists were submitted in 2018 (El Kak, 2019, p. 3). While transitioning to a proportional framework was expected to decrease systemic divides and cultivate a more enabling environment for political plurality in the scholarship as well (Nagle 2016, p. 64; Salloukh & Verheij, 2017, p. 166), its technical results did not deliver these promises.

⁴ In fact, most general elections in post-war Lebanon are preceded by such reforms, leading political elites to be regularly accused of gerrymandering and electoral engineering (see e.g. Atallah & El-Helou, 2017, pp. 1-3). The primary reason why no elections were held between 2009 and 2018 was the elites’ inability to reach agreement on how the electoral system could be reformed before the next vote.

4.2.1 Cohesion and consensus

To start with, the formation of Kollouna Watani was ‘inspired’ by the new electoral law’s criteria which did not allow candidates to run independently, only as part of a list. This, on the one hand, incentivised co-operations (often across confessions), deemed a desirable outcome in Lebanon. On the other hand, these groupings were more strategically motivated than genuinely motivated and grounded (Waterschoot, 2018, p. 5). Thus, the movement’s candidates lacked sufficient cohesive power and resembled more a patchwork of agendas struggling to reach consensus over larger policy issues in their programme. The crossover from local activist hubs to ‘electoral war machines’ (Khneisser, 2018, p. 361) against the rock solid sectarian elite circle required the participant organisations to significantly re-consider their approach to politics. Risking their effectiveness at resolving the environmental challenges that originally brought their movements to life, coalition members now adopted a macro-political approach to target the root causes of Lebanon’s crises and ‘change the system from within’. This leap could not have been more divisive among those Kollouna Watani members that were affiliates of Beirut Madinati, who at that point were already troubled by infighting and ego clashes (Deets & Skulte-Ouass, 2016, p. 524).

One of the main areas of debate that challenged the candidate group’s cohesion was some of its members’ relations to Hezbollah. More specifically, they were divided between those who condemned the militant political party’s possession of weapon stockpiles and its alleged involvement in the Syrian civil war, and those who were willing to collaborate with, and accept funding from it (Waterschoot, 2018, p. 5). In fact, some were of the opinion that having relations with any of the established political parties, not just Hezbollah, brings the risk of co-optation which could fundamentally undermine the movement’s reform objectives, not to mention shrink their crowd of progressive sympathisers. In their view, civil society candidates may only be able to foster changes in the sectarian political system if they maintain an independent outsider image (Ghaddar, 2018, pp. 6-7). This polarisation negatively impacted the effectiveness of the Kollouna Watani movement, which ultimately led to vaguely defined elements in their electoral programme (Khneisser, 2018, p. 361).

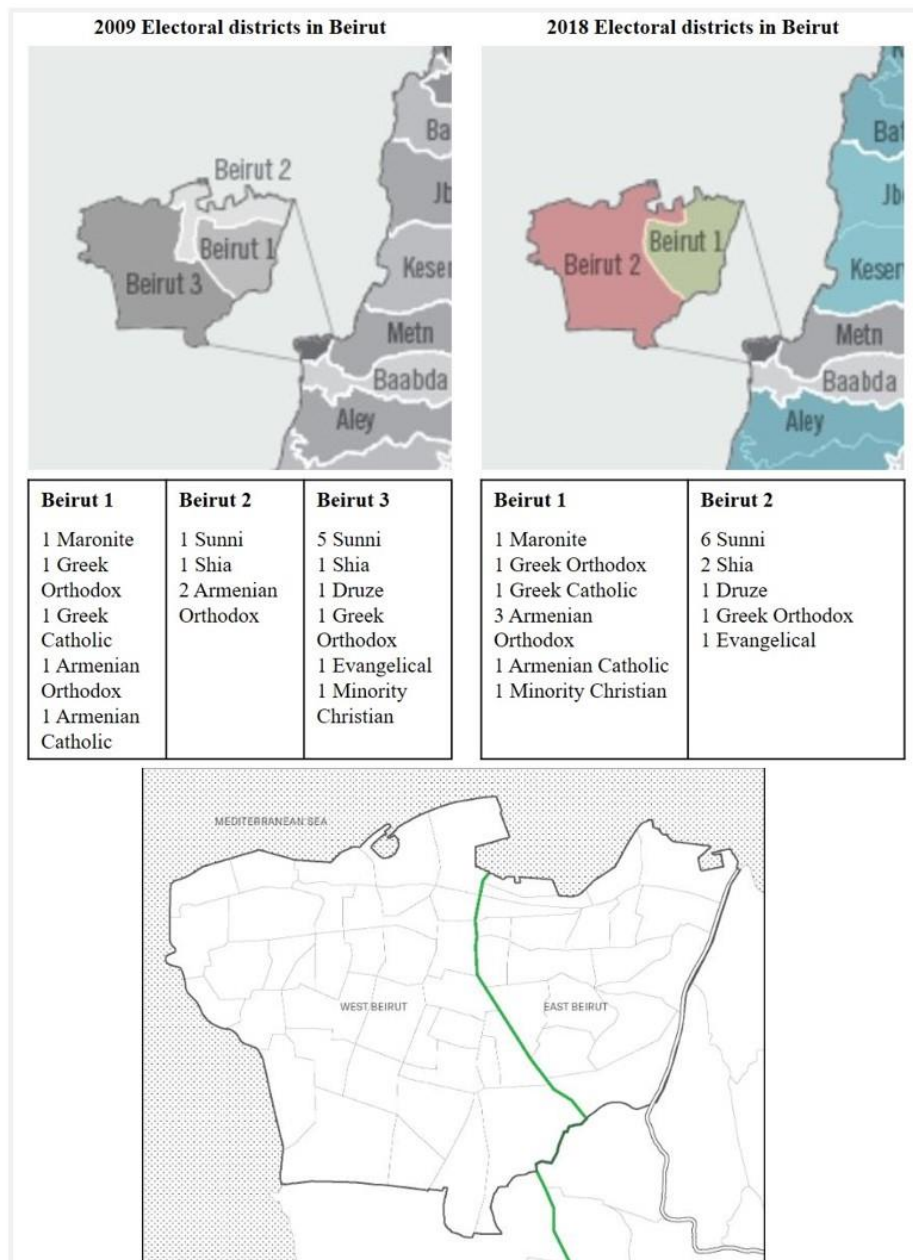
In addition, the electoral system (even after reforms) contained obstacles which commonly hinder new parties’ campaign such as lacking resources to secure sufficient media coverage throughout their campaign. All the while, no reasonable limits were placed on the campaign spendings of established parties (El Kak, 2019, p. 3), to which Kollouna Watani responded by adopting a strategy similar to that of Beirut Madinati: disseminating the movement’s campaign

via social media platforms, and organizing street actions to draw in larger audiences. They purposefully organised their announcements and gatherings in public spaces, unused buildings or unfinished construction projects which are seen as symbols of the corrupted way in which the regime handles urban development tenders (Stoughton, 2018). Thus, the movement aimed to symbolically reclaim physical space from the mismanagements of their elite. These campaign actions appealed predominantly to young voters disillusioned with the clientelist political structure (Waterschoot, 2018, p. 10).

4.2.2 Reinforced communal boundaries

An additional structural flaw of the new proportional electoral framework that disadvantaged civil society candidates was the fact that it redrew Lebanon's electoral districts. While previously, districts were determined according to geographical provinces, now they were designed to accommodate the established parties' supporter bases (Elghossain, 2017). Particularly noticeable were these changes in Beirut's new electoral districts, which were reduced from three to two. One being centred overwhelmingly around Muslim constituencies and the other around the Christian communities, the districts brought back memories of the city's civil war-era divisions to many (See Figure 1.; El Kak, 2019, p. 3). This form of gerrymandering made it particularly easy for elites to launch smear campaigns against Kollouna Watani, claiming – amongst others – that the civil society-originated candidate list would not be able to properly represent the interests of Christian communities (Ibid, p. 7). Such instances reveal the difficulty of navigating through a state system where campaigning on the basis of confession is highly salient, and the concept of non-sectarian politicisation is regarded with suspicion.

Figure 1⁵. Above: The pre-allocation of parliamentary seats in Beirut’s electoral districts according to the 2009 versus the revised electoral laws of 2018. Below: the civil war-era ‘Green Line’ that divided the predominantly Muslim West Beirut from the predominantly Christian East Beirut



Due to the deep-seated communal divides, attacking and undermining independent political candidates is not merely a conscious strategy on the elites’ level, but a self-reinforcing process among citizens, too. According to some Kollouna Watani list members, voters in certain

⁵ Sources: Barclay, A. (2018). *Executive Magazine Infographics*. Data retrieved and edited June 30, 2020, from <https://ahmadbarclay.com/project/infographics/executive-magazine-infographics/>; Hafeda, M. (2019). Map of the civil war era division across the green line, in Hafeda, M., *Negotiating Conflict in Lebanon – Bordering Practices in a Divided Beirut* (p. 19), England: Bloomsbury Publishing.

districts where the majority of the population are known as affiliates to the established larger parties, showed hostility towards KW candidates and prevented them from placing campaign posters or holding gatherings (Waterschoot, 2018, p. 7). It is debatable whether the negative sentiments against the candidates were expressed because of genuine dissent against them, or they had more to do with fear that elites and armed groups (who closely control certain districts in Beirut) might crackdown on citizens who interact with their opponents. Considering these structural as well as deliberate hindering circumstances – and the fact that this was the coalition’s first time standing up for broad macro-political aims – their failure to inspire similar enthusiasm as Beirut Madinati did three years beforehand is hardly surprising. Although by far the most successful ‘civil society’ nominee in the general election, Kollouna Watani only ended up winning one mandate out of the 128-seat parliament (Ghaddar, 2018, p. 6).

Only 47 percent of citizens participated in the elections (Chulov, 2018), which reaffirmed the power of the ruling elite and did not bring considerable victory to KW. Overall, it managed to win around 5 percent of the total number of votes, with 16 percent support in its ‘stronghold’ district of Beirut I (Atallah & Zoughaib, 2019, p. 30). It was announced based on the preliminary election results that they secured two mandates in the parliament (out of 128 in total). However, the next day the counting was corrected, leaving the coalition with only one parliamentary seat. Suspicion arose that the confusing change was done deliberately by the government to minimise the coalition’s mandates (Chamoun, 2018). A monitoring civil society organization, the Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections reported 7000 cases of violations that occurred during the election; these included parties buying votes within and outside of the country, where – according to the new laws – diaspora members were also allowed to vote (Arnous, 2018, p. 3).

The case of Kollouna Watani highlighted the fact that a long struggle awaits those seeking to de-sectarianize Lebanese politics via the route of formal politics. While the 2018 general elections saw the emergence of multiple non-sectarian reformists eager to engage voters who ‘want change but are sceptical about the benefits of elections’ (Vohra, 2018), their efforts were easily hampered by engineered electoral criteria and smear campaigns by government(-affiliated) actors. Candidates not only faced a solidified structure of confessional boundaries when entering politics in Lebanon, but also the distrustful and resigned attitudes of citizens that derive from this status quo. To what extent non-sectarian movements will be able to recover from the disappointments of the 2018 vote and what new entryist strategies they may forge to

permeate the membrane of elite politics will provide an interesting case study for the 2022 (planned) elections.

4.3 Smashing in the windows of a sectarianized past – the 2019 thawra

Remaining with the nexus of infrastructure and citizenship, this sub-section explores a more diffuse form of countering Lebanon's sectarianized status quo in the form of protests provoked by the violation of what citizens perceive as basic needs. By 2019, Lebanon was among the countries with the poorest quality internet networks in the world (McKinsey & Company, 2018), and already suffering from shocking wealth inequalities; 0.4 per cent of the population owned half of its total wealth (Khneisser, 2019a, p. 1112). Citizens experienced ever-increasing prices on basic commodities such as fuel and bread while brewing frustrations towards elites who were seen as orchestrators in the country's deterioration to the edge of collapse. It is hardly surprising therefore that the Lebanese government's announcement of a new monthly tax on calls made via social media applications on October 17 2019 was seen as the last drop in the glass, causing mass protests to erupt and rapidly spread across the entire country (Azhari, 2019a). The emerging movement relied heavily on social media channels, and its denouncement of corruption and surging unemployment rates resonated with the long-standing discontent of many citizens, who took to the streets proclaiming the events as the thawra (revolution).

The government's early attempts to extinguish the protests by first revoking the planned taxes and then having the prime minister resign were in vain. Two months into the ever-intensifying movement, despite the government trying to appeal to the protesters by appointing Hassan Diab – an academic and relatively neutral political figure – as prime minister (Azhari, 2019b), public actions continued. Civil society organizations again became facilitators of collective actions and public debates. This often meant that the same associations that were also active in the 2015 garbage crisis protests (and/or even in the Kollouna Watani coalition) resumed their role as organisers in 2019. Ambitiously, the protest movement even became identified as 'the beginning of the end of the civil war' (Wheeler & Zawk, 2019), signifying its aim to face and repair the long-standing grievances which the movement recognised as impediments to building a unified post-conflict nation.

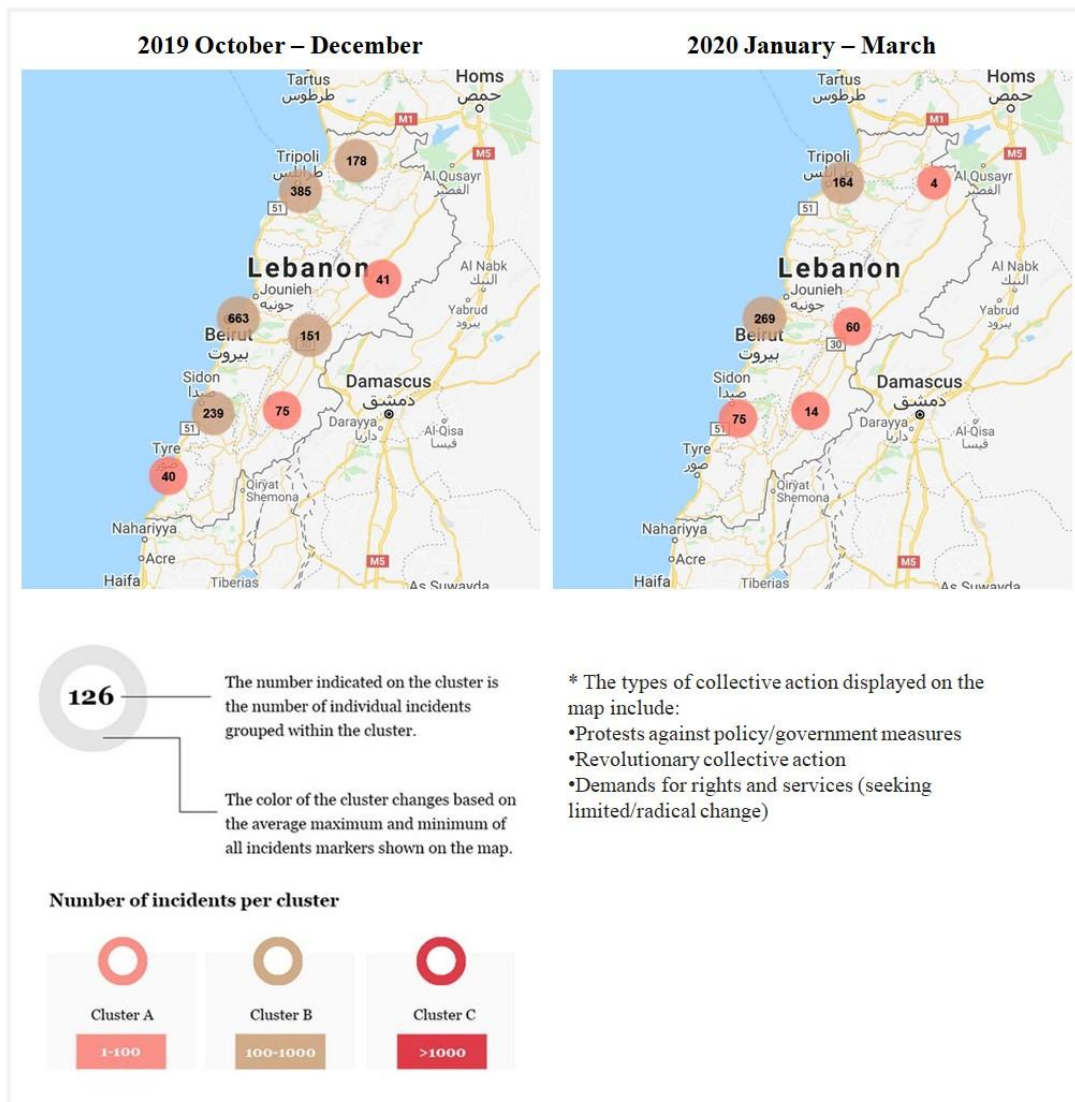
4.3.1 Continuity in frames

In this process, they continued the 'all of us means all of us' frame, a discursive strategy that has accompanied Lebanese protest movements since the peak of the garbage crisis, to signify their internal unity and distinction from the elites (MacShane, 2019). The line of

contention again was drawn between citizens and the state (instead of confessions versus confessions) just like during the garbage crisis. But by this point the narrative has matured into an even more drastic portrayal of elites as perpetrators preying on public resources, versus the Lebanese people as their collective victims (Chérif-Alami, 2019, p. 2). This framing strategy stressed the rights of *citizens* as a united entity, rather than separate confessions, and criticised the role played by communal elites. In the centre of this rights-based claim-making were public spaces, such as squares in the inner parts of Beirut and buildings that stand derelict due to elites' and private contractors' quarrels over their reconstruction. These sites are portrayed as symbols of the limitations placed on citizens by the sectarianized political system to enjoy urban commons and interact with the members of confessions outside their own (Sinno, 2020, p. 199).

In Beirut – a city with memories of civil-war era urban segregation (see Larkin, 2010, pp. 429-430) – the (mis)management of public spaces bears a sensitive meaning. Since many of these facilities concerned have been damaged or shut down in/after the Lebanese war, it was not the first time that they were listed among the grievances that provoked frustration and resentment towards the elites. However, the thawra saw the first attempt following the garbage protests that *systematically* problematised (much more explicitly than before) the problem of public space 'theft' and made it an essential element of claim-making with relation to citizenship rights. This connection was articulated by the adoption of the hashtag #ReclaimingThePublicSpace, which protesters used in their social media content after they occupied renowned abandoned buildings such as 'the Egg', a building in Beirut once designed as a public theatre but never completed (Sinno, 2020, p. 201). In addition to conquering buildings, sit-in methods and blocking roads became by far the most common form of collective action during the protests, with over 2000 episodes of participants occupying major squares and forming human chains over the period of four months (Civil Society Knowledge Centre, 2020).

Figure 2⁶. Map of the types* and number of collective actions that took place across Lebanon over the six months following the outbreak of the thawra



Protesters also demonstrated their capacity to fill in for the state in terms of providing public services, by organizing mass waste collection actions in response to the garbage situation which still has not been resolved (Sinno, 2020, p. 200). This latter action reflects the movement’s emphasis on portraying civil society as the real drivers of development while mocking the government’s inactions in solving acute crises. In addition, protest supporters were invited to take part in seminars to map out the main problems that should be addressed in the envisioned transition of the political system (Khneisser, 2019b). Organisers placed an emphasis on

⁶ Source: Map of Collective Actions in Lebanon. *Civil Society Knowledge Centre, Lebanon Support*. Data extracted and edited 30 June, 2020, from https://civilsociety-centre.org/cap/collective_action

collaborating with social researchers on these occasions to merge the voice of civil society and academic expertise towards the government (Chérif-Alami, 2019, p. 3). This high level of respect for scholars and technocrats can be regarded as another form of expressing dissent towards the oligarchic (and often nepotistic) ways in which influential Lebanese figures divide power over state resources among themselves.

4.3.2 Government clampdown

The government's response to these episodes of contestation showed little willingness for negotiation with the movement's leading figures or organizations. Temporary concrete blockades and barbed wire fences were erected to seal public buildings that could become targets for the protesters, including the parliament (Fregonese, 2020, p. 35). These steps, in turn, also influenced some participants' strategies who opted for more radical actions which included smashing in the windows of bank offices and destroying urban properties, particularly in the most violent days of the protests in January 2020. All this happened at a stage of the protests when the ongoing liquidity crisis (appeared to have) hit rock-bottom and citizens were, amongst other difficulties, severely limited in the amount of cash they could withdraw from ATMs (Middle East Eye, 2020). In addition, three months into the protests much of the – already fluctuating – mass that originally participated in the movement in its peaceful form was no longer protesting, giving way to the 'hard core' of the movement and raising the likelihood of more violent escalations (Rose & Haines-Young, 2020).

Paradoxically, in this period the coverage for the protests in the (primarily state-owned) Lebanese media significantly increased compared to before, when channels were often accused of a 'media blackout', in other words, a deliberate neglect to report the realities of the street movement (Zakhour, 2020). A violent turn of the movement provided the government with an opportunity to vilify the protesters as rioters, thus delegitimizing their claims, and even to curb their non-sectarian narrative into one that is dominated by communal interests. Indeed, scepticism emerged of the 'non-sectarian' nature of the protests, arguing that sectarian interests were still noticeable. These claims were not entirely ungrounded, as certain political groups are reported to have only participated in the movement out of sectarian, rather than non-sectarian interests. A notable example for this is brought by Rønn (2020b) who claimed that the Future Movement (a Shia-affiliated political entity) primarily joined the protesting crowd to voice their dissent against the appointment of the Diab government, whose lenience towards Sunnis seemed as a threat to the Shia communities' interests. Such events affirm the assumption that it

is mainly common grievances and common enemies that unite Lebanese protesters, not necessarily a genuine sense of unity.

In terms of the movement's larger aim to bring about a government whose decisions are founded on technocratic expertise, rather than clientelist interests, only marginal success was reached. Notwithstanding that, the path and new space for participation that the *thawra* was able to carve out⁷ must not be overlooked: it uniquely materialised citizens' claims to physical urban locations which the elites withheld from public usage before. In addition, they awakened public awareness and engagement through civil society-organised public debates which may lay the foundation for further non-sectarian civic actions and constructive forms of contestation. From the starting point of this awareness, civil society may, in the long run, pressure out higher accountability from the government and reinstate itself as a watchdog over corruption and the fairness of Lebanese politics.

In conclusion, this chapter introduced the strategies by which non-sectarian movements navigate through the structural challenges that deliberately or implicitly hinder them in de-sectarianizing the political sphere in Lebanon. Two case studies demonstrated that these challenges can rise both externally (e.g. by the government, voters' apathy) and internally (e.g. inability to reach consensus, violent spoilers). While grassroots movements showed considerable development in terms of support, scope and strategies in the period since 2015, thus far they remain short of reaching their desired changes in the status quo. Certain moments enhance the salience of latent discontent with the government, yet, this does not indicate that the movements arising from these remain sustainable either through the electoral route or through collective action. Despite some movements' apparent readiness to re-negotiate the post-civil war political system of Lebanon, the structural impediments that are ingrained in it – both on the elites' and the citizens' levels – make these movements' mission extremely challenging. The following chapter takes an analytic perspective to contrast the weaknesses and opportunities that the two non-sectarian movements' strategies hold.

⁷ Covid-19 further deepened the economic grievances of protesters, and at the same time, provided the government with an opportunity to securitise and disperse the protests (Civicus, 2020). Assemblies continued despite the stay at home order and police brutality was often experienced by those violating the lockdown to protest, particularly over June 2020 (see e.g. Hubbard & Saad, 2020). These events were not factored into the assessment, as it primarily focuses on the *thawra* in its pre-coronavirus phase up until mid-March 2020.

5. DE-SECTARIANIZATION FROM WITHIN OR WITHOUT? ENTRYISM VERSUS STREET PROTESTS AS REFORM STRATEGIES

Having provided a descriptive account of Kollouna Watani's and the thawra's strategic discourses and actions, the following chapter assesses these in a structured way and contrasts them along organizational capacity and the external pressures their strategies yield. The focal point of this comparison is placed on the entryist versus protest approaches towards change from the bottom up – in other words, visions of achieving reforms from *within* versus from *without* the formal political system. What do the movements share and what are the differences between their strategies of mobilisation? What responses/threats do the two types of non-sectarian approaches provoke on the political elites' part? These questions will be answered by first taking a closer look at the logic that governed the two movements' discursive and action repertoires. In doing so, the movements will be placed into Nagle's typology of non-sectarian social movements in divided societies, in order to synthesise the literature discussed in the theoretical chapter with the findings of the case studies. By reflecting on the different types of government retaliations that diverging non-sectarian movements provoke, the analysis supports its earlier argumentation that the sectarianized political system – and therefore de-sectarianization, too – is a process of negotiation, not a static agent on its own.

5.1 The Strategic Logic of Contention

Chapter two provided an explanation on Nagle's theoretical classification of social movements that emerge in divided settings into four sub-types: transformationists, pluralists, cosmopolitans and commonists (Nagle, 2016, pp. 21-25). While it is acknowledged that these are not clear-cut categories and they can bear overlapping characteristics, the scholar's typology is considered instructive by the thesis in unpacking the logic by which activists/citizens react to structural constraints and inadequacies. In Nagle's framework that is based on case studies of social movements in Northern Ireland and Lebanon, Kollouna Watani's crossover into politics best fits the 'commonist' category that denotes a form of mobilisation driven by dense collaborative networks. These networks, however, are mostly instrumental for the acquisition of political power, therefore lack the identity bonds necessary to sustain mobilisation (despite their momentary cross-confessional salience). Thus, the logic of 'commonist' movements imply an intention to obtain stakeholdership – in Kollouna Watani's case, political mandates – and effect societal change from within the political system.

In contrast, the category which the thawra movement could be cast into is ‘transformationists’; seeking to fundamentally undermine sectarianized politics by bridging the gaps between communities from the bottom up as a start. What connects transformationists (whether they be partisan or non-partisan movements) is their intention to emphasize an inclusive identity dimension (e.g. ‘the working class’, or in this case, ‘citizens’) over people’s confessional identities to mobilise masses for shared interests.

The very fact that there is a divide between the commonist and transformationist logics in Lebanon reflects the disillusionment and resignation towards the political system of many who plea that change is not possible through dialogue with the current political elites. From their perspective, the belief that new, independent candidates gaining mandate in the Lebanese parliament can serve as primary catalysts for structural change are often accused of being utopistic (Majed, 2017). Behind this line of thinking lies the assumption that the country’s state structure lacks the centrality necessary to retain (provisional) dominance over its territory and communities, which makes them raise the question: if power is not in the hands of the state but outsourced to influential elites, then what sense does it make to challenge it via formal politics? This view is reflected not only in the works of scholars that were introduced in chapter two, particularly Migdal whose concept ‘dispersed domination’ depicts the Lebanese state as a reactive, rather than proactive entity whose main aim is survival (Migdal, 1994, p. 9). It is also what protesters articulated when they assumed substitutive roles in garbage collection and posed the question during the garbage crisis protests ‘where is the state?’.

5.1.1 Shared ends, diverging means

It becomes clear both from the narrative of protest movements and from the actions of Kollouna Watani, that there is a high desire in Lebanon’s civil society to strengthen the dominance of the state, albeit not in the form that it currently takes. As the primarily socio-economic grievances underpinning recent years’ collective mobilisations revealed, state power is envisioned in the form of centralised public services and infrastructure. Both the ‘commonist’ entry into politics and the ‘transformationist’ uprising on the streets aimed to respond to this identified problem; the former from the perspective of explicitly participating in parliament decision-making, the latter by fostering salience for an identity that can potentially push decision-makers to adopt more consensual solutions to policy issues.

One further agenda that the two movements shared – in addition to the call for centralized and accountable service provision from the state – was their overwhelming support for

technocratic leadership. The heavy inclusion of ‘independent experts’ and academics in debates organized both during Kollouna Watani’s campaign and then in the early phases of the thawra reflect a constructive, although somewhat idealistic, attempt to break out of the decades long mistrust between voters and the Lebanese political elite. However, political elites sought to neutralise these attempts by appointing a new prime minister, Diab who is considered close to fitting the image of a ‘technocrat’, having previously held professorship at the American University of Beirut and the title of Minister of Education and Higher Education. To this superficial and calculated attempt to give in to the demands of citizens, protesters responded by intensified collective action and violence, which showed dissent towards the method of reshuffling power among the existing elites, and a desire to bring new figures into the circulation of Lebanese politics (Agence France-Presse, 2019).

Paradoxically, it is argued that social movements in the Middle East are unlikely to succeed, unless they receive considerable support from influential political actors or armed groups, as the case of Tunisia and Egypt during the Arab Uprisings appear to demonstrate (Lorch, 2015). This makes it easier to understand why Kollouna Watani tried to break this cycle of co-optation and strived for more independence and room for manoeuvre within the political arena. On the other hand, it also confirms the suspicion of those who refuse to enter into such cooperation with actors in the establishment, out of fear that the powerful ‘allies’ may pose expectations on the movements/participating organisations in return for their patronage, which could hijack the former’s original non-sectarian aims.

5.1.2 Organisational capacity

Although both movements can be cast under the label of non-sectarian movements, they differed vastly in terms of consistency and modes of participation. To start with, the thawra took shape as a relatively spontaneous movement with revolutionary intentions, which implies that violent incidents were dispersedly present in it from the start. In contrast, the coalition Kollouna Watani was formed in a phase when the violence that occasionally characterised the garbage protests starting in 2015 had already been filtered out. Therefore, they worked with a committed group of organizations and practitioners in the field of environmental activism, which contributed to a significantly more professional image.

Notwithstanding that, the higher professionalism of the coalition compared to the protests does not guarantee better chances at achieving transformation, as the political field that Kollouna Watani sought to conquer was also a more difficult terrain than ‘the streets’. Scarce

campaign resources, and voters' apathy – or in many cases, citizens' fear of elite retaliation for 'betraying' communal loyalties – were amongst Kollouna Watani's noteworthy challenges (El Kak, 2019, p. 7). In addition, the very coalition came into existence following a large schism in the Beirut Madinati movement where many of the candidates originated from, and conflicting visions within the new group continued to divide its participants even further. This put a large obstacle to the credible and (relatively) homogeneous image that entryist parties are expected to project in order to gain support in the opposition, and led to vaguely defined elements in their electoral programme (Waterschoot, 2018, p. 11).

Having secured one seat in the parliament, supporters of the coalition (which originally had 66 candidates) saw very little of their efforts rewarded. One mandate out of 128 was far from being the foot in the door for 'civil society' that the movement's supporters opted for. Arguably, it serves more as a token for the government - particularly because the MP of concern is female while Lebanon is renowned for being on the list of countries with the lowest female ratio in parliament (Issa & Jazzar, 2020). Taking a closer look at Paula Yacoubian's mandate,⁸ it becomes clear that following the election, she resumed to working on similar lower-scale environmental campaigns from within the parliament as the ones she did 'from the outside'. In cases such as this, it is argued that the realisation of how much can actually be done 'from the inside' following the crossover can lead to the gradual disillusionment of supporters (Lewis, 2013, p. 45).

All the while, the protests allow for a looser structure where participants enjoy higher anonymity, where even leading activists can often blend in, giving a 'leaderless' impression of the movement (Khneisser, 2018, p. 1116). This, in turn, brought a range of other characteristics for the thawra, namely (i) vague but resonant frames that facilitate mass mobilisation in the early phase, (ii) uncertainty of consolidation in the later phases due to this vagueness, and (iii) heterogeneity eventually leading to fragmentation and a violent portrayal of the protests. At first, continuing the frames of the garbage protests proved salient again among audiences in the early phases of mobilisation. However, it is argued that the 'staying power' of frames can become eroded as time passes and participants are alerted to the fact that what they initially perceived as 'unity' in the movement was more likely the heterogeneity and multi-vocal fabric of their crowd, behind which various communal interests are disguised (Steinberg, 1998, p.

⁸ One can expect to find a scarcely maintained official website and lot more active Twitter and Facebook accounts. Since the outbreak of the thawra, she has clearly become the go-to personality to interview out of all MPs – which also has to do with the fact that prior to her career in politics she was a popular media reporter.

860). Participants' original drive is likely to shrink due to the lack of tangible results and, as the example of the thawra showed, it is more likely that once the critical mass dissolves, more room is left for radicalised actions.

Since social media platforms were the powerhouse for both movements, these must be discussed under the notion of organizational / cohesive factors. Online organization takes an interactive shape that is flexible and accommodating to the widest possible audiences – much more so than formal channels of politics that can be alienating to citizens. These platforms not only facilitate the spread of information (Khneisser, 2018, p. 1121) – which is crucial in pushing for accountability – they also serve as vehicles for strengthening cohesion and expressing solidarity. During the first violent phases of the thawra, a widespread campaign emerged in which supporters covered one of their eyes in protest against the arbitrary use of rubber bullets on the police forces' part (Osman, 2020). It appears though that social media is safest to use as a supplement to offline collective action, rather than a principal domain. That is particularly the case since the regulatory regime over cyberspace significantly tightened its control over content that activists publish online over the past years. Since 2016, large numbers of online activists have been targeted by the Bureau of Cybercrimes on charges of defamation for critical comments they made on social media platforms (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

5.1.3 External pressures

It is not only cyberspace where activists and journalists experience pressures on their expression of anti-establishment views. Both political entryism and protest movements are seriously threatened by the government's – and its supporters' – attempts to hinder or delegitimise their actions, which affects their manoeuvres to achieve de-sectarianization. Moving from civil society into state positions implies a process of loosening the boundaries between the two relatively separate realms. Therefore, it activates resistance among state actors who have interests in reaffirming these boundaries, as some of the incidents around Kollouna Watani's campaign and election results demonstrated. Firstly, some established parties' members deployed a smear campaign against them, criticising their lack of resources to provide the same level of protection to communities as the established elites would. This line of thinking makes the elites intention clear to reduce voting to following loyalties and dependence, rather than genuine political convictions.

In fact, it is worth noting the function of the electoral reforms which were presented as a progressive olive branch towards citizens who were discontent or resigned about the stricter

majoritarian framework. In reality, they were engineered to still maintain multiple constraints on aspiring new candidates via re-drawing electoral districts. By taking a sceptical stance similar to e.g. Valbjørn (who argued that even what may seem like a step by the elites towards de-sectarianization in Lebanon is merely a calculated and well-disguised step towards reaffirming their own power (2020, p. 129)), the new electoral system can be considered a ‘weapon’ deployed by the political elites to break an increasingly alert opposition. Following the election, the coalition’s members at various voting stations were reportedly sent out of the room where the counting took place – which legally should have been carried out in the presence of all candidate lists’ representatives. In the light of the controversial election results – where all preliminary counts pointed to Kollouna Watani gaining two mandates which was modified to one the next day – the possibility cannot be discounted that members of the establishment deliberately prevented the coalition from gaining influence in formal politics (Chamoun, 2018).

The elites’ unwillingness to interpret politics outside of the sectarian framework serves to undermine the efforts of non-sectarian movements in engaging the Lebanese public on the level of shared interests. Both political entryism and protest movements are seriously threatened by the elites’ – and its supporters’ – strategy by which they counter-frame their opposition movements to their constituents as too powerless to stand a chance in politics, or as radical rioters that need to be securitised. On the other hand, there are considerable differences in the levels of accountability that the two types of movements face, thus the government and armed forces target them differently. While political candidates are targeted on a personal basis which may harm their privacy or reputation, protesters are more endangered physically due to the armed forces’ regular use of force or their neglect to protect them from the violent attacks of counter-protesters (UN OHCHR, 2019).

This chapter examined what assumptions of agency underlie the distinctive strategies that Kollouna Watani and the *thawra* undertook. In addition, it assessed the different forms of external pressures that the particular strategies employed by the movements (political entryism and street protests) yield from the side of political elites. By zooming in on this aspect, the analysis sought to reconnect the theoretical findings elaborated in chapter two related to de-sectarianization and non-sectarian social movements’ repertoire, with the specific movements’ narratives and actions.

6. CONCLUSION

Inspired by the sustained collective action of the latest anti-government protest movement in Lebanon, this thesis set out to explore how recent years' pattern of non-sectarian movements emerged from the country's political and socio-economic context. Its research objectives were to understand how citizens' discursive and concrete strategies, which show an increasing tendency to transcend confessional boundaries particularly since 2015, respond to these contextual realities. Doing so, it aimed to investigate how these repertoires reflect attempts to reduce politically charged communal identities in Lebanon's politically and communally divided setting. This portrayal of grassroots agency vis-à-vis a cemented structure was achieved by analysing literature related to both elite instrumentalism, and social movement assessments which are peripheral in the studies pertaining to Lebanese domestic politics. The thesis sought to answer the research question of how the de-sectarianization of Lebanon's political system has been pushed for by non-sectarian grassroots movements between 2015 and 2020. This enquiry was extended both to (i) *why* a non-sectarian narrative gained salience in the country's particular consociational hybrid democratic setting, and (ii) *how* non-sectarian mobilisation was enacted over this period of time.

6.1 Research findings

With regards to the '*why*', chapter three found that many of the institutional designs dividing the multi-confessional societal structure of Lebanon have been in the making since before its independence from colonial rule. However, the proximate economic causes that drive activists and protesters are traced back to the power-sharing design that was solidified during the post-civil war reconciliation period from the 1990s. A significant point in the thesis argues that in this period after the 1989 signing of the Taif Accords, political sectarianization became a catalyst for elites' rentier capitalism, bringing striking wealth inequalities for Lebanese citizens. Chapter four detected this logic in the discourse of the latest anti-government protests as well, which hoped to bring about 'the end of the civil war', referring to the establishment's failure to close gaps and distrust between confessions after the armed hostilities. Furthermore, the discussion about the nexus of Lebanon's privatised service provision and clientelism revealed that it was primarily shared infrastructural grievances that enabled cross-confessional mass mobilisation in the non-sectarian movements since 2015.

Concerning the question '*how*', the research employed a methodology comprised of two case studies of specific movements that emerged in the 2015-2020 temporal scope of the thesis.

Assisted by a qualitative methodology and the analytic frame of de-sectarianization, a contextualised investigation was performed into the room for manoeuvre that these two civil society initiatives make use of, and create, in Lebanon. First, Kollouna Watani's participation and gain of a mandate in the general elections of 2018 was scrutinised. Although the win is rightly considered a civil society breakthrough to politics, the coalition's efforts to unite the opposition may have achieved precisely the reverse, as their struggle to find consensus over macro-political issues and the dilemma over accepting the patronage of established parties led to their schism.

Secondly, the thesis analysed the role of social media and public spaces during the early stages of the mass protests which started in October 2019. This research found that both movements shared an overwhelming trust and preference for technocratic governance as an alternative to sectarian politics, which was reflected in their methods of appealing to the secular identity dimensions of a wide range of intellectuals. While both seeking transformative change, a fundamental difference was revealed between the movements' strategies in that they locate power in different domains: within versus outside of the political structure. These presumptions were reflected in their strategic actions, as the electoral coalition sought to become active part of its desired political change, while the protests decided to embody a massive push-factor charged by (citizen) rights-based claims. Although the latter was more successful in mobilizing crowds and achieving the resignation of the government, it contributed little in terms of constructively transforming the political structure or its policies.

Findings suggest that the 'unity narrative' that shows continuity between the frames of both movements discussed often reflects instrumental alliances rather than genuine interests in cross-confessional collaboration. The 2018 elections and the thawra contributed greatly in terms of bringing to the surface what grievances and demands citizens share temporarily. However, civil society movements in Lebanon are yet to crystallise longer-term the shared aims that can translate into sustainable cooperation. Both case studies illuminated that the lack of coordination between the movements' constituent actors hinder non-sectarian initiatives internally, as it prevents them from taking a consistent stance and a united image. This, in turn can explicitly shrink their room for manoeuvre because it gives elites the grounds to mock or vilify candidates, and reinforce their own image and patronage among the public.

This brings the author to make concluding remarks on the hardships and extreme impediments placed on civil society movements' road to participating in political processes. A setting where elites privately own mainstream media outlets, control/bribe voters and have no

reasonable limits on their spending for electoral campaigns is clearly a disadvantageous playing field for non-state newcomers both in terms of protests (which can thus be framed as riots) and political candidates (who become subjects to counter-campaigns). The thesis stressed that both movements discussed above were deliberately targeted by government actors who tried to annul their non-sectarian narratives as a means to undermine their image as progressive political forces. On the one hand, the deliberate pressures placed on these actors reveal that elites recognise them as legitimate competitors, which – counter-intuitively – reinforces their agency in Lebanese politics. On the other hand, they also highlight that strengthening the cohesion of the Lebanon's opposition is a necessity to maximising their room for manoeuvre within this contested domain.

Overall, the research found synthesis with the claims made by numerous authors about the longitudinal nature of de-sectarianization. From the perspective of social movements, this is largely due to the lack of 'political maturity' and limited resources of grassroots movements that make it costly for them to sustain pressure on a solidified elite structure. All the while the backlashes by the government make the work of actors that seek to 'outplay' – or adopt self-definitions that are incompatible with – the entrenched sectarian narrative that politics in Lebanon are organised around potentially dangerous. Yet, despite their marginal contributions in terms of policy achievements, this thesis argues that non-sectarian movements' continued push and visions for an alternative form of governance are necessary to pave Lebanon's long way towards accountability. The potential of civil society in this process is provided by their ability to create new outlets and platforms (e.g. social media) for visibility and networks which boost their resilience against a political elite who – equally resourcefully – seek ways to undermine their capacity to mobilise.

6.2 Research limitations and recommendation

Additionally, the limitations of the thesis must be assessed. The opportunity to develop personal impressions of Lebanon during a fieldwork module and conducting more conversations with locals/natives would have added great value to the empirical inquiry of the thesis on the visions of Lebanese citizens. Not having the chance to do so due to the extraordinary circumstances created by the Covid-19 lockdowns altered the focus of the research towards secondary literature sources. The author relied on sources that may hold biases towards one end of the Lebanese political spectrum, particularly in terms of researching the thawra of which little academic publications are available yet. Despite continuously opting for the triangulation of the

materials processed by the author, this may affect the validity of some of the claims and arguments raised in the analysis.

Various avenues for further research may be identified based on the findings of this research. Firstly, the path taken by the present thesis and some authors in the de-sectarianization discussion should be widened by conducting more analyses that recognise grassroots agency in the MENA region's and particularly Lebanon's context. Future research could benefit greatly from in-depth inquiries into citizens' perceptions of the politicization of civil society actors which, as the schism of the Beirut Madinati and Kollouna Watani coalitions illuminated, is seen as controversial even by activists who formerly supported the movements. Neighbouring states' patterns of anti-establishment mobilisations would be worth dedicating investigations to. The inflammatory dynamics that led to the thawra in 2019 are not confined within the borders of Lebanon. Recent protests in Iran and Iraq are reminders that numerous other states in the MENA region share the problems of decentralised public service provisions and high corruption. Comparing the strategies and challenges of grassroots mobilisations in these other settings too could enrich academic understandings of the negotiation that surrounds the de-sectarianization of politics.

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ANNEX 1. PLAGIARISM DECLARATION

MA Thesis in Conflict Studies & Human Rights
Utrecht University
(course module GKMV 16028)

I hereby declare:

- that the content of this submission is entirely my own work, except for quotations from published and unpublished sources. These are clearly indicated and acknowledged as such, with a reference to their sources provided in the thesis text, and a full reference provided in the bibliography;
- that the sources of all paraphrased texts, pictures, maps, or other illustrations not resulting from my own experimentation, observation, or data collection have been correctly referenced in the thesis, and in the bibliography;
- that this Master of Arts thesis in Conflict Studies & Human Rights does not contain material from unreferenced external sources (including the work of other students, academic personnel, or professional agencies);
- that this thesis, in whole or in part, has never been submitted elsewhere for academic credit;
- that I have read and understood Utrecht University's definition of plagiarism, as stated on the University's information website on "Fraud and Plagiarism":

"Plagiarism is the appropriation of another author's works, thoughts, or ideas and the representation of such as one's own work." (Emphasis added.)⁹


Similarly, the University of Cambridge defines "plagiarism" as "*... submitting as one's own work, irrespective of intent to deceive, that which derives in part or in its entirety from the work of others without due acknowledgement. It is both poor scholarship and a breach of academic integrity.*" (Emphasis added.)¹⁰

- that I am aware of the sanction applied by the Examination Committee when instances of plagiarism have been detected;
- that I am aware that every effort will be made to detect plagiarism in my thesis, including the standard use of plagiarism detection software such as Turnitin.

Name and Surname of Student: **Sára Júlia Vértés**

Title of MA thesis in Conflict Studies & Human Rights:

Breaking the Cycle of Crises in Lebanon: Grassroots Strategies for De-sectarianization Between 2015 and 2020

Signature 	Date of Submission 30 July 2020
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⁹ <https://students.uu.nl/en/practical-information/policies-and-procedures/fraud-and-plagiarism>

¹⁰ <http://www.plagiarism.admin.cam.ac.uk/what-plagiarism/universitys-definition-plagiarism>