Sectarian securitization in the Middle East and the case of Israel

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Identity politics are not a new phenomenon in the Middle East. In their influential work on identity and foreign policy in the Middle East, Shibley Telhami and Michael Barnett observed repeated ebbs and flows of identity politics in the region, fluctuations they considered crucial for understanding the international politics of the Middle East.[1] In recent years, with the continuing civil wars in Syria, Libya and Yemen, combined with the pronounced antagonism between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the region has been marked by a distinctive level and intensity of identity politics. More specifically, since the Arab uprisings of the early 2010s, the Middle East has witnessed an ongoing process of political leaders constructing or accentuating sectarian differences within or beyond state borders in order to maintain or gain power and legitimacy.[2] These strategies are often referred to in the literature as *sectarianization*.[3] In its extreme form, this involves the construction or presentation of sectarian identities as being *under threat*, with political entrepreneurs often depicting this threat as an existential one. Sectarian identities, such as Sunni or Shi'a, are thus securitized, becoming sources of conflict themselves and fomenting fragmentation within and among states.[4]

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[1] Shibley Telhami and Michael Barnett, 'Introduction: identity and foreign policy in the Middle East', in Shibley Telhami and Michael Barnett, eds, *Identity and foreign policy in the Middle East (*Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), ch. 1.

[2] Mark Lynch, 'The entrepreneurs of cynical sectarianism', in *The politics of sectarianism*, POMEPS Studies no. 4 (Washington DC: Project on Middle East Political Science, Elliot School of International Affairs, 2013), pp. 3–6, https://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/POMEPS_Studies4_Sectarianism.pdf; F. Gregory Gause, *Beyond sectarianism: the new Middle East Cold War*, analysis paper no. 11 (Doha: Brookings Doha Center, July 2014); Ussama Makdisi, *The mythology of the sectarian Middle East* (Houston: Rice University James Baker III Institute for Public Policy, Feb. 2017), https://scholarship.rice.edu/bitstream/handle/1911/94091/CME-pub-Sectarianism-021317.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 17 Jan. 2021.)

[3] Nadir Hashemi and Danny Postel, eds, *Sectarianization: mapping the new politics of the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Fanar Haddad, 'Sectarianism and its discontents in the study of the Middle East', *Middle East Journal* 71: 3, 2017, pp. 363–82.

[4] May Darwich and Tamirace Fakhoury, 'Casting the other as an existential threat: the securitisation of sectarianism in the international relations of the Syria crisis', *Global Discourse* 6: 4, 2016, pp. 712–32; Helle Malmvig, 'Power, identity and securitization in the Middle East: regional order after the Arab uprisings', *Mediterranean*

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Extensive academic research in recent years has produced important insights on the politics of sectarianism in the Middle East in different historical and political settings.[5] This body of scholarship has debunked the myth—promoted mainly by pundits and politicians—that the violence in the region after the Arab uprisings can be explained by the age-old Sunni–Shi'a divide.[6] However, while elaborating on the role of agency, the literature has been far less explicit in assessing the conditions that enable or facilitate the instrumental use of sectarian divisions and violence. Some studies implicitly assume that a general feeling of uncertainty or insecurity among populations is such a condition, possibly in the context of major disruptive events. However, this assumption is rarely thought through with regard to sectarian securitization. Yet the question of *which* structural conditions enable the 'successful' securitization of sectarian identities at a given time is an important one.

Equally, studies of the politics of sectarianism in the Middle East have not paid much attention to the case of Israel. Yet a growing securitization of sectarian identities is observable in this country in recent years. The dominance of the narrative that presents Israel—as the state of its Jewish collective—as being under (existential) threat is particularly intriguing in the context that prevails since the uprisings. With Syria and Iraq in tatters, and with most surviving Arab regimes primarily preoccupied with their own survival, Israel faces far fewer external threats than before the uprisings began. This observation suggests that securitization dynamics may be at play in Israel similar to those operating in other parts of the Middle East. Yet the calls for Israel to be studied in a comparative perspective, voiced compellingly by Barnett and others over two decades ago, have gone largely unheeded.[7]

This article makes two interrelated claims. First, it suggests that the sense of insecurity and fear among populations amid major geopolitical shifts since the

Politics 19: 1, 2014, pp. 145–8; Helle Malmvig, 'Coming in from the cold: how we may take sectarian identity politics seriously in the Middle East without playing to the tunes of regional power elites', in *International Relations theory and a changing Middle East*, POMEPS Studies no. 16 (Washington DC: Project on Middle East Political Science, Elliot School of International Affairs, 2015), p. 32, https://pomeps.org/coming-in-from-the-cold-how-we-may-take-sectarian-identity-politics-seriously-in-the-middle-east-without-playing-to-the-tunes-of-regional-power-elites; Simon Mabon, 'The end of the battle for Bahrain and the securitization of Bahraini Shi'a', *Middle East Journal* 73: 1, 2019, pp. 9–50; Ceren Lord, 'Sectarianized securitization in Turkey in the wake of the 2011 Arab uprising', *Middle East Journal* 73: 1, 2019, pp. 51–72.

[5] In addition to the titles cited above, see e.g. Raymond Hinnebusch, 'The sectarian revolution in the Middle East', *R/evolutions: Global Trends and Regional Issues* 4: 1, 2016, pp. 120–52; Frederic Wehrey, ed., *Beyond Sunni and Shia: sectarianism in a changing Middle East* (London: Hurst, 2017); Simon Mabon and Lucia Ardovini, 'People, sects and states: interrogating sectarianism in the contemporary Middle East', *Global Discourse* 6: 4, 2016, pp. 551–60; Christopher Phillips and Morten Valbjørn, '"What is in a name?": The role of (different) identities in the multiple proxy wars in Syria', *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 29: 3, 2018, pp. 414–33; Morten Valbjørn, 'What's so sectarian about sectarian politics? Identity politics and authoritarianism in a new Middle East', *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 19: 1, 2019, pp. 127–49. This list is by no means exhaustive.

[6] Pure 'primordialist' claims are rare in the academic literature. See Morten Valbjørn, 'Beyond the beyond(s): on the (many) third way(s) beyond primordialism and instrumentalism in the study of sectarianism', *Nations and Nationalism* 26: 91, 2020, pp. 91–107.

[7] Michael N. Barnett, ed., *Israel in comparative perspective: challenging the conventional wisdom* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996). For a few exceptions, see Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, 'Politics of sectarianism: rethinking religion and politics in the Middle East', *Middle East Law and Governance* 7: 1, 2015, pp. 61–75; Oren Barak, 'Security networks, deep states, and the democratic deficit in the Middle East', *Middle East Journal* 72: 3, 2018, pp. 447–65; Oren Barak, *State expansion and conflict: in and between Israel/Palestine and Lebanon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Yusuf Sarfati, *Mobilizing religion in Middle East politics: a comparative study of Israel and Turkey* (New York: Routledge, 2014). There are different (mainly political) reasons for this state of affairs, which cannot, however, be discussed here.

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Arab uprisings is a crucial condition allowing for the securitization of sectarian identities in the Middle East. The essential point here is that a heightened sense of insecurity among domestic groups and populations not only acts as an *enabling condition*; it is also the *product* of sectarian securitization strategies adopted by political leaders. Hence, the 'politics of fear' may trigger a self-sustaining mechanism by igniting a feedback loop or vicious cycle: securitized sectarian identities, which become largely independent of materially defined security threats, are internalized and create further insecurity among domestic groups, thereby facilitating their leaders' sectarian securitization strategies even further.[8]

Second, the article will show that similar securitization dynamics are at play in Israel as in other parts of the Middle East. In the case of Israel too, a sense of insecurity at the societal level is an enabling condition for both the 'success' of sectarian securitization strategies *and* the outcome of these strategies. At the risk of advancing an argument that is highly unpopular on all sides, I will therefore examine the vicious cycle of sectarian securitization in Israel and its implications in a comparative perspective. I will use the term 'sect' to describe a religious denomination that may, or may not, be embedded in the collective identity of one or more ethnic groups and/or national identities.[9]

It is essential first to reflect on the insights offered within the social science literature, to ground our understanding of the politics of sectarianism and securitization. The discussion below lays particular emphasis on the role of insecurity at different levels of analysis as an enabling condition for 'successful' securitization moves by political leaders, often in the context of major disruptive events. These strategies, in turn, maintain or further increase the level of insecurity, or the perception of increased insecurity, at the societal level. The subsequent brief discussion of the politics of sectarianism in the Arab Middle East over recent decades serves to illustrate the conceptual argument. It also provides the framework for the more detailed analysis of the case of Israel that follows. I conclude by reflecting on the impact of the vicious cycle of sectarian securitization in the Middle East and the comparability of the Israeli case with the cases of other states in the region.

Some conceptual considerations

The relationship between collective identities, (in)security and foreign policy is the topic of a vast number of fascinating studies and almost endless academic debate, which cannot be exhaustively covered here.[10] A few conceptual considerations are nevertheless in order. First, the politics of sectarianism, or sectarianization,

[8] For a good discussion of material versus identity-based threat perceptions, see May Darwich, *Threats and alliances in the Middle East: Saudi and Syrian policies in a turbulent region* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

[9] Sectarian identities may be inextricably linked to nationalism and national identity, as in the cases of Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria, but also India, Ireland and Poland. See Fanar Haddad, 'Sectarian identity and national identity in the Middle East', *Nations and Nationalism* 26: 1, 2020, pp. 123–37. In the case of Israel, Jewish identity, which is both a religious and an ethnic identification, is deeply embedded in the logic of the Israeli state.

[10] For a seminal volume on this topic, see Peter J. Katzenstein, ed., *The culture of national security: norms and identity in world politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

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together with its extreme form of sectarian securitization, represent an exclusionary and divisive type of identity politics. Unlike the framings of politics that are based on overarching universalist and/or civic values and thus enable new members to join a given community, sectarianization is a process by which politics are framed on the basis of membership of fixed and allegedly primordial ethnic or religious groups. These distinct affiliations are reified and turn into the primary identifier of a modern political identity, thereby also cementing the internal membership of each of the groups, often identified in opposition to one another.[11]

Second, the question of why certain specific collective identities, defined by Benedict Anderson as 'cultural artefact[s] of a particular kind',[12] emerge and 'stick', while others do not, has been extensively debated. There are no clear answers in the literature. Possible explanations draw on the legitimacy, timing and intrinsic qualities of specific ideas that give meaning to collective identities, as well as the power and qualities of the actors who promote them.[13] Without entering into the old—and not particularly fruitful—debate in International Relations (IR) about the respective prevalence of agency and structure,[14] it is evident that mutually constitutive feedback processes are at work: a pre-existing normative environment may constrain or empower agents, while agency shapes that same environment. With regard to collective identities, strategic action often relies on the pre-existence of some sort of cultural capital, which may be institutionalized in education, language and arts.[15] Sectarian and other collective identities are thus the product of social construction both from above and from below.

A third consideration concerns the role of agency. The proposition that political elites may construct ethnic or sectarian antagonisms leading to violent conflict in order to acquire or maintain power is widely accepted in the literature.[16] The scholarship also postulates that populations may follow their leaders out of fear, incomplete information, or an inbuilt in-group/out-group bias. Research conducted in the 1960s already demonstrated the ease with which a fairly homogeneous group may be divided into two or three subgroups that can be manipulated to hate each other, with the leadership of these subgroups playing a key role in the process of rising antagonism and radicalization.[17] Of course, not every political

[11] Shakman Hurd, 'Politics of sectarianism', pp. 63–4; Ussama Makdisi, *The culture of sectarianism: community, history and violence in nineteenth-century Ottoman Lebanon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 7ff; Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, 'Beyond "identity"', *Theory and Society* 29: 1, 2000, pp. 1–47.

[12] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism*, 2nd edn (London: Verso, 1991), p. 4.

[13] Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, 'International norm dynamics and political change', *International Organization* 52: 4, 1998, pp. 887–917.

[14] See e.g. David Dessler, 'What's at stake in the agent–structure debate?', *International Organization* 43: 3, 1989, pp. 441–73.

[15] Toby Dodge, 'Beyond structure and agency: rethinking political identities in Iraq after 2003', *Nations and Nationalism* 26: 1, 2020, pp. 108–22 at p. 111.

[16] See e.g. James Fearon and David Laitin, 'Violence and the social construction of ethnic identity', *International Organization* 54: 4, 2000, pp. 845–77; Rogers Brubaker and David D. Laitin, 'Ethnic and nationalist violence', *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 24, 1998, pp. 423–52; Hashemi and Postel, *Sectarianization;* Lynch, 'The entrepreneurs of cynical sectarianism'; Makdisi, *The mythology of the sectarian Middle East*.

[17] Muzafer Sherif, *In common predicament: social psychology of intergroup conflict and cooperation* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966). Experiments conducted in the 1960s divided teenage summer-camp participants into two groups, prompting competition and a growing animosity between them in the framework of social activities.

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leader is equally able to engage in antagonistic identity politics. Studies in political sociology and social psychology suggest that authoritative sources or personalities, termed 'epistemic authorities', are able to influence publics in a significant way. The leaders' expertise and empathy, and the reliability of their sources of information, are crucial factors that determine the absorption of that information by a collective or by individuals.[18] Single political leaders, but also the media, public intellectuals and the army—the most trusted institution in many states of the Middle East—may thus act as epistemic authorities.

The securitization approach of the Copenhagen School in IR offers additional insights. In general, this school of thought highlights the way in which political leaders may 'securitize' an issue by making a security claim about that issue to a specific audience, thereby moving it from the field of normal politics into the realm of 'panic politics'.[19] Exceptional means, such as military interventions, wars or the curtailing of civil rights, become legitimate as a result. In addition to strengthening domestic support for policies that might otherwise be considered questionable, securitization moves also tend to mute domestic criticism. Applied to sectarian identities, the securitization approach accounts for the process by which sectarian identities are enacted and discursively framed in terms of security and survival.[20] Sectarian securitization and the encouragement of violence (and counter-violence) can thus be seen as a particularly powerful strategy of political entrepreneurs seeking to strengthen their legitimacy and generate support among their respective constituencies.[21]

Fourth, the literature's focus on agency provides only half of the picture: the timing of strategic action, and the circumstances in which it takes place, are equally important. Studies suggest that major events or political developments that deeply affect society, such as conflicts or natural disasters, tend to open the door for a collective reinterpretation of reality.[22] In such situations, authoritative sources tend to be particularly successful in promoting narratives that offer crucial information on these events, thus possibly altering public attitudes and beliefs. Situations of uncertainty and insecurity—or the prevailing perception thereof—seem to be crucial here. By stating that 'security, in any objective sense, measures the absence of threats to acquired values, in a subjective sense, the absence of fear that such values will be attacked',[23] Arnold Wolfers highlighted

[18] See e.g. Arie W. Kruglanski, Amiram Raviv, Daniel Bar-Tal, Alona Raviv, Keren Sharvit, Shmuel Ellis, Ruth Bar, Antonio Pierro and Lucia Mannetti, 'Says who? Epistemic authority effects in social judgment', *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, vol. 37, 2005, pp. 345–92.

[19] Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: a new framework for analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998), p. 34; see also Barry Buzan, *People, states, and fear: an agenda for international security studies in the post-Cold War era* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991).

[20] Malmvig, 'Coming in from the cold', p. 32; Malmvig, 'Power, identity and securitization in the Middle East'; Darwich and Fakhoury, 'Casting the other as an existential threat'; Mabon, 'The end of the battle for Bahrain'. From this perspective, the debate on whether specific sectarian identities are 'real' or not can be avoided; it does not matter.

[21] Lord, 'Sectarianized securitization in Turkey', p. 71.

[22] Sherif, *In common predicament*; James M. Goldgeier, 'Psychology and security', *Security Studies* 6: 4, 1997, pp. 137–66.

[23] Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and collaboration: essays in international politics* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962), p. 150.

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the relationship between (subjective) fear, collective beliefs and security over five decades ago.

In fact, different bodies of literature converge on a view of fear and insecurity among domestic groups as extremely powerful sentiments, which can be manipulated with relative ease. This is because fear is a primordial and basic instinct that does not involve reasoning. Particularly in societies involved in conflict, fear will always override hope, because hope is a complex process based on thinking, which requires an open mind. Fear, in contrast, is an automatic response based on a memorized past and usually involves conservatism or a closed mind.[24] Studies have thus highlighted the important role that collective threats have played in breeding ethnocentric and authoritarian attitudes and behaviour. Equally, fear triggered by violence and terrorism in societies tends to boost forceful and uncompromising policies advocated by the political right.[25]

Fifth, the vicious cycle of sectarian securitization works across different levels of analysis. Insecurity and fear, which act as enabling conditions but also result from securitization strategies, are primarily subjective and inter-subjective feelings of individuals and societies. As the securitization of sectarian identities often transcends state borders, as is currently the case in the Middle East, the boundaries between domestic and regional politics become blurred. Equally important, regimes and political leaders may also feel insecure and fear for their survival. With a high incidence of 'threatened' leaders engaging in sectarian securitization in a region, insecurity turns into a feature of the regional structure. Domestic and systemic levels are thus interlinked, rendering a 'classical' distinction between different levels of analysis rather unhelpful.[26]

Finally, while sectarian securitization in the context of conflicts and wars has been a recurrent phenomenon in the modern Middle East, the environment since the Arab uprisings provides a particularly fertile ground for sectarian securitization strategies. This is because the region finds itself in an extremely volatile situation, marked by several civil wars, struggles for regional hegemony between new and old regional powers, and major power shifts. Domestic politics, too, have turned into an important source of insecurity, as the Arab uprisings forcefully demonstrated, with heightened regime insecurity emerging as a major factor in Middle East politics.[27] In this situation, political leaders may indeed feel insecure.

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[24] Maria Jarymowicz and Daniel Bar-Tal, 'The dominance of fear over hope in the life of individuals and collectives', *European Journal of Social Psychology* 36: 3, 2006, pp. 367–92.

[25] Immo Fritsche, Eva Jonas and Thomas Kessler, 'Collective reactions to threat: implications for intergroup conflict and for solving societal crises', *Social Issues and Policy Review* 5: 1, 2011, pp. 101–36; Claude Berrebi and Esteban F. Klor, 'Are voters sensitive to terrorism? Direct evidence from the Israeli electorate', *American Political Science Review* 102: 3, 2008, pp. 279–301.

[26] Raffaella A. Del Sarto, Helle Malmvig and Eduard Soler i Lecha, *Interregnum: the regional order in in the Middle East and North Africa after 2011*, MENARA report no. 1 (Rome: Istituto Affari Internazionali, Feb. 2019), https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/interregnum-regional-order-middle-east-and-north-africa-after-2011, pp. 9–10; Walid Hazboun, 'In America's wake: turbulence and insecurity in the Middle East', in *Shifting global politics and the Middle East*, POMEPS Studies no. 34 (Washington DC: Project on Middle East Political Science, Elliot School of International Affairs, March 2019), pp. 14–17, http://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/POMEPS_Studies_34_Web.pdf; Maria-Louise Clausen, 'Saudi Arabian military activism in Yemen: interactions between the domestic and the systemic level', in *Shifting global politics and the Middle East*, pp. 76–80.

[27] Curtis R. Ryan, 'Regime security and shifting alliances in the Middle East', in *International Relations theory and*

They may actually conceive of 'their' ethnic or religious community as being under threat. However, they also have every interest in instilling a deep sense of insecurity among their constituencies for strategic reasons. While heightened insecurity (or the perception thereof) at the societal, state and regional levels all feed into each other, the 'politics of fear' adopted by political leaders are likely to ignite a particularly powerful vicious cycle.

The next section briefly explores the politics of sectarianism and securitization in the history of the modern Arab Middle East, paying particular attention to the interplay of agency and enabling conditions. The discussion will set the stage for the subsequent analysis of the case of Israel.

The politics of (securitized) sectarianism in the Arab Middle East

Sectarian differences and conflicts have been recurrent features throughout the history of the Middle East—as in other parts of the world. Yet sectarianism as we know it today is a manifestation of modernity, reflecting the deliberate manipulation of sectarian identities for political ends.[28] While the Ottoman empire notably engaged in the practices of managing and manipulating sectarian differences, such practices were facilitated by subsequent processes of state- and nation-building, cultural systems and the existence of disenfranchised segments of the population. Periods of transition and upheaval, often in conjunction with external interference, frequently enabled the 'successful' manipulation of sectarian identities by local and external political entrepreneurs.

Agency and enabling conditions

European colonial powers played a major role in the accentuation and partial reconfiguration of sectarian identities in the Middle East, allocating privileges to certain ethnic or religious communities within the modern state system they had created.[29] The collapse of the Ottoman empire and the region-wide struggle against western colonialism also disrupted the region. These developments also created an 'identity vacuum' that 'fuelled the rise of Arab nationalism'.[30] With its embrace of a unifying and broadly secular rhetoric at the supranational level, pan-Arabism notably differed from sectarian identity politics, and this layer of supranational identification became a distinctive feature of Middle East politics.[31] In the 1950s and 1960s, a number of Arab leaders would skilfully use pan-Arabism in their quest for regional hegemony. Yet the mantra of pan-Arab solidarity was also used to justify interference on a massive scale in the domestic politics of neighbouring states, thereby increasing the level of regional insecurity.[32] While

a changing Middle East, pp. 42–6.

[28] Makdisi, *The culture of sectarianism*.

[29] See e.g. Albert Hourani, *A history of the Arab peoples* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

[30] Raymond Hinnebusch, 'The politics of identity in Middle East international relations', in Louise Fawcett, ed., *International relations of the Middle East*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 148–63.

[31] Hinnebusch, 'The politics of identity'; Telhami and Barnett, 'Introduction'.

[32] Malcolm H. Kerr, *The Arab Cold War: Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir and his rivals, 1958–1970* (London and New York:

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pan-Arabism coexisted uneasily with the territorially defined national identities established after independence, authoritarian leaders often manipulated religion to legitimize their rule. Some rulers also based their regimes on sectarian loyalties or family dynasties, as for example in Jordan and Saudi Arabia.

Over the decades, political entrepreneurs would repeatedly engage in the politics of sectarianism in particularly turbulent periods. Thus, a general religious revival and the strengthening of sectarian movements right across the region followed the decline of pan-Arabism after the Six-Day War of 1967, amid the deep sense of uncertainty arising from the defeat of Arab armies by Israel.[33] Political Islam, in its various facets, was soon to replace pan-Arabism.[34] Islamist movements had also become deeply entrenched in societies through compensating for state failure in the social realm. In this particular context, the reference to Islam as the solution became a powerful element for aspiring political leaders in the region.

From the 1970s on, a reassertion of Shi'a identity occurred throughout Middle Eastern states in which the Shi'as had hitherto remained a marginalized minority. The deepening of the cleavage between Sunni and Shi'a in the second half of the twentieth century resulted from the replacement of traditional Shi'a leadership with a new generation of politicized religious leaders.[35] However, the tumultuous political environment in which their strategic action took place was extremely important. Significant power shifts were affecting the region, prompted by the revolution in Iran and the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, as well as by the Iran–Iraq war that began in 1980. While occasionally also appealing to pan-Islamic solidarity, the new leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran would try to exploit the Shi'a–Sunni divide to gain legitimacy at home and abroad. Sectarianization thus served as a powerful tool to legitimize aspiring rulers' quests for legitimacy and power amid major power shifts in the region.

The crescendo of sectarian securitization

The unprecedented wave of sectarianization seen in the region from the mid-2000s onwards would have been unthinkable without the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, which left chaos and destruction that reverberated well beyond Iraq's borders. The ill-conceived US attempt to export democracy to Iraq by introducing sectarian politics contributed to a rise in Shi'a influence and a striking increase in sectarian violence in the area.[36] The sectarian politics of the then Iraqi prime minister Nuri al-Maliki in excluding Sunni Iraqis from power would only contribute further to the rise of sectarian violence in this part of the Middle East.[37] With Iran becoming

Oxford University Press, 1971); Michael N. Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab politics: negotiations in regional order* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

[33] Sadiq al-Azm, *Self-criticism after the defeat* (London: Saqi, 2012); Fouad Ajami, *The dream palace of the Arabs: a generation's Odyssey* (New York: Pantheon, 1998).

[34] Nazih N. M. Ayubi, *Political Islam: religion and politics in the Arab world* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 1991).

[35] Olivier Roy, *The politics of chaos in the Middle East* (London: Hurst, 2007), p. 102.

[36] Marc Lynch, *The new Arab wars: uprisings and anarchy in the Middle East* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2016).

[37] Zaid al-Ali, 'How Maliki ruined Iraq', *Foreign Policy*, 19 June 2014.

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more assertive after the defeat of the Taliban in Afghanistan and of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, and Hezbollah gaining power in Lebanon,[38] the US intervention in Iraq provided a significant impetus for the growing securitization of Sunni and Shi'a identities in the Middle East.

The Arab uprisings sweeping through the region from 2011 strengthened this development even further. These events created power vacuums in Syria, Libya and Yemen that degenerated into atrocious civil wars. In Syria specifically, the origin of the conflict was unrelated to sectarianism; both the regime and external actors were, however, quick to securitize sectarian differences once the peaceful demonstrations against the Assad regime were brutally repressed, turned violent and led to civil war. Regional powers also 'rediscovered' the power of identity politics in the context of the growing rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Together with Turkey, these states further accentuated and exploited sectarian differences in their quest for regional hegemony or for the purpose of deterrence, amid growing levels of violence and chaos in the region.[39]

Since the Arab uprisings, the Middle East has been going through a convulsed period of transition with an uncertain future, an interregnum between an old and a new regional order.[40] In this transition, to use Gramsci's words, 'morbid phenomena of the most varied kind come to pass'.[41] During these years the region has been marked by old and new conflicts, several appalling civil wars, the rise of armed non-state actors, informal and recurrently shifting alliances, and major power shifts. Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar have emerged as major regional players alongside Israel, vying for influence and hegemony. Russia has expanded its role in the Middle East arena while US influence has been declining. Moreover, the surviving Arab regimes have not forgotten the revolutions of 2011, which expelled several long-time Arab rulers, such as Ben Ali in Tunisia, Mubarak in Egypt, Gaddafi in Libya and Saleh in Yemen. Regional politics are only adding to the current regimes' preoccupation with their survival, as demonstrated by the massive meddling of Middle Eastern states in the domestic affairs of their neighbours, for example in Syria and Yemen.[42] Global dynamics are an additional potential source of threats to regime survival, with Russia, as noted above, having vastly increased its involvement in Middle Eastern affairs while the

[38] Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah has traditionally also (successfully) appealed to non-sectarian pan-Islamist and anti-Zionist solidarity. See Helle Malmvig, 'Allow me this one time to speak as a Shi'i: the sectarian taboo, music videos and the securitization of sectarian identity politics in Hezbollah's legitimation of its military involvement in Syria', *Mediterranean Politics* 26: 1, 2019, pp. 1–24.

[39] Gause, *Beyond sectarianism*; Elizabeth Monier, 'Egypt, Iran, and the Hizbullah cell: using sectarianism to "de-Arabize" and regionalize threats to national interests', *Middle East Journal* 69: 3, 2015, pp. 341–57; Morten Valbjørn and André Bank, 'The new Arab Cold War: rediscovering the Arab dimension of Middle East regional politics', *Review of International Studies* 38: 1, 2012, pp. 3–24; Hassan Ahmadian and Payam Mohseni, 'Iran's Syria strategy: the evolution of deterrence', *International Affairs* 95: 2, 2019, pp. 341–64.

[40] Del Sarto et al., *Interregnum*.

[41] Antonio Gramsci, *Prison notebooks*, vol. 2, ed. and trans. Joseph A. Buttigieg (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), para. 34.

[42] Lynch, *The new Arab wars*; Ryan, 'Regime security and shifting alliances'; Cinzia Bianco and Gareth Stansfield, 'The intra-GCC crises: mapping GCC fragmentation after 2011', *International Affairs* 94: 3, 2018, pp. 613–35; Rory Miller and Sarah Cardaun, 'Multinational security coalitions and the limits of middle power activism', *International Affairs* 96: 6, 2020, pp. 1509–25.

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United States has retreated from the region. Heightened regime insecurity has also prompted an accelerated pace of militarization in the region, a development that hardly increases the level of security there.[43]

A vicious cycle

At present the vicious cycle of sectarian securitization is nowhere more visible than in Syria, Iraq and Yemen, where it is having devastating effects. As regimes have become obsessed with their own survival, authoritarianism and coercive practices have multiplied in the region. Together with sometimes unpredictable and forceful foreign policies,[44] the securitization of sectarian identities has been a strategy widely used to combat regime insecurity and fend off popular demands for political and socio-economic reforms. From Syria to Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, incumbent or aspiring political leaders have been engaging in the securitization of sectarian identities, resulting in a greater fragmentation within and among states and a higher incidence of sectarian violence.[45] While the deliberate strategies of sectarian securitization by political entrepreneurs work particularly well in moments of uncertainty, these practices create social facts. They foment fear and self-sustaining in-group/out-group biases, which, once unleashed, are extremely difficult to rein in. The conflicts in Iraq and Syria are prominent cases in point: securitized sectarian identities have themselves turned into a source of instability and conflict.[46] A heightened sense of insecurity and fear at the societal level, in turn, tends to boost support for strong leaders who promise security. Yet in practice, the recipes preferred by these leaders to confront (regime) insecurity consist of a mix of policies that only amplify the sense of insecurity among populations, increase sectarian tensions and further contribute to the destabilization of the region. Most notably, these remedies include coercion at home, erratic foreign policies, attacks on the sovereignty of neighbouring states and increased military spending—combined with an entrenchment of sectarian securitization practices.

In our enquiry into the vicious cycle of sectarian securitization dynamics, the next section of the article shifts its attention to the case of Israel.

The politics of (securitized) sectarianism in Israel

As much as the 1917 Balfour Declaration promised British support for a (sectarian) 'national home for the Jewish people' in Palestine, Zionism's objective of creating *a state for the Jews* clearly indicates that sectarian conceptions of statehood and

[43] Robert Springborg, 'The Middle East is the most militarized region in the world', Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture Project, 18 July 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EPyss74rN4I.

[44] F. Gregory Gause, 'Balancing what? Threat perception and alliance choice in the Gulf', *Security Studies* 13: 2, 2003, pp. 273–305.

[45] Madawi Al-Rasheed, 'Sectarianism as counter-revolution: Saudi responses to the Arab Spring', in Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel, eds, *Sectarianization: mapping the new politics of the Middle East* (London: Hurst, 2017), pp. 143–58; Malmvig, 'Power, identity and securitization in the Middle East'; Darwich and Fakhoury, 'Casting the other as an existential threat'.

[46] Phillips and Valbjørn, '"What is in a name?"'; Hinnebusch, 'The sectarian revolution in the Middle East'.

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nationhood were intrinsic to the Israeli state from the outset. Given the long history of persecution and pogroms that culminated in the Holocaust, the search for security was equally built into the idea of Jewish statehood. Both labour Zionism and revisionist Zionism subscribed to these ideas. The latter, however, put an even stronger emphasis on the unchangeable condition of Jewish collective *insecurity*—perhaps best exemplified by the notion of 'living by the sword', in conjunction with Jewish ethno-nationalism and maximalist territorial claims.[47] Thus, in the case of Israel, the stage for sectarian securitization was set.

Agency and enabling conditions

Securitized sectarian conceptions of Israeli politics would grow stronger over the decades. While the lessons learned from Jewish history played a prominent role in the construction of an Israeli national identity that relies on Jewishness,[48] Israel's political leaders stressed that the country was facing existential threats, with the destruction of the 'Jewish state' (and thus of the Jewish people) viewed as the ultimate objective of its enemies. The doctrines and practices that guided Israel's foreign and security policies reinforced and institutionalized these conceptions of threats and regional order. Focusing on Jewish self-reliance and the ability to confront any external menace with force, these notions thrived particularly well in the context of repeated wars with neighbouring states.[49] Security considerations would thus become central in Israeli politics, forging a 'quest for an almost metaphysical security' for the Jewish collective.[50] However, by producing a risk-taking and partly aggressive attitude, Israel's security doctrine may well have helped perpetuate the conflict with its Arab neighbours, as Zeev Maoz's seminal study of Israel's security policy concludes.[51]

The politics of exclusionary sectarianism became even more prevalent with the rising power of revisionist Zionism after the 1977 elections that ended the dominance of the Israeli Labour Party. The Likud, the main promoter of vigorous ethno-nationalism, has dominated, or at least participated in, most government coalitions ever since. Yet, while originally secular, revisionist Zionism absorbed messianic beliefs and the idea of religiously justified Jewish rights to biblical land, thus turning into what has been termed neo-revisionism.[52] Concurrently, various religious factions promoting exclusionary notions of sectarian identity became politically more powerful within the Likud, and other religious forces moved from the periphery to the centre of Israeli politics.

[47] Walter Laqueur, *A history of Zionism* (New York: Schocken, 2003). Revisionist Zionism stipulates Jewish historical rights over the land on both sides of the River Jordan.

[48] Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered roots: collective memory and the making of Israeli national tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

[49] Zeev Maoz, *Defending the Holy Land: a critical analysis of Israel's security and foreign policy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009).

[50] Amos Perlmutter, 'Israel's dilemma', *Foreign Affairs* 68: 5, 1990, pp. 119–32 at p. 120.

[51] Maoz, *Defending the Holy Land*, p. 552.

[52] Ilan Peleg, *Begin's foreign policy, 1977–1983: Israel's move to the right* (New York: Greenwood, 1987); Raffella A. Del Sarto, *Israel under siege: the politics of insecurity and the rise of the Israeli neo-revisionist right* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2017).

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Several factors explain the growing domestic support for these conceptions of politics. They include demographic change, such as the shift towards a majority of Mizrahi Jewish voters since the 1970s,[53] the constant growth of Israel's Jewish religious population owing to higher birth rates, and mass immigration from the former Soviet Union in the 1990s. To try to express a complex situation simply, these developments have widened the sectarian and right-wing base in Israeli society, in conjunction with the general rise of religious preferences in Israeli society over time.[54] However, the permanent status of insecurity resulting from the persistent Arab–Israeli conflict, the unresolved Palestinian question and recurrent terrorist attacks over the decades also need to be taken into account. Against this backdrop, primordial sectarian conceptions of politics that underline Jewish exclusiveness and also collective insecurity clearly came to dominate Israel's political discourse over time.[55]

The crescendo of sectarian securitization in the 2000s

Since the beginning of the millennium, a new level of exclusionary sectarianism has marked Israeli politics and society.[56] Israel's political leaders have insisted that the country is facing existential threats, its enemies aiming at the annihilation of the Jewish state. While these notions are not new, as we have seen, sectarian securitization has increased in both intensity and resilience. In particular, the failure of the Oslo process in late 2000 and the violence during the second Palestinian intifada provided particularly fertile ground for this development. The high incidence of Palestinian suicide attacks against Israeli civilians over a prolonged period, together with rocket attacks from Hamas and Hezbollah, instilled a general sense of insecurity and fear in Israeli society, triggering the well-known 'rally around the flag' effect. These events also prompted most Jewish Israeli voters to cast their ballots for the political right because it promised them security.[57]

In this environment of fear, right-wing political leaders had every incentive to play up threats even more for political gain.[58] While the issue of terrorism targeted on the Israeli Jewish collective came to define Israel's political discourse in the first years of the second intifada, then prime minister Ehud Barak coined the phrase 'no partner for peace' after the failed Camp David summit in July 2000. This notion implies that the Palestinians were only interested in terrorism and violence against

[53] The term Mizrahi Jews (or Mizrahim) is applied to Jewish communities of Middle Eastern and North African origin.

[54] Yoav Peled and Horit Herman Peled, *The religionization of Israeli society* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).

[55] Baruch Kimmerling, *The invention and decline of Israeliness: state, society, and the military* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 110ff.

[56] For a more detailed discussion of the politics of insecurity in Israel in the 2000s, see Del Sarto, *Israel under siege*. Parts of this section draw on this publication.

[57] Anna Getmansky and Thomas Zeitzoff, 'Terrorism and voting: the effect of rocket threat on voting in Israeli elections', *American Political Science Review* 108: 3, 2014, pp. 588–604.

[58] Marc Peffley, Marc L. Hutchison and Michal Shamir, 'The impact of persistent terrorism on political tolerance: Israel, 1980 to 2011', *American Political Science Review* 109: 4, 2015, pp. 817–32 at p. 338.

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the Jewish people, and ultimately in its annihilation. The idea became an unquestioned truth in Israeli Jewish society and politics.[59]

Agency is important here as well. Barak, the most decorated soldier in Israel's history, was a widely trusted figure, whom the Zionist left regarded as the political heir of the assassinated Yitzhak Rabin. He thus acted as an epistemic authority at a moment of pronounced uncertainty.[60] Particularly during the first intense years of the Palestinian intifada, the Israeli army and the mainstream media also acted as epistemic authorities. While usually supporting the positions of the Israeli government, they contributed to a one-sided and apocalyptic narrative of unfolding events.[61] Consecutive Israeli governments would continue to focus on the issue of terrorism while repeating the belief that there was no one to talk to on the Palestinian side. This narrative would continue even after Yasser Arafat died in 2004 and was succeeded by the pragmatic Mahmoud Abbas, and well after the second intifada faded out.

From the mid-2000s onwards, Iran and its nascent nuclear programme became an additional focus of sectarian securitization in Israel's mainstream political discourse.[62] Identifying Iran and its proxies, including the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Palestinian Hamas, as inherently evil, Israeli governments insisted that Iran was an *existential* threat, primed to destroy Israel. These assessments went hand in hand with recurrent warnings of a possible 'second Holocaust'.[63]

With widespread domestic support for these ideas and the policies they generate, sectarian securitization strategies have been strikingly successful. For example, the counterterrorism policies of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon during the second intifada, which were responsible for almost 3,000 Palestinian fatalities during Sharon's premiership alone, enjoyed the approval of between 70 and 92 per cent of Jewish Israelis.[64] These policies entailed large military operations in the West Bank, the reoccupation of areas from which the army had withdrawn under the Oslo Accords, closures, curfews, administrative detentions, house demolitions and extrajudicial killings.[65] According to various public opinion polls conducted over recent decades, a vast majority of Jewish Israelis believe that the Palestinians are not interested in peace.[66] Between 80 and 94 per cent of Jewish Israelis supported

[59] Del Sarto, *Israel under siege*, pp. 35–53; Eran Halperin and Daniel Bar-Tal, 'The fall of the peace camp in Israel: the influence of Prime Minister Ehud Barak on Israeli public opinion, July 2000–February 2001', *Conflict and Communication Online* 6: 2, 2007, http://www.cco.regener-online.de/2007_2/pdf/halperin.pdf.

[60] Halperin and Bar-Tal, 'The fall of the peace camp in Israel'.

[61] Daniel Dor, *Intifada hits the headlines: how the Israeli press misreported the outbreak of the second Palestinian uprising* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004); Kobi Michael, 'The Israel Defense Forces as an epistemic authority: an intellectual challenge in the reality of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 30: 3, 2007, pp. 421–46.

[62] Yossi Klein Halevi and Michael B. Oren, 'Israel's worst nightmare', *New Republic*, 30 Jan. 2007.

[63] Klein Halevi and Oren, 'Israel's worst nightmare'.

[64] See B'Tselem, 'Fatalities before Operation "Cast Lead"', n.d., http://www.btselem.org/statistics/fatalities/before-cast-lead/by-date-of-event; Asher Arian, 'Israeli public opinion on national security 2003', memorandum 67 (Tel Aviv: Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, 2003). Sharon served as Israel's prime minister from 2001 to 2006.

[65] Erika Weinthal and Jeannie Sowers, 'Targeting infrastructure and livelihoods in the West Bank and Gaza', *International Affairs* 95: 2, 2019, pp. 319–40.

[66] Halperin and Bar-Tal, 'The fall of the peace camp'; Shibley Telhami, *The 2011 public opinion poll of Jewish and Arab citizens of Israel* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, 2011).

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Israel's three wars on the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip, in 2008–2009, 2012 and 2014.[67] Considering the high number of Palestinians fatalities and the wide destruction of Gaza's infrastructure caused by these wars, this is a remarkably high percentage.

The power of sectarian securitization is also visible in the preference accorded by 48 per cent of Jewish Israeli respondents in a 2016 poll to Palestinian recognition of Israel *as the state of the Jewish people* over the achievement of a permanent peace agreement.[68] As regards Iran, over 80 per cent of Jewish Israelis were afraid of Tehran obtaining nuclear weapons in the late 2000s, considering it an *existential* danger. Accordingly, there was—and probably still is—widespread domestic support for Benjamin Netanyahu's preferred option of bombing Iranian nuclear sites.[69] In 2017, 77 per cent of the Jewish public also concurred with Netanyahu's warning that even after the signing of the 2015 international agreement limiting Iran's nuclear capabilities, Iran was still a serious threat.[70]

There is, of course, a basis to these threat perceptions. In addition to the significant surge in terrorist attacks during the second intifada, Hamas won the Palestinian elections in 2006 and took control of the Gaza Strip in 2007. Hezbollah became defiant and well armed, as evidenced in the war between Israel and the Lebanese organization in the summer of 2006. And while Iran increased its regional influence following the US invasion of Iraq and the fall of arch-enemy Saddam Hussein, the then Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad regularly made strongly anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic statements.[71]

However, sectarian perceptions of security ignore and contradict many important facts. For instance, the Arab peace plan of 2002 and the professed antipathy of some Arab states towards Iran (and thus the convergence of their interests with Israel's) allows for a non-sectarian interpretation of regional realities. Similarly, Israel's security environment has improved considerably since the Arab uprisings. Although Israel is concerned about the presence of Hezbollah and Iranian forces on neighbouring Syrian territory, Syria no longer poses a threat to the country. Egypt under President Al-Sisi shares Israel's hostility towards Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood. Palestinian President Abbas has been cooperating with Israel on preventing terrorist attacks and on fighting Hamas. Likewise, based on a common interest in confronting Iran, Israel's ties to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and smaller Gulf monarchies have been improving behind the scenes over the years, a development that would lead to the Emirates and Bahrain normalizing

[67] Yehuda Ben Meir, 'Operation Cast Lead: political dimensions and public opinion', *Strategic Assessment* 11: 4 (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2009), pp. 29–34; Ephraim Yaar and Tamar Hermann, *War and Peace Index, February 2009* (Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research and Evens Program in Mediation and Conflict Resolution of Tel Aviv University), http://www.peaceindex.org/files/peaceindex2009_2_3.pdf; Israel Democracy Institute, *The Peace Index: August 2014*, http://peaceindex.org/indexMonthEng.aspx?num=283.

[68] Only 27.5% of respondents preferred the goal of reaching a permanent peace agreement. See Israel Democracy Institute, *The Peace Index: April 2016*, http://www.peaceindex.org/indexMonthEng.aspx?num=304&monthname=April.

[69] Ephraim Yaar and Tamar Hermann, *Peace Index, February 2007*, http://www.tau.ac.il/peace/; Center for Iranian Studies, *Public opinion poll: main findings* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 2009).

[70] Israel Democracy Institute, *The Peace Index: November 2017*, http://www.peaceindex.org/indexMonthEng.aspx?num=327&monthname=November.

[71] See e.g. Nazila Fath, 'Wipe Israel "off the map" Iranian says', *New York Times*, 27 Oct. 2005.

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their relations with Israel in 2020. Yet while Israeli leaders occasionally acknowledged these facts, the narrative of insecurity and threats revolving around the Jewish collective continued to be prominent in Israel. The Israeli elections of April 2019 bear evidence to this: security was the major topic of the electoral contest,[72] and a majority of Israeli voters re-elected Netanyahu on his promise to provide exactly that: security. As Israel currently heads towards a fourth election in two years, polls predict that the different right-wing parties, most of which espouse exclusionary sectarian and partly securitized ideas, will gain a massive total of 80 seats out of 120 in the Israeli Knesset.[73]

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Domestic implications

The ever-growing securitization of Jewish identity has also significantly affected domestic politics. For example, when asked about which value is more important, 'Jewish' or 'democratic', a growing number of Jewish Israelis believe that a 'Jewish state' is more important than a democratic one. According to a poll taken in 2014, the number of respondents who maintain that both values were equally important fell from 48 per cent in 2010 to 24 per cent in 2014.[74] In the iteration of the same poll in early 2018, 26 per cent of Jewish respondents believed that the Jewish component should be more important in public life; 35 per cent maintained that both elements should be equally important; and only 28 per cent favoured democracy.[75] In the summer of that year, the definition of Israel as the Jewish nation-state was anchored in the country's basic laws—Israel's version of a constitution.[76] Ignoring the Palestinian Arab minorities, who constitute about 20 per cent of Israeli citizens, this law reserves collective rights and the right to self-determination for the Jewish collective only.

As Israel's Arab Palestinian citizens do not share the prevailing consensus on the sectarian definition of statehood and regional order, they are increasingly considered to be the enemy within.[77] In 2016, a staggering 59 per cent of Jewish Israeli respondents opposed the participation of Arab parties in the government and the appointment of Arab ministers to the cabinet.[78] In a 2018 survey, 47 per cent of Israel's Jewish public believed that the state should revoke the voting rights of those Israeli citizens who are unwilling to declare that Israel is the nation-state

[72] Netanyahu's most important competitor in those elections, the head of the Kahol-Lavan (Blue and White) party Benny Gantz, is a former military chief of staff (he would later join Netanyahu's government coalition).

[73] *Haaretz*, 16 Dec. 2020.

[74] Tamar Hermann, Ella Heller, Chanan Cohen, Gilad Be'ery and Yuval Lebel, *The Israel Democracy Index 2014: highlights* (Jerusalem: Israel Democracy Institute, 2014), https://en.idi.org.il/media/3639/democracy_index_2014_eng_highlights.pdf.

[75] Tamar Hermann, Or Anabi, Ella Heller and Fadi Omar, *The Israel Democracy Index 2018* (Jerusalem: Israel Democracy Institute, 2018), https://en.idi.org.il/media/12170/the-israeli-democracy-index-2018.pdf.

[76] Jonathan Lis and Noa Landau, 'Israel passes controversial Jewish nation-state bill after stormy debate', *Haaretz*, 19 July 2018.

[77] See Ilan Peleg and Dov Waxman, *Israel's Palestinians: the conflict within* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[78] Tamar Hermann, Ella Heller, Chanan Cohen, Dana Bublil and Fadi Omar, *The Israel Democracy Index 2016: highlights* (Jerusalem: Israel Democracy Institute, 2016), https://en.idi.org.il/publications/11985. Israel's Arab parties have never participated in a government coalition.

of the Jewish people.[79] Exclusionary sectarian discourses targeting Israel's Arab citizens have emerged as a notable feature of Israeli politics in the last decades. For example, Netanyahu defined them as a 'real demographic threat', while dozens of municipal chief rabbis signed a ruling that forbids the rental or selling of homes to Arab citizens.[80] Israel also adopted a series of laws that discriminate against the Arab minorities. These include the Community Acceptance Law of 2011, which allows rural towns to reject the residency of Palestinian citizens and other minorities on the basis that they are 'unsuitable' for Jewish communities, and the Nakba Law of the same year, which authorizes the finance minister to reduce state funding to institutions commemorating the Palestinian exodus in 1947–8. In the 2000s the Knesset also amended land rights, confirming state ownership of land confiscated from Palestinian citizens, even when the land has not been used to serve the purposes for which it was originally confiscated.[81]

A vicious cycle

While Israel certainly faces a number of 'objective' security threats, the threat perceptions that have come to prevail in Israel nurture anxiety and fear for survival, even though Israel is the strongest power in the Middle East, with the United States as its most powerful ally. The securitization of Jewish Israeli identity has legitimized, and rendered acceptable, forceful and unilateral policies towards neighbours advocated by successive Israeli governments, including deterrence, pre-emptive strikes and reprisals. These actions, however, only contribute to a heightened sense of insecurity, which in turn acts as an enabling condition for the 'successful' securitization of collective identities.

Equally, the securitization of Jewish Israeli collective identity has allowed the unhindered continuation of Israel's well-funded settlement project in Palestinian territories.[82] As the conflict with the Palestinians became reframed in sectarian terms, rather than as a dispute over land and borders,[83] any meaningful territorial compromise became nonsensical. The settlement project has thus gained wide domestic legitimacy, a development that corresponds with the preferences of Israel's right-wing governments and the settler movement. In this context, there is an ever-growing symbiosis between the settlements and the security establishment in Israel, making it even more difficult, perhaps even impossible, to resolve

[79] Tamar Hermann et al., *Israel Democracy Index 2018*, p. 84.

[80] Gideon Alon and Aluf Benn, 'Netanyahu: Israel's Arabs are the real demographic threat', *Haaretz*, 18 Dec. 2003; Chaim Levinson, 'Dozens of top Israeli rabbis sign ruling to forbid rental of homes to Arabs', *Haaretz*, 7 Dec. 2010.

[81] For more examples, see Adalah: The Legal Center for Minority Rights in Israel, *The discriminatory laws database*, last updated 25 Sept. 2017, https://www.adalah.org/en/content/view/7771.

[82] Yaron Drukman, 'Ha-mevaker: mo'atsah mafrah hok u-bonah le-lo rishionot be-ma'ahazim' [State comptroller: the local council (in the West Bank) violates the law and builds without permits in the settlement outposts], *YNet*, 9 July 2018; Yotam Berger, 'Israel approves 1,450 new homes in West Bank settlements', *Haaretz*, 26 Dec. 2018; Yotam Berger, 'Israel to approve over 1,400 housing units in West Bank settlements', *Haaretz*, 31 March 2019.

[83] Menachem Klein, *The shift: Israel–Palestine from border struggle to ethnic conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

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the conflict with the Palestinians. An important source of insecurity is thus kept alive.

Domestically, violence and a deep sense of insecurity have enabled the strengthening of illiberal elements and movements in Israel, which are also the main drivers of these conditions.[84] While also de-legitimizing the Israeli Zionist Left by presenting them as 'non-Jewish' and as 'traitors',[85] sectarian securitization has led to a widening divide between the Jewish majority and the Palestinian Arab minority, as noted above. Importantly, populist discourses and policies targeting the Arab minorities are influential among the Jewish Israeli public.[86] Israel's right-wing governments have thus not only contributed to this ever-growing gap; they have also succeeded in strengthening their support from the Jewish Israeli public *because of these policies*. Yet the growing antagonism certainly does not make Israelis—whether Jewish or Arab—feel more secure.

Sectarian securitization diverts attention from other pressing domestic issues, such as the corruption scandals surrounding Netanyahu or the constantly growing socio-economic inequalities in the country. The latter had placed Israel—an egalitarian and socialist-oriented country during the first decades of statehood—in seventh place in the income inequality ranking among OECD countries in 2018.[87] For a large part of the population, a general sense of insecurity is exacerbated by socio-economic grievances and uncertainty.

The securitization of sectarian identity in Israel has thus been extremely 'successful' for those in power: it has legitimized right-wing policies and generated a strong domestic consensus around them. It allows these governments to remain in power without the need to show substantial results in tackling, for instance, socio-economic issues. Sectarian securitization has contributed to a growing sense of insecurity in Israeli society, which in turn provides fertile ground for perpetuating the politics of fear.

Conclusions

Identity politics have been a notable feature of the Middle East for decades. In the Arab Middle East, recurrent waves of antagonistic identity politics over time can be linked to a number of factors, including foreign intervention, particular state- and nation-building processes, the long history of wars and conflicts, and repeated power shifts. Periods of transition seem to provide favourable conditions for political leaders to exploit certain existing, but often dormant, differences (and not others) for their own political interests, or to invent new ones. Nor are sectarian ideas of politics a new phenomenon in Israel, a country whose

[84] Yuval Feinstein and Uri Ben-Eliezer, 'Failed peace and the decline in liberalism in Israel: a spiral model', *Mediterranean Politics* 24: 5, 2019, pp. 568–91.

[85] Yonatan Levi and Shai Agmon, 'Beyond culture and economy: Israel's security-driven populism', *Contemporary Politics*, published online 22 Dec. 2020, https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2020.1864163.

[86] Nadim N. Rouhana and Nimer Sultany, 'Redrawing the boundaries of citizenship: Israel's new hegemony', *Journal of Palestine Studies* 33: 1, 2003, pp. 5–22.

[87] OECD, *Income inequality (indicator)* (Paris, 2018), https://data.oecd.org/inequality/income-inequality.htm#indicator-chart.

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founding rationale is actually embedded in sectarian conceptions of the state and the nation. Here, recurrent wars and conflicts with Arab neighbours have similarly provided impetus for the growing salience of antagonistic sectarian politics over time. While the Middle East at large has witnessed repeated episodes of sectarian securitization in the past, this phenomenon has reached a new level of intensity at present, with important implications for the region's security and stability.

Although a substantial body of literature on the construction of sectarian antagonism and violence exists, not much attention has been paid to the enabling conditions underlying this phenomenon. In the quest to answer the question why we are currently witnessing a 'flow' of antagonistic identity politics in the Middle East, this article has revisited the insights of political sociology and social psychology in the context of the securitization approach in IR. While agency and strategic action are crucial, I have suggested that particularly volatile periods and major disruptive events that instil a profound sense of insecurity in domestic groups and populations are key to the 'success' of sectarian securitization strategies. Since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Middle East has been going through a significant period of transition, characterized by a high incidence of political violence and important power shifts. The Arab uprisings and their aftermath have further reinforced these developments, as have several civil wars and the obsession of many leaders in the region with regime survival. In these conditions, political leaders have successfully engaged in the securitization of sectarian identities. In the case of Israel, the collapse of the Oslo process and the prolonged period of violence and terrorism of the second Palestinian intifada in the early 2000s count as a major disruptive event, creating a general feeling of threat and insecurity at the societal level. Consecutive Israeli governments have been eager to further promote this sense of (existential) threat to the Jewish Israeli collective, even though the material conditions have changed since the end of the second intifada and certainly in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings.

What may sound like circular logic in fact describes a self-sustaining mechanism that is currently at play in the Middle East: a heightened sense of insecurity is both an *enabling condition for* the 'successful' securitization of sectarian identities and *the outcome of* the politics of fear adopted by aspiring or incumbent leaders. Political leaders may engage in sectarian securitization out of fear and/or to legitimize their rule, but the stances they adopt—often bolstered by assertive foreign policies—only increase the sense of insecurity at the societal level while destabilizing the region further. Of course, sectarian securitization does not remain confined to the realm of ideas. By legitimizing policy choices, it institutionalizes and embeds in material facts sectarian conceptions of domestic and foreign policies. In many cases, it also legitimizes sectarian violence.

The discussion presented here generates three major conclusions. First, the vicious cycle of sectarian securitization is not only an important source of insecurity in the Middle East. It has also emerged as an integral part of the structure of the region's politics, with wide-ranging implications. For one thing, it runs counter to the essence of liberal democracy, undermining the idea of individual

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rights and any liberal conception of citizenship in a state. Instead, it tends to support Carl Schmitt's concept of the political, in which antagonism and the creation of an enemy are essential elements.[88] Moreover, by incessantly invoking supposedly primordial loyalties, threats and fears, the vicious cycle of sectarian securitization makes the peaceful resolution of conflicts highly unlikely, legitimizing instead the pursuit of violence and policies of force. As conflicts inevitably become defined in 'primordial' terms, rather than as disputes over resources and power, sectarian identities and security become quasi-ontological categories that are extremely difficult to deconstruct. While conflict resolution mechanisms thus need to take account of the 'fear factor',[89] sabre-rattling political leaders thrive particularly well in this environment. The conflict potential in the region is thus likely to remain high.

Second, global power shifts and external interventions—most notably the US invasion of Iraq—have considerably contributed to the region's turbulence and volatility, as does the persistence of violence in the wake of the Arab uprisings. However, while global, regional and domestic dynamics interlock and condition each other in the Middle East at present, the vicious cycle of sectarian securitization points to the crucial role of local actors. This finding validates the argument made by Jack Snyder about the domestic source of regional conflicts.[90]

A final conclusion regards the comparability of Israel with the broader Middle East, generally considered a taboo idea by all sides. There is no doubt that sectarian politics in Israel have their specificities—concerning, for instance, the definition of the state and the nation in terms of ethnicity *and* religion, that is, Jewishness. Israel also differs from many of its neighbours in terms of its political system and the strength of the state and its institutions. And although the construction of Jewish collective identity transcends state borders, thus inviting comparison with pan-Arab supranational identity, sectarian securitization in Israel mostly occurs within the structures—and borders—of the state. However, Israel exemplifies just one particular case of a broader trend in the Middle East; it is not unique. Indeed, the dynamics of the vicious cycle of sectarian securitization are comparable to that in play in other regional states, as are its implications. These include the impact on the nature of domestic politics and majority–minority relations, and the perpetuation of the politics of fear that legitimize forceful policies—all serving the narrow interests of illiberal leaders and domestic groups. Hence, Israel can and should be studied in a comparative perspective.

Could Israel's recent normalization of relations with the Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco break the vicious cycle of sectarian securitization in Israel? With Israel's government stressing that the deals will contribute to regional peace, and with Netanyahu describing both Israel and the Emirates as 'advanced

[88] Carl Schmitt, *The concept of the political* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1976).

[89] David A. Lake and Donald Rothchild, 'Containing fear: the origins and management of ethnic conflict', *International Security* 21: 2, 1996, pp. 41–75.

[90] Jack Snyder, *Myths of empire: domestic politics and international ambition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

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democracies',[91] the narrative seems to have started to shift. Yet the findings of this article suggest otherwise. While peace agreements are always positive, the major motivations behind the Israeli–Emirati normalization process include the identification of a 'common enemy' in Iran and the prospects of lucrative deals in advanced weapons and surveillance technology.[92] While neither incentive bodes well for regional peace and security, the entrenched nature of sectarian securitization in Israel—and its convenience for those in power—suggest that Israel's politics of fear may well intensify in relation to other issues, such as Iran or the Palestinians.

Given the significance and far-reaching implications of sectarian securitization in the Middle East at large, the question of how to break the vicious cycle is undoubtedly of fundamental importance for the future of the region.

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[91] Noa Landau, 'UAE is an "advanced democracy", Netanyahu said—then deleted', *Haaretz*, 18 Aug. 2020.

[92] Raffaella A. Del Sarto and Charles Lawrie, 'Olive branch or fig leaf? What Israel's normalisation processes really mean for regional security', LSE Middle East Centre blog, 13 Nov. 2020, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2020/11/13/olive-branch-or-fig-leaf-what-israels-normalisation-processes-really-mean-for-regional-security/.