Chapter 6
Sectarianism and the Politics of Identity in the MENA Region

Abstract The politics of identity is a source of major conflicts across the MENA region. Rejecting essentialist notions of identity, this chapter argues that sectarianism only becomes an issue when it is instrumentalized by political entrepreneurs. It examines how sectarianism has played out in Syria and Libya as well as the quest for an independent Kurdistan. The chapter explores the different approaches adopted by MENA states to manage the politics of difference. These include secessionism, federalism, consociationalism and nation-building. Various country case studies are provided as each of these approaches is assessed – from Syria and Morocco to Lebanon and Oman. Ultimately, however, the politics of identity calls upon mature political leadership with a vision and intellect to forge inclusive nation-states in an increasingly fractious region.

Keywords Identity · Consociationalism · Federalism · Nation-building · Secession

6.1 Introduction

From Columbia to Chechnya, from India to Iran and from Angola and Algeria to Afghanistan, the world is witnessing a return to the “cult of origins” where difference often means destruction, destitution, despair and death (Krause and Renwick 1996). This is not an overstatement. Contrary to conventional wisdom that the world is divided into 195 countries, the planet actually only consists of 5000 distinct ethnic groups – not mentioning religious or linguistic divides and the perennial economic cleavages. Indeed, only 9.1 percent of the globe’s states are ethnically homogenous (Davies 1996; Poku 1996). Effective nation-building is key to harmonious co-existence and common citizenship. Narrow ethno-centric nationalisms and religious fundamentalism undermine this collective imperative. Where such inclusive
nation-building is absent, tragedy beckons. The 1994 Rwandan genocide, the killing fields of the former Yugoslavia and the systematic purging of Yazidis by Islamic State all underline this truism.

The MENA region has not been immune to the politics of identity. There is an old Bedouin proverb, “I, against my brothers. I and my brothers against my cousins. I and my brothers and my cousins against the world” (Haji 2017). This saying encapsulates the central problem of identity politics in the MENA region. Negative identity politics lay at the root of state formation and also serves to prevent social cohesion and thereby contributing to the fragility of states in the region. The politics of identity creates permanent divisions of inhabitants of the MENA states into “insiders” and “outsiders” and makes it impossible for any common citizenship to develop. To be clear, identity politics is not necessarily negative. It promotes social cohesion as it provides individuals with a sense of belonging. This politics of belonging is central to the notion of a “nation-state.” However, when belonging is coached in exclusivist or nativist terms, when social-economic benefits are perceived to be accrued to certain groups and not others and where one’s cultural and religious traits and language is marginalized or disrespected, this not only undermines true nation-building but also contributes to political instability. The case of the Kurds is instructive here. Such political instability is further exacerbated when neighbouring states contribute to widening sectarian divisions in one’s country in an effort to secure certain strategic advantages as polarizing Shia-Sunni divisions would attest to.

In this chapter, we begin by examining the nature of identity politics. Following this, we move from theoretical constructs to the nature of identity politics in the MENA region. Finally we turn to a world in which identity politics may be transcended.

6.2 Theorizing Identity Politics

It is an altogether human yearning to know who one is and who shares these characteristics we identify within ourselves. Knowing who one is essential to the security of individuals. Despite processes of modernization: the construction of skyscrapers, the development of the Internet and ubiquitous nature of social media as well as talk of a Fourth Industrial Revolution, humanity still struggles with the perennial question of who am I? Contrary to modernization theory this search of identity “… may be of increasing importance in an age of bureaucratization and impersonal mass society, and a world of political alienation and isolation” (Davies 1996).
This quest for identity is intrinsically linked to issues of recognition, dignity and respect. Francis Fukuyama (2019) eloquently argues:

*the inner sense of dignity seeks recognition. It is not enough that I have a sense of my own worth if other people do not publicly acknowledge it or, worse yet, if they denigrate me or don’t acknowledge my existence. Self-esteem arises out of esteem by others. Because human beings naturally crave recognition, the modern sense of identity evolves quickly into identity politics, in which individuals demand public recognition of their worth. Identity politics thus encompasses a large part of the political struggles of the contemporary world, from democratic revolutions to new social movements, from nationalism and Islamism to the politics on contemporary American university campuses. Indeed, the philosopher Hegel argued that the struggle for recognition was the ultimate driver of human history, a force that was key to understanding the emergence of the modern world.*

Two caveats are crucial at this juncture. First, such self-identification as part of a particular group, Rothschild (1997) stresses, is subjective rather than objective. It is a perceived sense of common origins and interests which may or may not be true. Such perceptions are malleable. Therefore, identities are malleable and dynamic. Accordingly Krause and Renwick (1996) poignantly note that “identities are constructed and therefore can be deconstructed and reconstructed anew.” What this suggests is that a state could engage in nation-building – creating a sense of belonging for all its diverse citizens. Oman has created such a national identity and therefore has achieved greater social cohesion and peace. Conversely, political elites more could manipulate such identities in an effort to “divide-and-rule.” Such tactics might well provide short-term gain, but in the long-term will undermine stability in any polity. Iran’s discriminatory practices against its minority Sunnis and Saudi Arabia’s repression against its minority Shias merely adds to the troubles confronting Tehran and Riyadh. Indeed, the Sunni-Sectarian divide which wracks much of the Middle East relates to Iran and Saudi Arabia enflaming these differences as they seek pan-Islamist leadership in the Muslim world (Watkins 2018).

Second, it is imperative to also understand that a single individual juggles multiple identities simultaneously – belonging to a particular ethnic grouping, a religious denomination, a race, a socio-economic class, a geographic area and so forth. How an individual chooses one identity as the dominant one depends upon a number of external variables. Consider the case of the Jews in the MENA region. Following the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, an anti-Semitic backlash in Arab countries resulted in 900,000 Jews being forced to leave their homes and seek sanctuary elsewhere (Solomon and Tausch 2020). It did not matter that these Jews were Iraqi by birth or spoke Arabic or belonged to the same socio-economic class as their Arab neighbours. The fact that they were Jewish was the only identifier in the eyes of their Arab neighbours. Given the animosity confronting them, these Jews also laid greater emphasis on group solidarity and saw their interests being protected only by the Jewish state of Israel which the vast majority emigrated to.
6.3 Identity Politics in the MENA Region

Sectarianism has ravaged much of the MENA region. Leon Goldsmith (2015) writes of sectarian entrepreneurs who pursue political objectives by mobilizing, provoking and adding to the violent expression of sectarian identities. Such sectarian entrepreneurs include the regimes who exploit the politics of identity to maintain their privileged access to power by creating patronage networks for their co-sectarians whilst often demonizing the proverbial other (ibid, 2015). Indeed, one could well argue that many of the ruling elites and concomitant sectarianism was as a product of this politics of identity. Across the MENA region, one has families and extended kinship networks monopolizing political and economic power rendering social exclusion and alienation inevitable and nation-building impossible (Jung 2010).

Jajati Pattniak (2010) refers to this type of form of government as clan-based structural governance. In Saudi Arabia, despite an ostensible reform agenda and the trappings of democratic institutions like an elected 178-member Municipal Council and a Council of Ministers (cabinet), power is still concentrated in the hands of the country’s 25,000 princes. Within this extended royal family, it is the Sudairi faction who are politically dominant and their interests are represented in the Royal Council which is more influential than any electoral body (Pattniak 2010).

There has been an attempt by these families to enhance their legitimacy by including other tribes and select members of the clerical class and the business community (Jung 2010). Kuwait’s ruling Al-Sabah family, for instance, have bolstered their power base through an alliance with the country’s merchant class. Whilst the Al Sabahs controlled political and military power, the merchant class have dominated the economic life of the Kingdom (Alam 2010). Such arrangements, however, have largely taken on the form of co-option as opposed to a genuine process of inclusion. Far from attempting to bridge the sectarian divides in their country, the Royal Family has adroitly played on the divides to maintain their power.

The Sunni hadar (townspeople) from which the merchant class emanates makes up 35 percent of the population. The Shi’a who migrated from Persia in the early twentieth century constitute 17 percent of the population, whilst the Bedouin tribes make up 45 percent of Kuwait. The Al Sabahs have exploited the tensions between Sunni and Shi’a, rural and urban divides, and Islamist against modernists in an attempt to secure their throne (ibid, 2010).

The politics of identity, however, is not merely a national issue and has major regional implications. As Chap. 2 highlighted, the region constitutes a conflict system where sources of insecurity in one country impact that of neighbouring states. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the case of the quest for an independent Kurdish state. The Kurds are an ancient people who have lived for 3000 years in the mountainous regions of north-west Iran, the north-eastern part of Iraq, and eastern Turkey. They constitute the largest ethnic minority in the Middle East. Despite their political fragmentation into three so-called nation-states, they have maintained their separate language, culture and customs. Despite their Sunni Muslim identity, they have always sought an independent state they could call
home – a Kurdistan. Kurdish national aspirations have been acknowledged by the international community as far back as the 1919 Versailles Peace Conference. A year later, at the Treaty of Sevres, the victorious Allied Powers reiterated the need for an independent Kurdish state. Yet, a mere three years later, at the Treaty of Lausanne, which gave rise to the modern states of Iraq, Syria and Turkey, Kurdish national aspirations were thwarted (Callimunopulos 2012). Despite rhetorical support, the international community has largely abandoned the Kurds for political reasons given the resistance of Iran, Iraq and Turkey to the creation of a contiguous Kurdish political entity (Riamei 2010).

US President Donald Trump may be continuing this tradition of raising, only to dash, such national aspirations. Despite the fighting done by Kurdish forces against Islamic State, with US encouragement and support, Washington decided to give Ankara a green light to invade and occupy northern Syria in October 2019 (Schwarz 2019). Turkey under an increasingly autocratic President Erdogan views the Turkish Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) which seeks an independent Kurdish state within Turkey’s borders as being intimately connected with the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party in northern Syria and seeks a buffer zone to prevent a Pan-Kurdish state from developing (BBC 2019). The Kurdish question for national self-determination lives on despite setbacks such as these. Fuelling this quest for a Kurdish state is the discrimination and worse they experience in the countries they are currently occupying. Michael Kelly’s (2008) book on the position of Iraqi Kurds during the reign of Saddam Hussein is instructive here. As Kurds were literally confronted with genocide, as witnessed in the chemical attack on Halabja, the desire of Iraqi Kurds to secede grew ever more intense. A cultural and political genocide against the Kurds is currently underway in Turkey with an increasingly ethno-centric Turkish nationalism evident. This has witnessed attacks on Kurdish music and theatre production as well as closing the political space for Kurds to be integrated into a more inclusive Turkish nationalism (Kingsley 2019). Suffice to say that without more inclusive policies in host nations, the dream of a united Kurdistan will appear ever more appealing to the Middle East’s largest ethnic group without a state of their own.

In Syria, too, the failure to manage the politics of identity is self-evident. The catalyst for the civil war in Syria was the eruption of peaceful protests in 2011 against the Al-Assad dynasty in power since 1970. Whilst part of the wave of protests which was overturning regimes as part of the Arab Spring, the reality is that Syria’s future as a contiguous territorial entity was always in doubt given the demographic make-up and the harsh realities of economic and power configurations. The dominant Alawites, which Bashar Al-Assad is part of, make up only 12 percent of the Syrian population. The Alawites are a branch of Shia Islam. The majority of Syrians, however, are Sunni. Christians and Yazidis also add to the religious mix. Beyond religious divisions, there are also ethnic and linguistic cleavages. These include Arabs, Circassians, Druze, Kurds, Palestinian and Turkmen. Then there are the political and ideological differences – from nationalists to socialist, from militant Islamists to secularists (Fukuyama 2019).

There was never any sense of a single, overarching national identity. Three reasons account for this. The first relates to how the Alawites achieved their
ascendancy when the region was ruled as a French colony. Paris recruited the Alawites and they were integrated into French military structures. As a result, their legitimacy was always called into question. The Alawites, consequently, were always loathed by other groups in Syria in colonial times and after independence. Second, no national identity is possible where one group dominates politically and draws economic benefits from the state disproportionately as a result of this political domination. This was a process described in Chap. 2 of the study. Despite the co-option of some elites from other groups, Alawite dominance was all too apparent and those elites who joined the ranks of the government lost credibility amongst their own followers. Third, given their lack of legitimacy and inability to articulate and receive popular “buy-in” for a shared nation-building project, the Al-Assads have always resorted to brutal repression (Fukuyama 2019). Unsurprisingly, this alienated the majority of the populace further.

In an attempt to perpetuate his rule, Bashar Al-Assad has turned to Tehran and Moscow. The entry of Shia Iran and its Lebanese proxy, Hezbollah, has only served to further fuel the sectarian divides in the country whilst serving to further isolate Damascus from other Arab states. The entrance of Moscow, a long-time ally of Bashar and his father Hafez, has allowed the regime to make military gains against the rebel formations arrayed against his decrepit rule (Al Jazeera 2020). Russia’s military support, especially its aerial bombardments of densely populated civilian areas, has only served to further erode the remaining legitimacy of the regime whilst stiffening Al-Assad’s resolve not to engage in negotiations or some comprise with the rebels. Whilst such military solutions are certainly providing short-term gains, it makes reconciliation and therefore any future nation-building impossible.

Of course, Syria is not the only country confronting the consequences of a weak or non-existent national identity as Libya can attest to (Fukuyama 2019). Historically, Libya has never succeeded in creating an inclusive political entity divided in geographic, ethnic and religious terms. Geographically, the country has been divided between Tripolitana, Cyrenaica and Fezzan. These geographic divisions have been reinforced by ethnic cleavages: Arabs, Berbers and Toubous (Filiu 2015). To these divisions are the religious dimension. The Berber or Amazigh population of Libya do not belong to mainstream Sunni Islam. Rather they are Ibadi Muslim and have suffered persecution because of their religious beliefs. It should come as no surprise then that Berbers took an active part in the 2011 uprisings which resulted in the overthrow of Gaddafi (United World International 2020).

Following the ouster of Gaddafi, the country’s divisions became wider and more entrenched. Self-styled Field Marshall Khalifa Haftar’s Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) represent those communities in southern and western Libya who benefited from Gaddafi’s reign, who have lost Tripoli’s patronage and who have taken up arms against the Government of National Accord (GNA). The GNA, in turn, represents those forces which fought against Gaddafi during 2011. Adding to further polarization, Islamist forces embedded within Haftar’s forces are adding to the political, economic and clan divides (Lacher 2019). The civil war in Libya demonstrates the failure of the post-2011 dispensation to reconcile differences between groups.
6.4 Beyond Identity Politics

How does one manage identity politics? Is it possible to go achieve a polity at peace with itself despite the prevalence of “the cult of origins” alluded to in our introduction? In this section, we present four alternatives: secession, federalism, power-sharing and nation-building. Whilst secessionism is often regarded as a last resort to escape sectarian strife since it is the most politically unpalatable option. It entails allowing a group to secede and thereby govern themselves – retaining the territory which they inhabit which was once part of a sovereign state. Examples of these include Eritrea’s independence from Ethiopia, Lithuania’s from Russia and South Sudan’s from Khartoum and the dismemberment of the former Yugoslavia into independent polities (Gurr 1995).

Whilst this is an extreme method of escaping negative identity politics, it should be considered as a viable option when civil war has become so ruinous that the costs of secession may be more bearable than maintaining the current borders of an existing sovereign state. Commenting on this fraught issue, Gal Luft (2015) opines, “Sometimes a divided country is better than a broken and hopeless one.” Libya confronts such a stark reality. Despite international mediation attempts, the primary fault line between forces of Khalifa Haftar’s Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) and the Government of National Accord (GNA) has grown ever deeper (Laher 2019). Beyond this primary fault line, lay a constellation of other armed actors. Indeed, there are a staggering 1700 militias operating in this strife torn country. These militias are formed along lines of clan, criminal and Islamist lines (Solomon 2016). Should secession be considered in Libya? What form would it take? If one accepts the partition of the country along the lines of the balance of forces between those of the LAAF and the GNA, what prevent these rather fragile political entities from disintegrating further as clan militias and Islamist forces carve out their own niche within the divided country? The situation is somewhat clearer in Syria. Despite military control thanks to Russian airpower and Iran’s proxies supporting Al Assad, it is clear that the days where the 12 percent Alawite minority control the other 88 percent of the population is not sustainable as the seething Sunni resentment and the establishment of Kurdish states on Syrian sovereign territory will testify to.

A less extreme form of separation is federalism. This allows for the sharing of power between different groups, especially where a group is contiguous with a particular geographic region. At its core, federalism devolves power from the centre to regional units where the powers of each are clearly demarcated and constitutionally enshrined (Coakley 1993). Such autonomy may well provide aggrieved groups with a stake in the sovereign states and may well appease demands for secession. On the other hand, autonomy may result in greater fragmentation as groups use autonomy as a half-way towards outright secession. Moreover, federalism comes with greater financial burdens, think of the replication of state capitals and the additional layers of bureaucracy (Horowitz 1985).

The track record of federal arrangements is more successful in better resourced developed countries than in under-resourced developed states. Federalism also
requires greater intellectual and technocratic capabilities from the state. For federalism to work, the separation of powers between centre and regional entities has to be periodically renegotiated given changing realities. Moreover, these federal arrangements have to be augmented with other consociational measures at sub-regional level to maintain the stability of the polity (McGarry and O’Leary 1994). Ultimately, the success of federal arrangements is also dependent upon the political maturity of the leadership in countries implementing it – willing to bear short-term costs for long-term stability. Moreover, this political leadership in an effort to be more inclusive will need to pursue minimax strategies as opposed to zero-sum games. Compromise in such minimax strategies is key. Following on our earlier discussion in Chap. 2, the capacity of MENA states is in doubt and the political elites have deliberately widened sectarian divides in an effort to draw short-term political advantage.

Despite the challenges of federalism, there is space to consider it within the context of some MENA states. The case of Morocco and the Western Sahara does come to mind here. The former Spanish colony of Western Sahara was annexed in 1975 by Morocco citing ancestral and political ties. These claims were rejected by the Polisario Front representing the Saharawi people and a 16-year long insurgency ensued. The United Nations finally brokered a ceasefire arrangement between the Moroccan government and the Polisario Front in 1991. At the time of the signing of the agreement, Morocco controlled 80 percent of what the Polisario Front claimed was the sovereign Saharan Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) (BBC 2018). Whilst the SADR has received international and diplomatic recognition by some states, the joint economic and diplomatic offensive launched by King Mohammed VI has seen the withdrawal of diplomatic recognition of the SADR as well as Morocco’s triumphant return to the African Union. Given the seismic political changes underway in Algeria, it is uncertain how long the Polisario Front will continue to receive support from Algiers. At the same time, residents of this impoverished area are refugees in Algeria or internally displaced within the borders of the Western Sahara whilst tensions inside the Polisario Front are brewing as a younger generation prepares to take over the reins from the older leadership. Given the political realities on the ground, the most viable option may well be Morocco’s Autonomy Plan. This seeks to reconcile Morocco’s claims of sovereignty over the territory with the desire for self-determination on the part of the Saharawis (Pidoux 2019). Genuine, cooperative federalism with supporting sub-regional conflict resolution mechanisms and the equitable distribution of economic benefits might well prove to put an end to this long-running conflict.

Beyond secession and federalism, a third method of responding to virulent identity politics is power-sharing – often referred to as consociation or consociationalism (Rabie 1994). Far from dragooning people into one identity, power-sharing does two things. First, it actively acknowledges different identities. Second, it views these multiple identities as legitimate (Gurr 1995). Power-sharing arrangements are characterized by four elements. These include the involvement of major groups in power-sharing at executive level; the possibility of a minority veto on certain crucial issues; the internal autonomy of groups where it is desired most;
and proportional representation and proportional allocation of public funds and posts in the civil service (Solomon and Matthews 2001). Such power-sharing agreements prevent the marginalization of one group and can thereby create a spirit of loyalty to the state. However, for it to work optimally, leaders must be viewed as legitimate by their own constituency and their constituency also have to receive the material benefit of such power-sharing arrangements (Rabie 1994). As with federalism, such consociationalism needs to be periodically renegotiated given changing circumstances and it requires successive generations of leadership to remain committed to power-sharing with its concomitant compromises (McGarry and O’Leary 1994).

Lebanon’s power-sharing system has been unravelling in recent years and it is instructive to examine the reasons for this. Christian Lebanese, the majority of whom are Maronite Christians, constitutes 33.7 percent of the population. Shia and Sunni Muslims are fairly equal in number with 30.6 percent being Sunni and 30.5 percent Shia. Druze are 5.2 percent following by minuscule numbers of Jews, Baha’i, Buddhists and Hindu (Central Intelligence Agency 2020). Lebanon’s “confessional system” of governance links power-sharing arrangements to religious identification. Thus, the Lebanese President always hails from the Maronite Christian community. The Prime Minister is always a Sunni Muslim, whilst the speaker of parliament is reserved for a member of the Shi’a community. This latter position was devoid of actual power and Lebanese Shi’a opposed the confessional system believing that it marginalized their voice (Mandaville 2014). Hezbollah’s founding manifesto in 1985 also initially vehemently opposed this Shi’a marginalization in Lebanon’s power sharing agreement and the privileged status of Maronite Christians and Sunni Muslims. However, following the signing of the 1989 Ta’if agreement Hezbollah became more supportive of the confessional governance system. The Ta’if agreement provided official recognition to Hezbollah as a resistance movement. Not only did this increase its prestige but it meant that Hezbollah remained armed whilst other militias were disarmed (Daher 2017). Hezbollah also managed to master the art of sectarian politics where they and they alone were identified with the Shia bloc through the provision of social services from education and healthcare, garbage collection, electricity and water provision. Much of these social services were funded through the US $100 million that Hezbollah received annually from Tehran (Mandaville 2014). In 1991 Hezbollah began to run its own television station Al Manar (The Beacon) as well as founding The Educational Institute (al-Mu’assasa al-Tarbawiyya) which provides educational services thereby contributing to an ideal Shi’a society. The educational and social services provided together with its media outreach all contributed towards identifying Hezbollah as the only legitimate representative of the Lebanese Shi’a community. It also promoted the Islamization of the Shi’a community as it sought to control the narrative of both constituted a good Shi’i as well as obedience to Hezbollah’s leadership (Daher 2017).

Despite its initial resistance to Lebanese sectarian politics, Hezbollah drew benefit from it and mastered the art of deploying identity for political objectives. Hezbollah has actually made use of the confessional governance system to create a state within a state. As such, it has resisted calls from the Lebanese street to reform or
radically alter the current power-sharing agreement in Lebanon. Hezbollah resisted the call from ordinary Lebanese in 2011, as part of the Arab Spring, to rid the country of such sectarian identity politics. In 2015, more animated calls for an end to the confessional system of governance arose with demonstrators again taking to the streets. Once more, Hezbollah resisted an end to the politics of division. Its Secretary-General, Hassan Nasrallah whilst publicly arguing that his organization adopted a neutral position, worked with other sectarian political elites, despite ideological and political differences, to thwart popular forces calling for an end to the confessional system. Nasrallah also labelled those calling for an end to the current system “Takfiris” and Zionist agents (Daher 2017). Whilst making common cause with other political elites, Hezbollah was slowly controlling the Lebanese state from within. Its armed forces, some analysts note, are more powerful than that of the Lebanese Armed Forces. Its insidious control of the Lebanese state, meanwhile, continued apace and by February 2020 Lebanese President Michael Aoun felt compelled to publicly deny that Hezbollah is leading the new government (AMN 2020).

Hezbollah’s support for the sect-based party system, however, is going against popular opinion on the Lebanese street and makes little financial or governance sense. As alluded to earlier, one of the key characteristics of effective power-sharing systems is that not only leaders, but their constituency must also materially benefit from confessional governance. This is clearly not happening in Lebanon where the same families have been in power since the end of the civil war. Patronage networks and nepotism as opposed to the requisite technical skills have resulted in not only ineffective governance but also entrenched corruption. Lebanon has one of the planet’s largest debt loads. Government debt is more than 150 percent of gross domestic output and prospects of a sovereign default are highly likely. The central bank and local lenders were compelled to restrict the transfer of monies abroad as a result of a severe shortage of foreign exchange. This economic crisis has resulted in Lebanese to take to the streets since October 2019. These protests forced the government of Prime Minister Saad Hariri to resign (Elbahrawy and Abu Omar 2020).

The new administration of Hassan Diab has turned to the International Monetary Fund for assistance but they, together with the World Bank, have warned of the implosion of the Lebanese economy without an improvement of electricity supply, reforming education and liberalizing the telecommunications sector (Elbahrawy and Abu Omar 2020). Given the overlapping connections between sectarian political and economic leadership, however, Prime Minister Diab is unable to undertake such reforms. It is precisely for this reason that protests have continued against the new administration calling for new electoral laws which would entail the elimination of the confessional governance system which has impoverished ordinary Lebanese whilst promoting sectarianism and exacerbating the governance crisis. Hezbollah, once again, has resisted any change to the current system and may well find itself on the wrong side of history (Kranz 2020). The Lebanese power-sharing experiment demonstrates the danger of allowing one group to amass power at the expense of other groups (for instance, allowing Hezbollah to retain its armed militias), to create
a state within a state and allowing it to take over as well as excluding the majority of the population from materially benefitting from the system. The latter takes on added significance when an economy is imploding.

Finally, there are nation-building approaches to overcome sectarian divides. Whilst the cleavages of state and society across the MENA region exist, it does not mean that it should be accepted as a norm. One could be Turkmen, Iraqi and Muslim simultaneously. Similarly, one could be both Coptic Christian, Egyptian and Arab. Identity formation as we noted earlier is not merely as the result of subjective consciousness but also objective conditions which include inclusive political processes and socialization agents encouraging a national identity. As Welsh (1993) has argued very few of the world’s states are true nation-states, only about 20 states are ethnically homogeneous. Thus, national identity has to be constructed. Inclusive nation-building, as opposed to elite co-option strategies pursued by MENA leaders, would entail promoting the idea of a common shared nationhood and creating a collective sense of belonging stressing the territory we share, a shared history and future goals all can buy into (Hazleton 1998). Horowitz (1985), however, warns that nation-building will fail if political and economic disparities between groups are not reduced. This is especially important where a particular group benefits disproportionately from the largesse of the state based on their ethnicity, clan affiliation or religious identity as we have seen in the cases of Libya and Syria.

Oman under Sultan Qaboos bin Said al-Said provides important lessons in successful nation-building. Sultan Qaboos reigned from 1970 to 2020 and moved his country from conflict to relative peace and prosperity. In 1970, when he ascended the throne, Oman was a near medieval society mired in poverty and conflict. In the southern Dhofar Province, a Marxist rebellion supported by the neighbouring People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen was raging (Feierstein 2020). The Dhofar Liberation Front sought independence from Muscat (Keeler 2020). The country was also plagued by reinforcing sectarian fault lines. Whilst Sunni Muslims inhabited the southern and central areas from Dhofar to Shraqiyah, Ibadhi Muslims occupied the interior and northern regions of the country. Ibadi Muslims are distinct from Sunni and Shi’a Muslims and trace their origins to the Khawarij who were the first dissenters in Islam (Johny 2010). Approximately 5 percent of the population consisted of Shi’a Muslims who despite their small size were quite influential (Goldsmith 2015).

Demonstrating superior political acumen, Sultan Qaboos went about uniting his fractious nation though policies of nation-building, inclusiveness, socio-economic development and reconciliation. Whilst bringing an end to the Dhofar rebellion, he understood that there were genuine grievances driving the rebellion. Consequently, he championed the economic development of the erstwhile neglected southern region and he brought Dhofar’s leadership into Oman’s government (Feierstein 2020). The modest hydrocarbon reserves of the country were harnessed for the good of the country by ensuring that all groups’ socio-economic needs were met. Recognizing that these socio-economic needs will not be met without a capable state, note our discussion in Chap. 2, Sultan Qaboos reconfigured the civil service and the military to ensure that it was fit for purpose (ibid, 2020). Whilst Sultan Qaboos was
an Ibadhi, there was no privileged access by Ibadhis to state levers nor were they
drawing disproportionate socio-economic benefits from the state. Inclusive govern-
nance was the key.

Moreover, unlike other MENA states, Muscat was at pains to defuse rather than
incite sectarian tensions. Sub-national identities and Oman’s diversity were cele-
brated by the political system with different religious faiths and tribal sheikdoms all
represented in both the executive Council of Ministers as well as the Majlis Oman or
Omani Parliament (Goldsmith 2015). Recognizing the fact that religious extremism
could enflame sectarian tension, religious moderation and tolerance was promoted
by the state. Conversely any type of religious fundamentalism – whether Sunni, Shia
or Ibadhi – was not countenanced by the state. In 2005, there was an attempt on the
part of a fringe minority group involving some 70 academics and military officers to
establish an Ibadhi Imamate. Muscat promptly quashed the attempt. The success of
Oman’s strategy is evinced in the fact that there were no Omanis recruited into the
ranks of Islamic State (ibid, 2015).

If there is one criticism to be levelled against Oman’s, otherwise successful
nation-building approach is the fact that it was too closely associated with the person
of Sultan Qaboos who reigned for 50 years. It was he who reached out a conciliatory
hand to the rebellious south, he who cajoled recalcitrant tribal sheikhs to partake in
inclusive politics, he who created a capable state and had the political acumen to
ensure that the benefits of state largesse was to be shared by all. Oman’s successful
nation-building attempt was therefore inextricably linked with the person of Sultan
Qaboos. With his passing away on the 10 January 2020, it is unclear if his successor,
Haithim bin Tariq, has the necessary political acumen or legitimacy of his prede-
cessor. Indeed, Haithim bin Tariq is a relatively unknown. He served as Secretary-
General in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs until 2002 and that constitutes his public
role (Keeler 2020). If there is one lesson we can draw from Omani nation-building is
that the long-term sustainability of these processes needs to be better institutional-
ized and less personalized.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter has explored the debilitating consequences of the politics of identity. It
has also explored ways in which these sectarian divides could be overcome thereby
realizing the goal of nation-building. In Chapter 2, the linkage between the dearth of
democracy and weak institution-building and the consequent weakness of Arab
states was discussed. In Chapter 4, our discussion of patriarchy stressed that gender
emancipation is impossible under authoritarian conditions. Just as women rights are
intrinsic to broader processes of democratization, so is the connection between
nation-building and democratization. As Francis Fukuyama (2019) has emphasized:

A liberal democracy is an implicit contract between citizens and their government, and
among the citizens themselves, under which they give up certain rights in order that the
government protects other rights that are more basic and important. National identity is
built around the legitimacy of this contract; if citizens do not believe they are part of the same polity, the system will not function.

Given the religious divides alluded to earlier in this chapter, as part of the process of democratization, religious fundamentalist doctrines and narratives need to be eschewed and a new post-Islamist discourse needs to take root in society and the body politic. Religion, as we have witnessed in Libya and Lebanon, has tended to reinforce existing sectarian cleavages. Here, there is hope. As described earlier in the book, younger Arabs are less traditional in their attitudes, more cosmopolitan, less religiously inclined and more forward-thinking. This is the antithesis of Islamist discourses which are so dogmatic in their approach. Given the youthful demographics in the MENA region, there is optimism that a less fundamentalist, more inclusive post-Islamist narratives will expand its appeal.

Literature

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