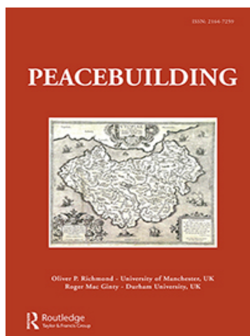

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Fierce and accommodationist divided cities: understanding right-to-the-city protests in Beirut and Manama

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ABSTRACT
Divided cities have attracted mounting scholarly attention. Yet, while the focus has largely been on how divisions are constructed, we examine the potentiality of waves of non-sectarian protest movements as urban peacebuilding actors. Towards this, we draw on comparative research on protests in two divided cities in the MENA region, Beirut (Lebanon) and Manama (Bahrain). These two cities, we argue, represent contrasting forms of divided city, marked by different approaches to dealing with sectarian pluralism that ultimately entrench sectarianism and inequality. Protest movements thus represent right-to-the-city mobilisations oriented towards demands for inclusive urban living. These movements foster 'insurgent citizenship, an articulation of urban belonging and citizenship that focusses on confronting and destabilising the entrenched regimes of citizen inequality. However, while these protests are important peacebuilding actors, we note the profound structural and agential forces that limit the movement's goals.

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Introduction

The term 'divided cities' has come to capture places shaped by violently contending claims to state belonging that have left a legacy of ethnosectarian fragmentation across the polity and wider society.[1] For this reason, the desire to operationalise the goals of peace is frustrated by the divided city's sectarianised spatial realities comprising a mosaic of power relationships. These 'wicked problems' are often exacerbated by modes of post-war urban governance that generate 'severe and counterproductive' effects, including cementing ethnosectarian identities and dysfunctional institutions.[2]

What, then, is a productive form of urban peacebuilding in divided cities? Rather than look towards a narrow statist ontology that collapses peacebuilding into statebuilding – particularly governance institutions – is it possible, as Bjorkdahl asks, 'to transform the

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[1]See: Frank Gaffikin and Mike Morrissey, *Planning in Divided Cities* (John Wiley & Sons: Oxford, 2011); Scott Bollens, *Trajectories of Conflict and Peace: Jerusalem and Belfast Since 1994* (Routledge, 2018); and Ivan Gusic, *Contesting Peace in the Postwar City: Belfast, Mitrovica and* Mostar (Basingstoke: Springer, 2019).
[2]Annika Björkdahl, 'Urban Peacebuilding', *Peacebuilding* 1, no. 2 (2013): 207–21.

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divided city'?[3] Such a question presumes that peacebuilding in divided cities requires a holistic and multidimensional approach to address the logics of violent conflict that are enmeshed into the urban fabric.[4]

In this paper, we take a narrower focus to examine the potential of protest movements as urban peacebuilding actors. These are movements that demand the 'right-to-the-city' – a work in which all urban citizens participate; a collective, not a singular project emerges, and new modes of living and inhabiting are imagined in opposition to the forces of inequality and division.[5] As Harvey argues, the right-to-the-city is citizens exercising 'power over the processes of urbanisation, over the ways in which our cities are made and re-made'.[6] The cry and call for a right-to-the-city by urban movements involves demands for access to public services and spaces, rights for queer populations, women, migrants and marginalised groups.

In divided cities, can we understand right-to-the-city protest movements as actors who sustain urban peacebuilding? Protest is contentious politics, which involves conflicts over resources, values and identities. Protest actors engage in conflicts with antagonists who are often defined as enemies.[7] Such conflict framing seems counter-intuitive to peacebuilding processes. We address this in the context of divided cities, which are not only defined by increasing sectarian polarisation, but also of inequality – socioeconomic, gender and sexuality – and concomitant struggles for legitimacy and power. Conflict is not only expressed in terms of ethnosectarianism; it is instead increasingly one that involves a complex array of elites and power holders – comprising state and non-state armed networks – and the wider citizenry.

Thus, while divided cities are the ground zero upon which violent conflicts emerge and are sustained in the long term,[8] they are imbued with potentiality as sites of 'resistance and opportunity for the emergence of new norms and political arrangements'.[9] Urban citizens, we argue, can come together across ethnosectarian boundaries to challenge their exclusion and precarious existence. Despite this promise, we acknowledge the powerful institutional and agential forces that severely constrict the capacity of urban movements to effect change in the divided city.

Divided, or violently contested, cities share, at a broad level, a characterisation as 'crucibles of major conflicts about ethnicity, territory, and in some cases even nationality',[10] and where the main line of group contestation is interlocked with the legitimacy of the state itself. Yet, as a number of scholars illuminate, these are urban environments in which sectarian, ethnic and nationalist cleavages have been constructed through a range of macro-historical dynamics, including failed statebuilding processes,

[3]Ibid., 208.
[4]Kristin Ljungkvist and Anna Jarstad, 'Revisiting the Local Turn in Peacebuilding – through the Emerging Urban Approach', *Third World Quarterly* 42, no. 10 (2021): 2209–26.
[5]see John Nagle, 'Sites of Social Centrality and Segregation: Lefebvre in Belfast, a "Divided City"', *Antipode* 41, no. 2 (2009): 326–47; David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (Verso Books: London, 2012); and Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, vol. 63 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).
[6]Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, 5.
[7]Charles Tilly and Sidney G. Tarrow, *Contentious Politics* (Oxford University Press:Oxford, 2015).
[8]Sara Fragonese, *War and the City: Urban Geopolitics in Lebanon* (London: IB Tauris, 2019).
[9]M. Kaldor and S. Sassen, eds., *Cities at War: Global Insecurity and Urban Resistance* (Columbia University Press: Columbis, NY, 2020), 5.
[10]Gaffikin and Morrissey, *Planning in Divided Cities*, 874.

such as settler colonialism, in which divisions are reproduced and maintained in the present. Various conceptual tools have been developed to capture some of these divergent processes, including 'grey spaces,[11] 'urban ethnocracies',[12] 'frontier cities',[13] and as this special issue notes, 'violently contested cities'.[14] We use the term 'divided cities' as a mechanism of opening up a new line of inquiry that sheds light on different forms of division and, as a result, the factors limiting urban peacebuilding aspirations. Divided cities are broadly located within the rubric of contested cities and, as a result, what is covered in this article contributes to the broader debate on (violently) contested cities. We seek to draw on and develop these frameworks by turning to two divided cities, Beirut (Lebanon) and Manama (Bahrain).

Deploying a comparative politics framework that uses 'most different' cases, this article explores the ways in which political life and resistance operate in divided cities. Focussing on the cases of Beirut and Manama, two Middle Eastern cities situated on opposing sides of the region – Beirut overlooks the Mediterranean Sea while Manama overlooks the Persian Gulf of the Indian Ocean – offers rich scope for comparative analysis due to their demographic makeup and recent history of protest.

Importantly, Beirut and Manama represent two different forms of divided city that we term 'accommodationist' (Beirut) and 'fierce' (Manama). In Beirut, accomodationism refers to how the main groups – categorised as sects – are accommodated in public institutions as part of power-sharing governance. Yet, dense networks of state and non-state actors operate and compete via formal and informal institutions to maintain control over resources and spaces. Political authority and contestation occurs within the context of ever-increasing state retrenchment, declining public services and buttressed by increasing sectarian polarity and socioeconomic inequality. In Manama, the municipal authorities represent an example of a 'fierce city', in which the ruling elite has fortified its rule by weakening every institutional pillar of traditional state 'antifragility', deploying sovereign power across urban landscapes in a deliberate process of counter-revolutionary strategy.[15] This exercise of power plays out vividly across Manama, where the municipal authorities and ruling Al Khalifa regime control the rhythms of urban life, from the opulent wealth of the Financial Harbour to the poverty of the souk. Yet, in both divides cities, the accommodationist and fierce, structures of elite sectarian power in Beirut and Manama have come under challenge by protest movements.

While we note how state and non-state actors in these cities reproduce ethnosectarian identities, our main focus is movements that challenge the sectarian order, particularly those activist networks that mobilise to demand public services, infrastructure and spaces, for gender equality, rights for LGBTQ populations and migrants, and for a society that is free from corruption and sectarian politics. We consider the potential of such struggles by activists to resist forms of urban sectarian power and, in so doing, the extent to which movements can contribute to peacebuilding in divided cities. In doing so,

[11]Oren Yiftachel, 'Critical Theory and "Grey Space": Mobilization of the Colonised', *City* 13, no. 2–3 (2009): 246–63.
[12]Oren Yiftachel and Haim Yacobi, 'Urban Ethnocracy: Ethnicization and the Production of Space in an Israeli "Mixed City"', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 21, no. 6 (2003): 673–93.
[13]Joël Kotek, 'Divided Cities in the European Cultural Context', *Progress in Planning* 52, no. 3 (1999): 227–37.
[14]Emma Elfversson, Ivan Gusic, and Jonathan Rock Rokem, 'Urban Peace and Conflict: Exploring Geographies of Hope in Violently Contested Cities', *Peacebuilding*, Forthcoming.
[15]See Simon Mabon, 'Precarious Politics and the Future of the State', in *The Middle East in 2050* (University of Lancaster: Lancaster SEPAD, 2021).

we engage with broader questions about the position of the divided city within political projects, and the ways in which sovereign power plays out across urban life.

This paper examines the possibilities of right-to-the-city movements in divided cities. Such movements range from feminists, LGBTQ, labour movements, and activists campaigning against corruption and poor public services.[16] It can also include minority ethnic groups oppressed and marginalised in a society that reinforces with extreme prejudice the power of the dominant regime. Yet, in different ways, these movements mobilise to disrupt and challenge their exclusion by articulating their rights to urban living. Despite this potentiality, can these movements create change and contribute to peacebuilding in the teeth of sectarian systems that are inbuilt with ossified properties designed to maintain the status quo for ethnosectarian regimes and elites, fortified by the idiosyncrasies of neoliberal capitalism? In addition, can protest movements – actors that purposely engage in conflict over the political and social order – be seen as agents of urban peacebuilding?

An inductive approach undergirds the research design for this article. Our initial research questions address how movements mobilise within power-sharing. Nine fieldwork trips have been undertaken by the authors to Lebanon since 2011, including during the Thawra protests in November 2019. Interviews with 60 activists, including You Stink, Thawra, Beirut Madinati, various LGBTQ groups and feminists, and also policymakers, media figures, and leading political representatives of several leading ethnosectarian parties (Amal, the Future Movement, the Free Patriotic Party, Kataeb, and the Lebanese Forces). In the case of Bahrain, 20 interviews took place with activists, politicians, lawyers, and film makers both in Manama and in London, where a large Bahraini diaspora resides in exile. Interviews are supported by further sources of data, such as social media, human rights reports, and email correspondence. Given that activists have often been the target of state security apparatuses, including being arrested, tortured and exiled, we are mindful of mitigating any further risk to these individuals. For this reason, all interviews have been anonymised. A purposive sample was used to order interviewees in terms of either activism or positions on non-sectarian parties. Interview data is triangulated with analysis of media and policy reports on protest in Beirut and Manama.

Our paper connects to special issue's theme of peace in violently contested cities. While recognising the obvious legacy of violent conflict, destruction of urban infrastructure, segregation and political polarisation, which characterises such cities, we need to be attuned to the 'constructive potential' of these places that allow for the establishment of 'new relationships across polarised lines, and enable cooperation that improves urban residents' safety and everyday lives'.[17] Thus, as the contributions of this SI illuminate, residents of violently contested cities can organise and mobilise across sectarian boundaries in ways that sustain intercommunal relationships and coexistence. This urban peace can take numerous forms, including urban residents negotiating everyday peace in

[16]See John Nagle, *Social Movements in Violently Divided Societies: Constructing Conflict and Peacebuilding* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016); John Nagle, 'Beyond Ethnic Entrenchment and Amelioration: An Analysis of Non-Sectarian Social Movements and Lebanon's Consociationalism', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 41, no. 7 (2018): 1370–89; and Carmen Geha, 'Politics of a Garbage Crisis: Social Networks, Narratives, and Frames of Lebanon's 2015 Protests and their Aftermath', *Social Movement Studies* 18, no. 1 (2019): 78–92.
[17]Elfversson et al., 'Urban Peace and Conflict'.

sectarianised environments[18]; through the design of the urban built environment[19]; and through a broad range of actors involved in civil society.[20] Yet, despite recognising the potentially of the city as a crucible for peacebuilding, our paper also recognises the constraints that actors confront when perusing peaceful change in contexts shaped by deeply entrenched divisions and the structural factors conditioning such divisions.

'Accommodationist' and 'fierce' cities

The dynamics of apparent growing urban sectarian polarisation in the afterlives of the 2011 Arab Uprisings provoke important questions about how we conceptualise cites that are violently contested. Several regimes and urban environments in the region are increasingly shaped by state retrenchment, particularly in terms of governance institutions withdrawing from its role of producing and distributing public services, infrastructure and jobs.[21] Instead of using state institutions as mechanisms to foster inclusive citizenship and legitimacy, elites rule by undermining key institutions traditionally seen as the pillars of antifragility and stability.[22] These regimes and elites exercise control through an array of devices: securitisation, corruption and clientelism, the upshot of which is a society riven by increasing sectarian polarity, socioeconomic inequality, and human rights abuses.[23]

These wider processes, driven by uneven forms of failed statebuilding permeate into local urban contexts, particularly in major cities shaped by ethnosectarian polarisation, with urban design driven by the aspirations of ruling elites to maintain power.[24] Yet while the concept of 'divided cities' captures places similarly marked by contested ideas of state legitimacy, we still need to understand these places as diverse urban regimes situated within particular historical and temporal contexts. These dynamics do not play out in a uniform way within the same urban structures. We draw attention to two broad, but occasionally overlapping, categories of violently contested city: the 'accommodationist' and the 'fierce' divided city.

We use the term 'accommodationist divided city' to describe cities in which governance and public institutions are designed to recognise and ensure the inclusion of the salient ethnosectarian groups.[25] Accommodationist approaches range from giving respective groups forms of representation in local government institutions (e.g. power-sharing governance), supporting single-identity civil society projects, and through the duplication/multiplication of public goods and services.[26] In terms of planning,

[18]Jeroen Gunning and Dima Smaira, 'Navigating Dahiyeh, Negotiating Everyday Peace: Mediation Practices Across Beirut's Southern Suburbs', *Peacebuilding*, Forthcoming.
[19]Lisbet Harboe and Kristian Hoelscher, 'Architecture, Politics and Peacebuilding in Medellín', *Peacebuilding*, Forthcoming.
[20]Lior Lehrs, Nufar Avni, Noam Brenner, and Dan Miodownik, 'Seeing Peace Like a City: Local Visions and Diplomatic Proposals for Future Solutions', *Peacebuilding*, Forthcoming.
[21]Hamid Dabashi, *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012); and Mounira M. Charrad and Nicholas E. Reith, 'Local Solidarities: How the Arab Spring Protests Started', *Sociological Forum* 34 (2019): 1174–96.
[22]Marc Lynch, *The Arab Uprisings Explained: New Contentious Politics in the Middle East* (New York City, NY: Columbia University Press, 2014).
[23]Simon Mabon, 'The End of the Battle for Bahrain and the Securitisation of the Bahraini Shia', *Middle East Journal* 73, no. 1 (2019): 29–50.
[24]Simon Mabon, *Houses Built on Sand: Violence, Sectarianism and Revolution in the Middle East* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).
[25]See: Bjorkdahl, 'Urban Peacebuilding'.
[26]Gaffikin and Morrissey, *Planning in Divided Cities*.

accomodationism aligns with the 'equity strategy' in divided cities which allocates urban services and power equally to the rival groups based on their size.[27]

Yet, while the accommodationist divided city suggests the role of formal power-sharing and public institutions, accomodationism can more likely operate via informal processes and networks. This situation is particularly acute where the state is largely absent as producers and distributers of public infrastructure. These domains are essentially devolved to non-state actors, especially sectarian networks that operate in the blurred lines betwixt political parties and militia groups, and for this reason governance exists in 'hybrid' forms.[28] Non-state networks have thus assumed leading roles in providing security and policing, healthcare,[29] and other infrastructural goods. These resources and services are placed under their control of such networks and subject to their coercive and extractive power. In the wake of a disintegrating social contract, many citizens in the accommodationist city are often reliant on the informal sphere of sectarian networks for basic services.[30] As Parreira argues in relation to Beirut and Baghdad, these are cities in which elites practice the 'art of not governing' – an approach noted for state absenteeism in policymaking and the most basic service provision, ranging from healthcare, electricity and gas, waste management and social security.[31]

Rather than characterised by attempts to accommodate multiple ethnosectarian identities and interests, 'fierce' divided cities largely reflect the hegemonic power of dominant ethnosectarian groups at the expense of disenfranchised 'others'. Fierce cities are places where regimes enforce exclusionary control of access to services, legislative power, the aesthetics of space and the city more broadly. It is a mode of governance articulated as a zero-sum existential struggle where forms of conflict and structural violence reinforce the determination of a ruling elite to defend existing institutional arrangements by force. In fierce cities, the consolidation of institutions and their effectiveness is often tied to attributes that directly contradict those seen as necessary to overcome fragility, including accountability, voice, equity, transparency, and inclusion. This power is enforced by the regime's control system – the legal, institutional, and physical instruments of power deemed necessary to secure ethnic dominance.

The fierce city clearly overlaps with Yiftachel and Yacobi's conceptualisation of 'urban ethnocracy', wherein a dominant group appropriates the city's apparatus to buttress its domination and expansion.[32] Urban ethnocracies display specific features to ensure that power and control is reproduced in the service of the hegemonic group, underpinned by powerful logics of ethnic dominance and capital accumulation, including via the use of urban planning, land and housing allocation. The disenfranchised will inevitably mobilise resistance to their station, but they will be classed as ungovernable and subject to illegality. Yet, the fierce city has also some crucial differences relative to urban ethnocracies. While urban ethnocracies are typically the product of settler colonial societies, and

[27]Bollens, *Trajectories of Conflict and Peace.*
[28]Fregonese, *War and the City.*
[29]Melanie Cammett, *Compassionate Communalism: Welfare and Sectarianism in Lebanon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).
[30]Bassel F. Salloukh, 'Taif and the Lebanese State: The Political Economy of a Very Sectarian Public Sector', *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 25, no. 1 (2019): 43–60.
[31]Christiana Parreira, 'Power Politics: Armed Non-State Actors and the Capture of Public Electricity in Post-Invasion Baghdad', *Journal of Peace Research* 58, no. 4 (2021): 749–62.
[32]Yiftachel and Yacobi, 'Urban Ethnocracy'.

where political polarisation is legislated via the electoral system, fierce cities are more likely to be found in semi-authoritarian and 'rentier states' that have little need for the mask of democracy in order to consolidate power on behalf of the dominant ethnosectarian group. These are places shaped by inefficient state institutions, weak democratic processes, and patriarchal political cultures. Here, the state essentially bribes its co-ethnics with extensive welfare populations, while non-citizens and disenfranchised groups are regulated through coercion and violence. Fierce cities thus are ordered in such a way that the whims of ruling elites manifest spatially and in the regulation of people's right to the city, conditioned by the often unrestrained perceptions, needs and aspirations of those in power.

What is shared between accommodationist and fierce divided cities is the respective elites' commitment to maintaining rather than overcoming ethnosectarian divisions. Elites reproduce sectarian identities and polarity on an everyday basis as a deliberate strategy of regime survival. In the 'accommodationist 'city, ethnosectarian pluralism is framed as part of the city's multicultural fabric and identity and thus must be preserved supposedly to ensure peaceful coexistence between the respective groups. In presenting themselves as the guardians of sectarian pluralism, sectarian elites position themselves as bastions of peace and security.[33] In the 'fierce' city, alternatively, regime elites present ethnosectarian pluralism as a danger to unity and, in many cases to the political project itself, reflecting broader existential concerns about divided loyalties. Disempowered ethnosectarian groups are often constructed as 'fifth columnists', insurgent groups that desire to overthrow the regime through revolutionary violence, positioned within regional rivalries and drawing upon historical prejudice as a means of justifying actions. Fierce city elites thus present themselves as guarantors of stability and unity against the putative forces of fracture and chaos and, often, against the 'other', defined in national, ethnic, or sectarian terms. Thus, in this sense, ethnosectarian pluralism legitimates the existence of the regime and its use of control techniques,

In terms of accomodationist and fierce cities, very powerful structures – political, economic, institutional, legal, interpersonal, ideological, and infrastructural practices – combine to maintain the system. In particular, we note two interlocking ways that ethnosectarian systems in these divided cities are able to reproduce themselves and thus seek to resist possibility of transformation.

First, these systems are maintained via the use of securitisation: defined here as the process through which specific public issues is constructed by state elites as existential threats to the nation therefore requiring emergency, defensive countermeasures. These emergency measures make use of 'extraordinary means', breaking the normal political rules of the game. Thus, groups who are identified as threats to elite rulers have become subjected to securitisation. While a vast literature has emerged looking at the sectarianisation (or securitisation) of particular groups,[34] the broader implications of such approaches require further exploration. Indeed, in divided cities processes of sectarianisation can have serious repercussions for daily life along with the ways in which power regulates life throughout the infrastructure of the city.

[33]Geha, 'Politics of a Garbage Crisis'.
[34]See: Mabon, 'The End of the Battle for Bahrain'; and Toby Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

Second, these are cities question the idea of the 'modern infrastructure ideal': centralised, sociomaterial systems for water, sanitation, and other services that make rule possible by giving cultural, economic, legal and political logics of rule a consistent material form.[35] Roads, water supply systems, sanitation networks, and communication technologies are intrinsic to the process through which governance is circulated throughout society. Yet, in the accommodationist and fierce city, rather than aiming for 'the infrastructure ideal', rule is achieved through flexible and contested constellations of the state's formal apparatus and non-state actors such as militias that together discipline and control urban populations. This assemblage of state and non-actors represent 'zones of exception' where the banal and spectacular work of governance is carried out by a diverse set of groups that blur the line between state and society. These actors have the power to decide which form of life – which type of sectarian identity – is useful for it and which is framed as a threat to its survival.[36] At root, this exposes how life itself is regulated via the distribution of key services and resources, such as healthcare and electricity. Social services and urban infrastructure are used by ethnosectarian networks a process of regulating the 'biological, social, and economic life of their subjects'.[37] Thus, this assemblage – as a form of 'spatial governmentality' designed to construct governable subjects – is a achieved through the consolidation of sectarianism rather than its moderation. Of course, this is not to say that individuals pledge belonging to ethnosectarian groups purely for instrumental reasons – namely access to services and goods. Less immediately material concerns about security and belonging can animate coethnic voting.[38]

Yet, despite the panoply of forms in which polarisation and inequality is reproduced in these urban environments, contestation occurs. This contestation takes place via a variety of groups and forms of political agency, ranging from calls for the inclusion of marginalised groups, gender equality, human rights for LGBTQ populations and migrant workers, demands for public services to active attempts to overthrow the regimes. Contestation against urban modes of sectarian governance takes the form of 'counter-governmentality', resistance to those practices that sediment inequality and division. Social movements in divided cities have attracted mounting scholarly attention.[39] Such research challenges the assumption that political contestation occurs only along ethnic and sectarian lines. In violently contested cities increasingly shaped by dysfunctional public services, patriarchal institutions, and the violent exclusion of queer and migrant populations, citizens from across the city come together at particular junctures to reimagine urban living.

To what extent can these movements be understood as right-to-the-city demands? The right-to-the-city, as first conceptualised by Henri Lefebvre, is rooted in resistance against the forces of urban development predicated on capitalist accumulation, which increasingly

[35]Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin, *Splintering Urbanism: Networked Infrastructures, Technological Mobilities and the Urban Condition* (London: Psychology Press, 2021).

[36]See Mabon, 'The End of the Battle for Bahrain'.

[37]Usmaan Farooqui, 'Politics of Neutrality: Urban Knowledge Practices and Everyday Formalisation in Karachi's Waterscape', *Urban Studies* 57, no. 12 (2020): 2423–39.

[38]Melani Cammett, Dominika Kruszewska-Eduardo, Christiana Parreira, and Sami Atallah, 'Coethnicity Beyond Clientelism: Insights from an Experimental Study of Political Behavior in Lebanon', *Politics and Religion* 15, no. 2 (2021): 1–22.

[39]See John Nagle, '" Unity in Diversity": Non-Sectarian Social Movement Challenges to the Politics of Ethnic Antagonism in Violently Divided Cities', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 37, no. 1 (2013): 78–92; and Rima Majed, 'In Defence of Intra-Sectarian Divide: Street Mobilisation, Coalition Formation, and Rapid Realignments of Sectarian Boundaries in Lebanon', *Social Forces* 99, no. 4 (2021): 1772–98.

alienated citizens and expedited inequality, social exclusion and separation.[40] Demands for a right-to-the-city thus encompass the call for urban infrastructure and services that sustain life in urban contexts, human rights for marginalised groups, such as migrants and queer populations, for public spaces for people to express creativity and to foster citizenship and interaction. The right-to-the-city imagines the city as a site of renewed centrality, a place of encounter, an assemblage of difference which permits the full usage of moments and places. The right-to-the-city is 'an active right to make the city different, to shape it more in accord with our heart's desire, and to re-make ourselves thereby in a different image'.[41]

While research on the right-to-the-city has proliferated exponentially, encompassing cities in the global south undergoing neoliberal revanchism, and which takes into account the unequal gendered and sexual city, rarely has the 'ethnosectarian' divided city been considered. Indeed, while 'the right to remake ourselves by creating a qualitatively different kind of urban sociality is one of the most precious of human rights',[42] the question remains: whose rights and whose city?[43] This question appears particularly problematic in divided cities where claims to the 'right to the city' are demarcated along competing ethnosectarian lines.

Yet, as we have noted, the divided city in many cases are characterised by weakening or non-existent public services, patterns of chronic conflict and instability, segregated living, shrinking public spaces, and the exclusion of minority groups. The right-to-the-city, here, takes on an even greater urgency given the need to re-imagine urban living as inclusive, safe, a meeting point for the construction of collective life, where human rights are advanced, and citizens have access to public services. The right-to-the-city is not merely an act of protest; it represents a form of urban democracy that Lefebvre called the 'oeuvre': a work in which all citizens participate to generate new forms of living and inhabiting.[44]

While the right-to-the-city has been critiqued for its lack of precision as a form of urban resistance, in the context of divided cities it permits an opportunity to reframe the unit of analysis away from seeing conflict as between ethnosectarian groups and towards one in which a wider group of citizens from across a broad spectrum society challenge elites regarding the production of urban goods and living. Put another way, it allows for a focus upon interests beyond the all too common focus upon identities. Protest movements that challenge the hegemonic order of ethnosectarian antagonism and polarity, contains the promise of contributing to urban peacebuilding. It is to this potential in that we turn to in relation to Beirut and Manama.

Beirut: the accomodationist city

Beirut's categorisation as an 'accomodationist' divided city largely, though not exclusively, stems from the civil war (1975–1990). Although the civil war cannot be classed as sectarian – simply a conflict between Christian and Muslim sects – the main actors used

[40]Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*.
[41]David Harvey, 'The Right to the City', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 27, no. 4 (2003): 939.
[42]ibid., 993.
[43]see Marc Purcell, 'Excavating Lefebvre: The Right to the CIty and its Urban Politics of the Inhabitant', *GeoJournal* 58, no. 2–3 (2002): 99–102.
[44]Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*.

sectarian violence as a deliberate tactic leading to an amplification of sectarian polarisation.[45] Divisions were purposely constructed by the powerful militias who built their own sectarian fiefdoms in the shadow of a disintegrating state. As Fragonese demonstrates, the warring militias used 'urbacide' – the process of destroying 'buildings, logistics networks and communication infrastructure' to divide communities and disintegrate civic values that embody the urban experience.[46] In so doing, the sectarian factions assumed ownership of key services for the communities they claimed to defend. A wide range of basic services – medical care, education, refuse and postal collection, gas and electricity – were exploited by the sectarian militias in order to extend coercive control over their communities. By the end of the war, the largest militia groups were operating as states within the state complete with their own social welfare departments, press and media outlets, and powerful political parties proclaiming to defend the interests of particular sects.[47]

Beirut city centre was the strategic frontline of the civil war as the rival militias vied to control the district. The city centre represented the 'Green Line', dividing Christian and Muslim Beirut, and approximately 30% of buildings in the historic downtown area were destroyed. Evidence of the polarisation of the city is that the Muslim population of east Beirut declined from 40% to 5% during the civil war.[48]

These divisions have become further entrenched and institutionalised in the post-war era. At a broader state level, political sectarianism has been accommodated via the operation of power-sharing sharing institutions. The overall architecture for accomodationism is enshrined in the 'allotment state' ('muhasasa'), which means that each group – 18 Muslim and Christian sects – are guaranteed representation through a quota system reflecting the assumed demographic balance.[49] Accomodationism is reproduced at the municipal level in the urban context of Beirut. In the post-war era, the effect of the accomodationist city is the construction of homogeneous and exclusive spaces, which have the effect of consolidating the exercise of local power by former militia warlords now reinvented as political leaders. Post-war Beirut has undergone militarisation as the various 'sectarian militias reorganised and rearmed themselves, and urban space was physically and symbolically divided into exclusive sectarian ghettos'.[50] Bou Akar notably has traced the territorialisation of Beirut in the post-civil war era, highlighting the role of political parties, municipal authorities, and religious institutions, among others, in shaping the divided geography of the city.[51]

Yet, while ethnosectarian divisions are embedded into the political system, public institutions are purposely weakened by the sectarian elites so that resources and services are placed under their control. Sectarianized networks – non-state actors – are primary providers of up to 60% of basic health services in Beirut, while the supply of electricity and

[45]Samir Khalaf, *Lebanon Adrift: From Battleground to Playground* (London: Saqi, 2012).
[46]Fregonese, *War and the City*, 22.
[47]See Amanda Rizkallah, 'The Paradox of Power-Sharing: Stability and Fragility in Post-War Lebanon', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40, no. 12 (2017): 2058–76.
[48]See Khalaf, *Lebanon Adrift*, 83.
[49]Reinoud Leenders, *Spoils of Truce: Corruption and State-Building in Postwar Lebanon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012).
[50]Bassel F. Salloukh, Rabie Barakat, Jinan S. Al-Habbal, Lara W. Khattab, and Shoghig Mikaelian, *Politics of Sectarianism in Postwar Lebanon* (London: Pluto, 2015), 29.
[51]Hiba B. Akar, *For the War Yet to Come* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018).

gas, microcredit, even the construction of roads come under their influence.[52] Thus, sectarianism is renewed on a daily basis through the sectarian parties provision of essential services and infrastructure, which is used to create cultures of dependency tightly binding communities with elites in what has been called a 'politics of non-state welfare'.[53] The situation is facilitated by Lebanon's failing economy, characterised by galloping public debt, which has left two-thirds the Lebanese living in poverty or deprivation and increasingly reliant on the informal sphere of sectarian networks.[54] Rather than merely reflecting existing sectarian divisions, the weak state and strong sectarian system combine to elevate citizens as sectarian subjects above all other forms of social and political identity.

Beirut thus represents the accommodationist divided city. Sectarian divisions are formally and informally embedded into the structure of the state and the municipality. A consequence of this system is that access to the means that sustain life in the city – such as healthcare, gas and electricity – is privileged for those citizens to play the 'sectarian' game. Those members of society excluded from the system have their lives severely hypertrophied by a chronic lack of access to these services. Even those members of society who seek to play the game can find themselves vulnerable at periods of intense crisis when even the sectarian networks are unable to deliver key services. It is precisely at these junctures where broad-based civic movements can emerge.

Through exclusively privileging the interests of the main sectarian groups, the accommodationist system has the further effect of negatively regressing demands for gender equality and rights for LGBTQ people, workers, migrants and refugees. Yet, despite of and in reaction to the divisive sectarian system, a range of non-sectarian movements resist their marginalisation and exclusion, including feminists, anti-corruption and privatisation, LGBTQ, labour, refugees, and anti-racist groups.[55]

In the context of Beirut – the accommodationist divided city – we turn to right-to-the-city movements through two rounds of citizen protest: 'You Stink' (2015) and the 'Thawra' 'Uprising' (2019-).

Garbage politics and the 'Uprising'

The first wave of protest occurred in summer 2015 as a consequence of a garbage crisis. Lebanon's power-sharing government, stuck in a deadlock, was unable to renew the contract to the private company – itself connected to a sectarian party – responsible for trash collection.[56] Within weeks, hundreds of thousands of tonnes of decaying trash began to accumulate on the streets of Beirut.

While the respective political leaders sought to sectarianise the issue by blaming each other for the mess, the wider public in Beirut quickly took to the streets to direct their anger at sectarian elites.[57] This anger was primarily expressed through a new protest

[52]The 2019 Corruption Perception Index (CPI) ranked Lebanon among the world's most corrupt countries and territories – 137th of 180.77 In surveys, 87 percent of Lebanese people think that the government is failing in its fight against corruption and 67 percent believe that most or all government officials are involved in some form of corruption.
[53]Cammett, *Compassionate Communalism.*
[54]Salloukh, 'Taif and the Lebanese State'.
[55]John Nagle and Tamirace Fakhoury, *Resisting Sectarianism: Queer Activism in Postwar Lebanon* (Bloomsbury Publishing: London, 2021).
[56]Geha, 'Politics of a Garbage Crisis'.
[57]Ibid.

movement called 'You Stink' (tol'et rihetkom), an apt name that expressed outrage at a 'stinking' political class that needed to be cleaned up. Rather than protests being bound by a discrete issue – garbage collection – the 'You Stink' protests harnessed the failure of the state to deliver a basic service to illuminate broader systemic issues, of a weak and collapsing urban infrastructure, divisive sectarian politics, rampant corruption and disaster capitalism.

Yet, as a right-to-the-city movement, activists recognised that the politics of protest was intimately bound up with urban peacebuilding. One activist asked: 'How can we hope to build peace with people whose survival depends on maintaining a state of non-peace?'[58] Thus, the lack of public services, rising socioeconomic inequality, and sectarian antagonism were all deliberate symptoms of the system perpetuated by the sectarian factions to sustain their own political and economic power in the city.

Thus, central to the You Stink protests was to evoke an imaginary that articulated a powerful alternative politics to the sectarianism reproduced by political leaders. This political imagination required harnessing people power, the citizenry that is disempowered. A You Stink leader explained that the protests brought to the streets 'the silent majority that is disenfranchised, but they are not powerless'.[59] The right-to-the-city was not only expressed as a demand for public services; the protest movement fostered powerful ways to imagine urban life. In the context of segregation and divisive ethnosectarian politics, the You Stink movement was notable. fir its 'unprecedented cross-class … and cross-sectarian' character.[60] The movement, additionally constructed connections between what seemed disconnected agendas to eventually become linked issues in contesting the sectarian system. For this reason, the protests became popularly known as 'al-Hirak' ('The Movement'), particularly as it expanded to embrace overlapping political actors: feminist collectives, environmentalists, queer activists, and leftists. These actors made connections between various issues, ranging from the lack of public services, such as electricity and sanitation, to Lebanon's collapsing economy, dysfunctional governance, gender inequality and processes of violent exclusion against LGBTQ populations and migrants. In protests, there was consensus that these ills are the product of the corrupt elite and their 'garbage' politics of sectarianism.

Protests articulated frames that identified sectarian elites as the source of blame for a wide range of intersecting issues, including corruption, poor state services and goods, gender inequality, and youth unemployment. Attributing culpability to specific structural and agential forces is achieved through 'injustice frames',[61] modes of representing the world that define the actions of an authority as illegitimate. By making seemingly discreet and unconnected problems of governance into larger questions of the legitimacy of power-sharing and the elites, protestors voiced a 'signalling mechanism' by attributing blame to decision makers and by highlighting the political dimension of conditions.[62]

[58]Interview with activist, June 2015.
[59]Interview with leading You Stink activist, January 2016.
[60]Geha, 'Politics of a Garbage Crisis'.
[61]Robert D. Benford, 'Master Frame', The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements (Wiley, 2013), https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470674871.wbespm126.
[62]B. Bremer, S. Hutter, and H. Kriesi, 'Dynamics of Protest and Electoral Politics in the Great Recession', *European Journal of Political Research* 59, no. 4 (2020): 842–66.

A leading protest organiser explained the importance of assigning blame to the ethnosectarian elites:

> All of them have killed, they have been in the civil war, they have corruption cases against them, all of them have deep rooted negligence of the state. We don't trust these politicians and their political parties. That's what we hope for – to remove the old guard; it is a dictatorship.[63]

While the You Stink protests eventually waned, a new wave of mobilisation occurred four years later in October 2019 in a series of demonstrations labelled the Thawra ('Uprising'). The Thawra protests began in October 2019 after the government proposed an increase in VAT and implemented a new tax on the use of WhatsApp and other mobile messaging services. The taxes occurred at the same time as a liquidity crisis that consumed Lebanon's banking sector that led caused the devaluation of the Lebanese pound by 90% and GDP to decline by 9.2.[64] The economic crisis – compounded by hyperinflation – was ranked by World Bank as among the three most severe seen anywhere since the mid-nineteenth century.[65]

Like You Stink, the Thawra represented a non-sectarian movement, described as 'cutting through the sectarian divisions that for so long have dominated Lebanese life'.[66] The Thawra movement quickly embraced a number of connected issues: denouncing corruption of public funds and the failed neoliberal policies of a failed government, demands for public services and jobs, gender equality and human rights for queer populations and domestic migrant workers. These issues were framed by the Thawra movement as fundamentally intertwined since they are products of the sectarian system. Indeed, the protestors often articulated 'rejection of the explicitly sectarian system that has governed the country for decades'.[67]

Thus, as a right-to-the-city movement, the Thawra sought to reimagine the divided city by interlinking multiple claims to urban life which bridged hopes for urban infrastrcture, such as transport, public space, and housing, with opposition to sectarianism, patriarchy, homophobia and racism against migrants. Building on You Stink, the Thawra protests were more than demands for urban services; it articulated opposition to sectarianism and sectarian elites. Protestors demanded that 'the people want the downfall of the sectarian regime' and held placards depicting a skull and crossbones: 'Sectarianism: Danger'. Elites were targeted for overseeing bad governance and for expropriating public resources through the exercise of grand corruption. The specification of blame can aid mobilisation by identifying 'villains', and such demonisation fuels powerful emotions for protest.[68] Protestors 'dared point fingers at their own sectarian leaders',[69] evident in the

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[63]Interview with leading You Stink activist, January 2016.
[64]Rima Majed and Lana Salman, 'Lebanon's Thawra', MERP, 2019, https://merip.org/2019/12/lebanons-thawra/.
[65]World Bank, Lebanon Economic Monitor, Lebanon Sinking (to the Top 3), Spring 2021, www.worldbank.org/en/country/lebanon/publication/lebanon-economic-monitor-spring-2021-lebanon-sinking-to-the-top-3.
[66]Martin Patience, 'Lebanon Protesters' Euphoria Gives Way to Despair', *BBC*, 2019, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-54554278.
[67]Mortada Alamine, 'Lebanon's Loyalists: The Other Side of Change', *Synaps*, 2021, https://www.synaps.network/post/lebanon-uprising-revolution-loyalists-parties.
[68]Bremer et al., 'Dynamics of Protest and Electoral Politics in the Great Recession'.
[69]Ibrahim Halawi and Bassel F. Salloukh, 'Pessimism of the Intellect, Optimism of the Will after the 17 October Protests in Lebanon', *Middle East Law and Governance* 12, no. 3 (2020): 322–34.

chant, 'All of you means all of you' ('kellon ya'ni kellon'), which epitomised the outright rejection of the entire sectarian political class.

The politics of anti- and non-sectarianism is evident in the intersectional politics and issues that protest movements articulated, ranging from gender equality, LGBTQ rights, victims' movements, disability, labour movements, and demands for protections for domestic workers. Protests thus fostered alliances between a range of groups and issues marginalised and excluded by the power-sharing system. A Lebanese feminist and queer activist noted that in the Thawra: 'Queer rights, anti-racist organising, refugee organising, coalition work. It all started to come out'.[70]

Manama: the 'fierce city'

Manama's status as a divided city stems from its position within the Bahraini state: While Bahrain is one of the three majority Shi'a states in the Middle East it is ruled by a Sunni ruling family, the Al Khalifa. Unlike Beirut, which hosts different religious and sectarian groups, in Bahrain division typically plays out along two axes: sectarian, where a Sunni minority rules over a Shi'a majority, which is then further complicated by ethnic divisions between the indigenous Arab *Baharna* and the *Ajam*, a group of Persian descent; and citizens and non-citizens, with a large percentage of Bahrain's population (around 60%) comprised of the latter.

Over recent decades, Bahraini politics has been viewed through the lens of sectarian politics – an 'ethno-sectarian gaze' - which reflects long-standing tensions between rulers and ruled that have typically been mapped onto religious identity. The use of this gaze is, in part, an elite-driven strategy designed to retain power in the face of political and social unrest – a process of *sectarianisation* – dating back to the turn of the 20th century.[71] Yet it also bears the hallmarks of geopolitical concerns, notably the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which – given the presence of shared ethnic and religious identities across state borders – has exacerbated schisms in divided societies across the Middle East .[72] Bahrain's demographic makeup and geographical location, less than 20 km off the eastern coast of Saudi Arabia, prompted many in Riyadh to view developments in Bahrain through the lens of the Saudi state's own security, fearing both increasing Iranian influence and the spread of democracy.

Yet to reduce Bahrain's complex social fabric to geopolitics or sectarian difference ignores the subtleties of tribal, ethnic, class, political and ideological difference which have played a central role in shaping political life. Across the 20th century, the Al Khalifa's statebuilding project has required engaging with – and balancing – the multifarious groups operating in Bahrain, each of whom has, at various times across the twentieth century, been viewed as a threat to the Al Khalifa's position as ruler of the state.

The heavily urbanised population of Bahrain – with the majority of the country's population living in the cities of Manama or Muharraq – has meant that the development

[70]Interview with Thawra protestor, February 2020.
[71]Staci Strobl, *Sectarian Order in Bahrain: The Social and Colonial Origins of Criminal Justice* (New York: Lexington, 2018); and Omar AlShehabi, *Contested Modernity: Sectarianism, Nationalism, and Colonialism in Bahrain* (London: Oneworld, 2019).
[72]Simon Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Soft Power Rivalry in the Middle East* (London: IB Tauris, 2013).

of both a state project and development of urban centres have been symbiotic,[73] illuminated by efforts to negotiate processes of modernity brought about by the emergence of oil wealth and the dramatic transformation of all facets of political, social and urban life. In this context, the development of urban environments has been used as a means through which sovereign power – and with it, the power of the Al Khalifa – can regulate life.

This power was seen in the physical landscape of the city, as members of the ruling family purchased prime real estate at knockdown prices, accruing vast wealth in the process. The erstwhile Prime Minister, for example, was one of the largest landowners in Bahrain, whose portfolio included the Financial Harbour area, land that was reclaimed from the sea and is home to the country's financial district and is alleged to have been bought for one-dinar, less than $3 in 2005.[74]

Over the past century Bahraini political life has been punctured by myriad instances of protest, as people articulate grievances along economic, political, and social lines.[75] Shi'a groups have regularly spoken out against the Al Khalifa, reflecting broader processes of marginalisation and suspicion that they are a group with little loyalty to the state; instead, following the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, many Sunni Arab monarchies – the Al Khalifa included – viewed Shi'a groups suspiciously as Iranian 5th columnists.[76] Such efforts take myriad forms but typically involve the mobilisation of technologies of power designed to limit agency, the cultivation of divisions across society, and the cultivation of Manama as a 'fierce city'.

As a site of expressions of protest and sovereign power, Manama represents the 'fierce city', where the power of the Al Khalifa operates, seemingly with little regard to the sectarian 'other' or, indeed, those who criticise the regime. Within this vein, processes designed to order life are operationalised in a way that reasserts Al Khalifa power; indeed, basic services and infrastructure were used to maintain control over life itself. Unlike the case of Beirut where access is limited to those willing to play the 'sectarian game', access to the means that sustain life in the city is restricted to declarations of *bay'ah* (allegiance) to the regime. Whilst this possesses sectarian characteristics, the fundamental factor driving such calculations pertains to ensuring regime survival.[77] Thus, the regulatory capacity of the Al Khalifa has historically been deployed against those seeking to challenge state power.

The visible manifestation of the fierce city characterises Manama. Banners depicting prominent members of the Al Khalifa – the King, Crown Prince and erstwhile Prime Minister – adorn major roads in a vivid reminder of the cult of personality present in the state. This adornment also serves as a form of structural violence, a constant reminder of the power of the ruling family and their omniscience; the sense that one is in an Al Khalifa fiefdom is all encompassing. Typically supporting this is the presence of armed security sector personnel who man the entrances to Manama and occupy prominent intersections across the city. The message from this posturing – both in the creation of a spatial landscape adorned with images of the ruling family and security sector

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[73]Nelida Fuccaro, *Histories of City and State in the Persian Gulf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
[74]Frederik Richter and Martin de Sa'Pinto, 'Special Report: In Bahrain, A Symbol at the Heart of Revolt', *Reuters*, 2011, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bahrain-gfh-idUSTRE75F4LF20110616.
[75]Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf.*
[76]See note 72 above.
[77]Mabon, *Houses Built on Sand*; Mabon, *Precarious Politics*.

presence – is to reinforce Al Khalifa power and to cultivate a sense of inclusion amongst those who support the ruling family, but to reinforce experiences of exclusion amongst those who oppose it.

Protests: the Uprising

By the turn of 2011, with mass protests taking to the streets of cities across the Middle East which have come to be termed the Arab Uprisings, it was hardly surprising that latent frustrations which had been prevalent across Bahrain in the previous decades would erupt.[78] Drawing widespread support from across Bahraini society – populated by all age groups, genders, sects, geographical locations and political backgrounds – the protest movement encapsulated a wide range of political agendas ranging from those calling for reform of the existing system to those demanding the fall of the Al Khalifa. From across Bahrain, people arrived in Manama to express their anger at regime inertia and corruption. Some estimates put the number of protests at well over one hundred-thousand Bahrainis, out of a citizen population of less than 570,000 in what has been described as 'one of the greatest shows of "people power" in modern history'.[79]

United under the chant of 'not Sunni, not Shi'a, just Bahraini', the protesters articulated a common sense of frustration, hinting at a desectarian moment, one that was seen to pose an existential challenge to the very survival of the Al Khalifa. Indeed, this articulation of unity despite decades of regime efforts to foster division pointed to a moment where interests transcended identities. At this point, the politics of division was challenged by the politics of solidarity, provoking a crisis at the heart of the Al Khalifa, which reverberated across other Arab monarchies.

In the decades prior to the protests, the Al Khalifa had deployed a range of mechanisms of control designed to prevent the emergence of collective action. Yet by 2011, anger at the political situation prompted action. In taking to the streets, the protesters shared a range of grievances, including political reform (a source of contestation within the protesters), increased political accountability, economic reform, and an end to corruption. Speaking with people from the protests, a key feature of dialogue and chanting were shared expressions of national identity rather than articulating sectarian membership.[80] This moment of protest also served as a moment of hope as different groups came together to articulate demands for change. On 14 February, on the anniversary of the 2002 constitution (which promised reform), protesters gathered in Pearl Roundabout, a site that symbolised Bahrain's rich cultural heritage of pearl diving – recognised on the 500 Fils coin (which was later withdrawn from circulation) – in an effort to demonstrate national unity. Much like Tahir Square in Cairo, Pearl Roundabout was a prominent urban site, allowing people to interact and transform the space in a manner akin to that envisaged by advocates of the right-to-the-city movements whilst also being highly visible. In this environment, people from a range of backgrounds coalesced and in doing so embarked on discussions of the nature of political life in Bahrain. Aside from Pearl Roundabout, the protesters also blockade the towers of the Financial Harbour,

[78]Mabon, *Houses Built on Sand*.
[79]Sean Yom and Gregory Gause, 'Resilient Royals: How Arab Monarchies Hang On', *Journal of Democracy* 23, no. 4 (2012): 74–88.
[80]Interview with student, November, 2013; Interview with documentary maker, April 2014.

waving one-dinar notes in protest against the corruption of the country's Prime Minister. Yet despite the early optimism of such movements, the strength of the Al Khalifa and their regional – and international – backers allowed for retrenchment and a doubling down of their rule.

In the face of powerful movements calling for change, the Al Khalifa embarked on a draconian counter-revolutionary process, facilitated by the declaration of a state of emergency in March 2011 and supported by the presence of a Gulf Peninsula Shield Force, led by Saudi Arabia. Amidst concerns about the actions of the protesters, the ruling elites embarked on a multipronged strategy designed to curtail scope for political action. Honed over previous decades, the counter-revolutionary strategy that emerged sought to capitalise on existing facets of division in Manama whilst also shifting the terms of political debate into the language of security.

While the inclusive nature of the protest movement was celebrated by many, for the ruling elites it posed a serious challenge, prompting a divide and rule strategy designed to expose latent ethno-sectarian tensions, opening up suspicion at the nefarious involvement of Iran in Bahrain's domestic affairs. In such a highly charged environment, where security concerns had prompted the suspension of the rule of law, the essence of the 'fierce city' allowed the regime to eviscerate the protest movement. From acts of resistance at places, such as Pearl Roundabout[81] to the militarisation of highways, Manama became the means through which the biopolitical machinery of sovereign power found traction. Intersections became occupied by heavily armed military personnel, images of the ruling family were increasingly prevalent, and riot police were regularly seen through the souq. Access to the city was limited, with checkpoints regulating access to Manama.

The transition to a heavily securitised environment was as swift as it was fierce. Those calling for change – and those offering support to those calling for change – faced the wrath of the state. Hospitals became sites of government oppression. At the Al Salmaniya hospital, senior doctors were arrested having provided medical support to those needing it, including protesters[82]; upholding their commitment to the Hippocratic oath had devastating repercussions. Thousands were imprisoned as a consequence of their part in the protests, with many tortured while in custody, with a culture of impunity emerging at this point.

Political parties such as Al Wifaq and Al Wa'ad were restricted from participating in elections before being banned on the grounds of undermining the state and spreading sectarianism. What began with a focus on Shi'a parties and movements after 2011 became more comprehensive as time went on, as the Al Khalifa turned their attention to Sunni Islamists amidst a changing geopolitical environment after 2014.[83]

Beyond political movements, efforts to regulate life across the fierce city became more holistic, impacting on civil society and the labour force. In the years after the protests, legal and medical professions faced growing pressure from the Al Khalifa. Outspoken members of both professions were arrested (interviews) while increasing levels of oversight meant that employment became politicised and, by extension, viewed through the lens of security. As one lawyer observed, the Al Khalifa 'don't care if justice is being served', but are

[81] Mabon, *Precarious Politics*.

[82] Rupert Wingfield Hayes, 'Bahrain Doctors in Prison for Daring to Speak Out', *BBC*, 2011, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/9521963.stm.

[83] Simon Mabon, *The Struggle for Supremacy in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

concerned about security and control. As another lawyer stressed, 'security is about everything here'. While the protesters sought to demonstrate unity in the face of historical division, the arms of the state framed the environment in the language of security and, through this, engaged in a process of violent and holistic repression.

Urban peacebuilding and the backlash

Citizens in Beirut and Manama have forged right-to-the-city movements to express demands for public services, an end to corruption and sectarianism, for queer rights, gender equality, and for inclusive forms of governance. Yet, in what ways are right-to-the -city claims – for public services and spaces and human rights for marginalised groups – rhyme with the practice of urban peacebuilding? This question can be addressed if we understand how the right-to-the-city disrupts the embeddedness of ethnosectarian hegemony and how it is reproduced on a daily basis.

First, as we have argued, state retrenchment, is a fundamental way in which urban sectarianised forms of governance maintain its coercive power. Demands for public services and spaces and for human rights represent expressions that challenge the grammar of ethnosectarian governance. These demands resemble what Holston (2009) calls 'insurgent citizenship', an articulation of urban belonging and citizenship that focusses on confronting and destabilising the entrenched regimes of citizen inequality. Insurgent citizenship is thus not merely a venting of anger by the periphery; it is a political imaginary that generates alternative formulations of urban citizenship grounded in coexistence, human rights and equality.

Second, in the context of cities characterised by residential segregation, sectarian politics and violence, right-to-the-city movements purposely build inclusive networks and alliances of actors not only across ethnosectarian cleavages, but also various identity groups. In so doing, these movements sustain cooperation between urban residents in an environment that incentivised fragmentation and contestation, over identity, resources and political belonging.

Third, the act of urban protest has the potential to generate what Lefebvre called the 'heterotopia': the construction of liminal social spaces where alternative political imaginaries are fostered. For Lefebvre, right-to-the-city protests are moments of irruption, 'when disparate heterotopic groups suddenly see, if only for a fleeting moment, the possibilities of collective action to create something radically different'. Thus, right-to-the -city protests in divided cities provide momentary acts of irruptive imagination, a process of citizens coming together to evoke unity and new ways of urban living. Insurgent citizenship, moreover, often becomes visible in central civic spaces, such as squares, which have an almost sacred aura in legitimising the hierarchies, legalities, segregations, and inequalities of the entrenched regime of citizenship.[84] Protest in these spaces becomes 'insurgent performance' (Holston 2009): in which citizens coalesce to produce agency, power and collective action.[85] When right-to-the-city movements enter and

[84]Notably, Holston argues that forms of insurgent citizenship are most powerful, not when performed in city centre squares, but when it is embedded into everyday life in the peripheries. James Holston, 'Insurgent Citizenship in an Era of Global Urban Peripheries', *City & Society* 2, no. 2 (2009): 245–67.

[85]Holston, 'Insurgent Citizenship in an Era of Global Urban Peripheries'.

occupy these spaces, they challenge their invisibility and dispossession by forging a space of appearance, a space that is diverse and large enough for all of us.

Yet, while right-to-the-city movements drive urban peacebuilding, this potentiality is severely constricted in divided cities. Ethnosectarian elites and regimes in Beirut and Manama use all of the instruments at their disposal to weaken non-sectarian protest movements. Elites securitise these movements by framing them as threats to security and stability supposedly enshrined in sectarian pluralism. For instance, during the You Stink protests a prominent sectarian leader accused the protesters of attempting 'to topple what is left of the institutions and the government, which would shake and endanger stability and civil peace'.[86] As part of this, protestors are labelled agents of foreign actors seeking to bring down regimes and peace. Thus, the Thawra was labelled as the product of foreign interference and funding while protestors in Manama were portrayed as a 'fifth columnists', doing the bidding of Iran.[87] The trans-sectarian/ethnic and diverse identity groups that participated in protests were also seized on by elites as evidence of dangerous pluralism and moral decay. In a speech about the Thawra, a media personality warned: 'If this sodomy revolution is successful, and they implement non-sectarian laws, they'll pass laws related to their homosexuality'.[88]

In securitising protest movements, ethnosectarian elites have been able to deploy extrajudicial powers to try and crush protest. In Manama, key opposition leaders from both Al Wifaq and the protests were arrested, including over 500 people were convicted in the 6 months between April and October 2011.[89] Political representatives had their nationalities stripped, along with hundreds of others in the years that followed. In addition, symbolic and physical violence was central to the policing of protest. In Manama, the security forces used bulldozers to destroy the Pearl Roundabout, a monument which provided a space where protesters gathered.

Unsurprisingly, such actions provoked a serious response. Sectarian elites have called upon their non-state networks, especially militiamen, to use violence. The You Stink and Thawra protests, in particular, were marked by a number of occasions in which shadowy groups of henchmen went to downtown Beirut to beat protesters and journalists and destroy tents set up by protesters. A leading activist 'explained they (elites) sent partisans (militias) to initiate violence. We didn't call for violence at any moment. I was always about protesting for our democratic rights peacefully. We were faced by violence from the security forces. We didn't respond to the violence, even though we were badly beaten up'.[90] In Manama, the Bassiouni Independent Commission Inquiry documents the severity of the regime's response to the protests, noting 35 deaths and the imprisonment of thousands, a large number of whom were tortured or experienced physical or psychological abuse in custody. In documenting this, the inquiry referred to a culture of impunity existing across Bahrain, where mistreatment was deployed as a deliberate practice of coercion and retribution.[91]

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[86]See Nagle, 'Beyond Ethnic Entrenchment and Amelioration'.
[87]Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf*.
[88]Mabon, *Precarious Politics*.
[89]Human Rights Watch, 'No Justice in Bahrain', *Human Rights Watch*, 2012, https://www.hrw.org/report/2012/02/28/no-justice-bahrain/unfair-trials-military-and-civilian-courts.
[90]Interview with leading You Stink activist, January 2016.
[91]Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, *Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry*, 2011, https://www.bici.org.bh/BICIreportEN.pdf p. 417.

Beyond violence, the regime in Manama has built dense apparatuses of control in the aftermath of the protests to ensure that it remains in control, including urban planning programmes that create urban segregation and electoral gerrymandering to privilege the position of regime loyalists at the expense of Shi'a MPs who took a more critical stance against the regime.[92] Schools have also been targeted though the imposition of curricula that reinforces the values of the state. Lawyers practicing in Manama were subject to increasing oversight, which allows for dissenting voices to be removed from the juridical system. This oversight maps onto a system that already enforces sovereign power and enshrines sectarian difference.

It is here where we can consider how the dynamics of protest and its policing by the state play out differently in the accomodationist and fierce divided city. In accomodationist Beirut, the protests involved not only citizens from across the ethnosectarian spectrum, but also feminists, queer activists and migrant workers. Protests thus mirrored this heterogeneity by articulating several interlocking demands, including anti-sectarianism and corruption, rights for queers, gender equality alongside claims for public services and spaces in the city. The pluralistic character of the protests and its objectives reflected the hydra like character of the sectarian system and the elites that reproduce it. While protestors chanted that they wanted the' overthrow of the sectarian regime' and 'all means all of them' – a reference to all of the sectarian elites that had to be removed – the very dispersal of power, spread between state and non-actors, meant that there is not a unified governance structure for the movement to challenge. Crucially, this context had a significant impact on the protest movement's ability to create change, especially as activists lacked consensus over its ultimate goals. While some activists outlined reformist goals, such as forcing the resignation of leading politicians and demanding key changes related to urban infrastrcture, such as transport, public space, and housing, others demonstrated 'resistance to formulating a list of demands' and sought instead to oppose the 'socioeconomic violence … produced by the sectarian order' with its 'rampant clientelism and corruption'.[93] The often fractured nature of protests provided opportunities for the elites and their non-state networks to try and weaken activism. This situation was notably evident in how 'party loyalists' – whose sense of security and communal identity is normally anchored to ethnosectarian elites – initially joined in protests before withdrawing. These loyalists withdrew their support for protests after ethnosectarian leaders threatened and coerced them.[94]

In Manama, rather than a dispersed forms of power, the fierce city is characterised by the unitary nature of the Al Khalifa regime and its imposition of power over residents and the popular protests. This regime has sought to reproduce its control in Manama via ethnocratic policies, which securitised and marginalised first the majority Shia population then, in the years that followed, others who dissented. Thus, the right-to-the-city protests were largely, though by no means exclusively, the articulation of the voice of the oppressed Shia population. Nevertheless, the protestors sought to couch their identity as unifying all Bahranis, captured in chants such as 'No to Sunni; no to Shia. We are all Bahraini'. Demands for human rights and an end to discrimination were quickly framed by the regime as an attempt by Iranian-backed Shias to overthrow

[92]Justin Gengler, 'Segregation and Sectarianism: Geography, Economic Distribution, and Sectarian Resilience in Bahrain: Countering Sectarianism in the Middle East', *Rand* (2019): 41–63.
[93]Halawi and Salloukh, 'Pessimism of the Intellect', 323.
[94]Alamine, 'Lebanon's loyalists'.

the state through revolutionary violence. As we have seen, the regime's response to the urban protest movement was multifaceted, driven both by a 'divide and rule' strategy and sheer brute force, repression and violence deployed by the various arms of the states, with extremely bloody outcomes.

Conclusion

Divided cities are urban environments defined by both the reproduction and contestation of ethnosectarian polarity and antagonism. These issues are illuminated in the context of the Arab uprisings that have emerged across the MENA region since 2011. Urban regimes here are characterised by state retrenchment leading to deteriorating public infrastructure, services and a deepening of socioeconomic inequality. Given these issues, it is thus unsurprising that urban elites and rulers have been challenged by mass citizen protest movements claiming their right-to-the-city. Rather than maintain any semblance of legitimacy through widening the social contract, elites and groups have deployed sectarianisation and securitizaton to combat and weaken popular movements.

In this paper, we have illuminated a nexus of sectarianisation and activism in two divided cities, Beirut (Lebanon) and Manama (Bahrain). Beirut, as the accommodationist, is based on power-sharing which seeks to give the city's multiple sectarian groups representative power and inclusion. Manama, as an example of the fierce city, is characterised by the use of ethnocratic power to ensure the survival of one dominant group against a marginalised 'other'.

We have highlighted two key aspects of activism: First, the protests – through focusing on public infrastructure and services – have sought to take control over urban life in ways that benefit all citizens rather than particularistic sectarian networks. Secondly, the movement actors have created networks and alliances across several political projects marginalised in the context of political sectarianism. In so doing, these movements have constructed new political imaginaries that challenge the logic of sectarian polarisation.

Right-to-the-city movements in Beirut and Manama can be understood as significant actors of urban peacebuilding. These movements articulate 'insurgent citizenship' that destabilise and generate alternatives to the entrenched politics of sectarian antagonism and inequality. Right-to-the-city movements insert into the public sphere new ways of urban belonging and citizenship that foreground rights, collectivity, coexistence and equality. The city, however, is always dialectical and thus a site of contestation. We do not argue that right-to-the-city movements are somehow actors with magical properties to end the legacy of political violence and precarity in divided cities. Their power, though often only provisional, is to, as Lefebvre (1976) argues, is to multiply the readings of city, a project that proliferates the potential of urban life that is less alienated, but conflictual and dialectical, open to becoming, to encounters (Harvey).[95]

Despite this promise, regrettably we illuminate the immense coercive instruments that urban elites have at their disposal to close down dissent. Elites summon a 'state of exception' in order to securitise protestors as threats to the urban order founded on sectarian pluralism and division. Violence, enacted by both the security force and non-state militias, exists alongside with arrests of protestors, the use of rhetoric that frames

[95]Harvey, *Rebel Cities*.

them as agents of outside interference, co-option, and with the process of urban planning as a means to reinforce segregation.

These tensions – between urban citizens and elites – look likely to be exacerbated in the coming decades in the MENA.[96] UNICEF has predicted that the population of the Middle East will increase dramatically by 2050, from a population of around 500 million in 2020, to 724 million in 30 years. Given that an estimated 65 percent of the population in the MENA already live in cities, the urban will be the main focus of demographic change. Compounding the issue is that the region and especially cities will be vulnerable to climate change. Of course, it's not axiomatic that population growth and climate change leads to conflict; however, in a context of state retrenchment, increasing youth unemployment and inequality, demographic transformations carry the risk of being mapped onto sectarian cleavages.[97]

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[96]Mabon, *Precarious Politics*.

[97]Already, in Lebanon, for example, the current economic crisis (2019-) that has left more than two-thirds of the population in poverty has exacerbated communal tensions. The World Bank has warned that the state's rapid contraction is usually associated with conflicts or wars' see: World Bank, Lebanon Economic Monitor, Spring 2021: Lebanon Sinking (to the Top 3), www.worldbank.org/en/country/lebanon/publication/lebanon-economic-monitor-spring-2021-lebanon-sinking-to-the-top-3.