## Chapter 7 Lebanon

### 7.1 INTRODUCTION

With its geographical positioning on the shores of the eastern Mediterranean, its high literacy rate (Table 3.1) and its historic mercantile culture, Lebanon has traditionally been an important commercial hub for the Middle East, as well as an important cultural crossroads between East and West. However, in modern times, despite its small size and relative ethnic homogeneity (Arab)[[1]](#endnote-1), Lebanon has often been at the centre of Middle Eastern conflicts because of its borders with Israel and Syria and its distinctively complex religious composition. Unique in the Middle East, Lebanon is a parliamentary democracy with 18 officially recognized religious sects and no dominant religious group (the largest religious groups being Muslim and Christian[[2]](#endnote-2)). Unlike the other country contexts discussed in this book, Shi’a[[3]](#endnote-3) Muslims comprise a significant portion of the population[[4]](#endnote-4) (estimated to be approximately 30-40 per cent of the total Lebanese population), and Shi’a make up the majority in South Lebanon, the Beqa’aValley and the southern suburbs of Beirut.

This chapter focuses on the ways that Shi’a youth in South Lebanon construct and negotiate their identities of nation, religion, ethnicity and gender within the local context of Lebanon’s complex sectarian balance and within the broader context of contemporary regional conflicts.  In particular, the chapter explores how male and female Shi’a youth understand themselves and live their lives both as members of the Muslim majority in Lebanon and the Middle East as well as Muslim minority ‘others’ in relation to the dominant regional paradigm of Sunni Islam.

#### History and Geography

Lebanon, with an estimated population of five million (Table 3.1), is situated on a narrow coastal strip along the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. Geo-politically considered to be part of the Middle East, Lebanon, with an area of 10,400km² (Table 3.1), borders Syria to the north and east and Israel to the south. Lebanon’s history is long and rich, encompassing Canaanite, Phoenician, Egyptian, Roman, Umayyad, Crusader and Ottoman civilisations. Likewise, the Lebanese cities of Byblos, Beirut, Sidon (Arabic: *Saida*) and Tyre (Arabic: *Sur*) are among the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world.

**(Insert Fig 7.1 here)**

From the 16th century until the beginning of the 21th century, the land and people comprising what is now the state of Lebanon were part of the (Sunni-ruled) Ottoman empire (based in modern-day Turkey). Under Ottoman rule, Shi’a Muslims experienced both intense persecution as well as periods of ‘unofficial tolerance’ by state authorities (Winter 2010). This (at least partly) coincided with a period of powerful rivalry between the Ottomans and the (Shi’a-ruled) Safavid dynasty in neighbouring Persia (modern-day Iran), where Sunni Islam (along with other religions) was suppressed (BBC 2009).

After the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916) partitioned the former empire’s Arabic-speaking provinces into zones under British control and influence (modern-day Iraq, Kuwait, Jordan and Israel/Palestine) and those under the control and influence of France (modern-day Syria and Lebanon). Originally part of Greater Syria, the borders of Lebanon (centred around Mount Lebanon) were drawn by the French to carve out a Christian-majority country in the midst of the predominantly Muslim Middle East. This was intended both to provide a safe haven for the existing Maronite[[5]](#endnote-5) Christian population of Mount Lebanon as well as to provide the French with a base of control from which they could exercise their power and interests in Syria. Territories to the north and south of Mount Lebanon, as well as the Beqa’a Valley and Beirut (largely populated by Sunni and Shi’a Muslims), were subsequently added to form Greater Lebanon, the precursor of the modern state of Lebanon. Both the boundaries of Christian enclave around Mount Lebanon and the later inclusion of Sunni and Shi’a Muslims within Greater Lebanon produced fault lines of religious difference that remain significant in contemporary Lebanese social and political life. Greater Lebanon was officially put under French Mandate by the League of Nations in 1920, and the first Lebanese constitution (modelled after that of the French Third Republic) was promulgated on May 23, 1926 (Hakim 2013).

However, unlike the other country contexts discussed in this book, European colonial domination was short (lasting less than a generation) with Lebanon officially declaring its independence on November 22, 1943. At this time, an unwritten agreement divided parliamentary seats along communal lines as defined in the 1932 census, when the country had a (Maronite) Christian majority. No official census has been taken in the country since 1932, and Muslim groups have consistently demanded that political representation should reflect their increased proportion in the population. On the other hand, many Christians fear a Muslim majority, as (unique among country contexts discussed in this book) Christianity predates Islam in the region, with the city of Tyre (fieldwork location) being specifically mentioned in both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible[[6]](#endnote-6). This communal tension has been at the heart of most internal conflict in Lebanon ever since (Fisk 2001).

In 1975, sectarian tension in the country boiled over into a devastating civil war, which lasted for almost 16 years. Sometimes described as being ‘Muslim versus Christian’, the Lebanese Civil War was actually a multifaceted conflict in which there was nearly as much intra-sectarian violence as there was violence between religious groups. Starting in 1975, the war resulted in an estimated 130,000 to 250,000 civilian fatalities over the course of the next 16 years. Another one million people (approximately one third of the population) were wounded, and thousands (mostly Christians) fled the country (Fisk 2001).

The conflict within Lebanon was intensified when neighbouring states used the internal instability within the country as a pretext for intervention. In particular, Syria, Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) used the country as a battleground for their own conflicts and interests. Under the pretext of limiting the influence of the PLO in Lebanon (which had entrenched itself in the south of the country), Syrian troops entered Lebanon shortly after the war started, with Syria only ending its 29-year military presence in 2005 under international pressure after the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister, Rafik Hariri (BBC 2015). Also under the pretext of ousting the PLO from Lebanon, Israeli troops invaded the country in 1978 and again in 1982, before pulling back to a self-declared ‘security zone’ in South Lebanon, from which they only withdrew in May, 2000 (Fisk 2001). Israel still occupies territories in the south which are claimed by Lebanon, namely the mainly Shi’a ‘seven villages’ (*Tarbikha*, *Saliha*, *Malkiya*, *Nabi Yusha*, *Kades*, *Hunin* and *Ibal Qamh*), as well as the ‘*Sheba’a* Farms’ (also claimed by Syria) (Kaufman 2006).

At the end of the Lebanese Civil War, the 1989 *Ta’if* Agreement, signed by surviving members of Lebanon's 1972 parliament, established a system of governance in Lebanon known as ‘confessionalism’, which attempted to fairly represent the 18 recognized religious sects in government.  According to Article 24 of the Lebanese Constitution, the President must be Maronite Christian, the Prime Minister Sunni Muslim and the Speaker of the Parliament Shi’a Muslim. This makes Lebanon’s system of power-sharing extremely complex, as well as rigid. The confessional system has also constructed a unique legal framework in the country, which has resulted in an extreme case of legal pluralism. Lebanese are governed by a system of separate ‘personal status laws’, allowing the different historical religious groups in the country to apply their own laws to family affairs. While personal status laws exist alongside the country's secular civil law, there is no civil code covering issues such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, custody of children and spousal/child support, often placing women in particular situations of vulnerability. Moreover, in practice, there is little or no government oversight of religious courts (Tabet 2005).

Although the confessional arrangement was originally intended to deter further sectarian conflict, it has been a major source of tension and conflict within the country. This is because significant demographic changes have taken place within Lebanon since the last official population census in 1932, including a vast increase in the overall Muslim population (Sunni and Shi’a) mostly due to the emigration of large numbers of Maronite Christians and a higher Muslim birth rate.  This has called into question the legitimacy of the current power-sharing arrangement. It has also led to ongoing feelings of mistrust between religious communities within Lebanon and worked to undermine the authority of the state.

In addition to experiencing major internal strife, Lebanon has also been embroiled in regional and international conflict. Arising from Israel’s 1982 invasion and occupation of South Lebanon was the Iranian and Syrian regime-supported Lebanese Shi’a political and military organization, Hezbollah (literal translation: ‘Party of God’, sometimes referred to as ‘the Islamic Resistance’), which is widely considered to be the most powerful military force in the country. Since Hezbollah’s foundation, there has been recurrent conflict with Israel, culminating in all-out warfare in July, 2006. Since then, there have been intermittent armed skirmishes between Hezbollah and Israel, and Lebanon and Israel remain technically at war. The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) remains in the country to patrol border areas with Israel and to monitor the cessation of hostilities. Although, the UN has demanded the dismantling of all armed groups in Lebanon, including the military wing of Hezbollah (which controls much of southern Lebanon and the Beqa’a Valley), Hezbollah maintains that it needs to remain armed as a deterrent to further Israeli aggression. While Hezbollah is considered to be a terrorist organisation by several international governments, and some Lebanese consider Hezbollah to be a threat to the country's stability, it remains enduringly popular within the Shi’a community in Lebanon. This is partly out of respect for Hezbollah’s considerable military accomplishments, and partly out of appreciation for its charitable organisations, which provide much needed social service support in areas underserved by the Lebanese government (Saad-Ghorayeb 2002; Harik 2004).

Within the last few years, sectarian conflict between Sunni and Shi’a communities has increased throughout the region, culminating in all-out warfare in Iraq and Syria, with tensions spreading in Lebanon, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and countries further afield, such as Pakistan. Existing sectarian tensions within Lebanon have been exacerbated by Lebanon’s long-term ‘hosting’ of 500,000 Palestinian refugees and recent ‘hospitality’ to 1.2 million Syrian refugees (both groups are overwhelmingly Sunni), with Syrian refugees alone comprising 25 per cent of the total population of Lebanon. Lebanese politicians across the political and religious spectra are in agreement that permanent settlement of these refugees in Lebanon, imposed or voluntary, would devastate the Lebanese nation. This is partly because the naturalization of such a large number of Sunni Muslims would upset the delicate sectarian balance carefully reconstructed in Lebanon at the end of the civil war (Fisk 2001). Recently, the neighbouring conflict in Syria has also spilled over into Lebanon, as Hezbollah has sent fighters across the border to support Syria’s President Bashar al-Assad, a close ally of Shi’a-led Iran. On the other hand, Hezbollah's Sunni Lebanese rivals (supported by Saudi Arabia) have largely supported the Sunni-led rebellion against the existing Syrian government (BBC 2016).

The section below discusses the educational environment in which Lebanese youth learn about themselves and others.

#### Education

In Lebanon, the cycle of education consists of six years of primary education, three years of intermediate education and three years of secondary education. After secondary school, students may proceed to higher education (university, technical/vocational college) or employment. The languages of instruction in Lebanese schools are Arabic, French and English. Language of instruction depends on the type of education (public or private), level of education, subject being taught, affiliation of the school and the availability of teachers in rural areas. In general, Arabic is more widely used in public schools, at primary level, and for subjects such as History, Geography and Civics, while French and English are more widely used in private schools, at higher grades and for technical subjects such as Math and Science.

The youth literacy rate (15-24 years) in Lebanon is nearly universal at 99 per cent, and school life expectancy (13.8 years) is the highest of any country context discussed in this book (Table 3.1). Although Lebanon ranks quite low in gender equality overall (Table 3.1), and illiteracy among women over 40 years old is double that of men of the same age, there is near gender parity in education at primary level (0.93), and females outnumber males at secondary (1.01) and tertiary (1.09) levels (UNESCO 2016). Despite this, there are significant regional and communal inequalities. For example, the geographic distribution of quality schools tends to be concentrated around Beirut and the northern areas of the country, which are predominantly populated by Christians and Sunni Muslims. Moreover, illiteracy rates are higher in the Beqa’a Valley (14.45per cent) and South Lebanon (12.25per cent), which have predominately Shi’a populations (Frayha 2009).

A distinctive feature of the Lebanese education system is the predominance of private providers. The majority of Lebanese children and youth (approximately 70 per cent) are educated in fee-charging private schools where the quality of education is relatively high but attendance is contingent on families’ ability to pay. On the other hand, 30 per cent of Lebanese young people are enrolled in free but often poor quality public schools, which are largely dependent on donor funding and are often plagued by teacher shortages and infrastructure problems. This has resulted in the development of gaps between economically advantaged and disadvantaged youth in Lebanon (USAID 2015). The public/private divide is particularly acute in relation to higher education. While most of the oldest colleges and universities in the country were founded by missionaries and some, such as the American University of Beirut (1866) and the Université Saint-Joseph (1875), predated the establishment of the Lebanese State, many new private universities have been established in the last half century, such as the Shi’a-affiliated Islamic University of Lebanon (1996). In contrast, the Lebanese University (1951) remains the only public institution for higher learning in the country.

Private education in Lebanon is generally segregated along religious lines, with religious communities of all denominations having the option to organize their own schools, control what is taught and choose their own textbooks (UNESCO 2014). The existence of parallel systems and diversified curricula have often been cited as contributing factors to ongoing divisions between communities and the propagation of sectarianism within the country. It has also challenged the development of a common national identity based on a set of shared social and civic values (Frayha 2009). Lebanon’s history of communal conflict has particularly posed challenges for the teaching of History. As attribution for Lebanon’s civil war remains unresolved and wounds between religious communities remain fresh, official History textbooks taught in Lebanese schools stop abruptly in 1943, the year the country gained independence. Although intended to avoid inflaming old hostilities, this has left many young Lebanese with unanswered questions about the civil war, as well as their communal past (Al Jazeera World 2011). Successive Lebanese governments have been unable to centralize the education system due to political and religious opposition. However, the Lebanese Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) has attempted to address this issue by insisting that all private schools be licensed and that all secondary school graduates pass the government baccalaureate exam. These regulations have (with varying degrees of success) worked to hold private schools to account and prevent them from diverting too far away from government curricula.

Conflict has had a tremendous impact on education in Lebanon. Since the outbreak of the civil war in 1975, the quality of public education in Lebanon has suffered, and the education system continues to face significant challenges. Most recently, the war in neighbouring Syria and subsequent refugee flow into Lebanon has overwhelmed the Lebanese education system, which has been called upon to support local communities (including 40,000 out of school Lebanese), as well as absorb the huge populations of school-age children (3-18 years) displaced from Syria (including 655,000 Syrian refugees, 16,000 Lebanese returning from Syria, and 11,300 Palestinian refugees from Syria). This is in addition to the 53,000 Palestinian school-age refugees already resident in Lebanon (mostly educated through UNRWA[[7]](#endnote-7) schools). This has resulted in mounting fiscal costs, schools operating in shifts to try and meet increased demand and a decrease in the quality of public education (UNHCR 2015). The current circumstances have also given rise to the recent proliferation of local and international NGO-run schools in the country (Shuayb et al 2014).

Despite the high levels of youth literacy and school life expectancy in Lebanon, youth unemployment (22.1 per cent) is the highest of any country context discussed in this book (Table 3.1). Moreover, Lebanon is located in the global region (MENA) with the world’s highest rates of youth unemployment (ILO 2015) and the lowest rates of female labour force participation (IMF 2012). This means that education is not translating into employment outcomes for youth. Without employment prospects, the ability to transition into adulthood or marry (for males), many youth with financial means and/or personal networks are resorting to emigration from Lebanon in search of a better life (Rarrbo 2009). On the other hand, youth without the resources to leave the country are becoming vulnerable to socioeconomic hardship and (particularly for males) possible recruitment into para-military organisations.

It is within this complex local and regional context that Shi’a youth in South Lebanon live their lives and work to negotiate their identities of nation, religion, ethnicity and gender.

### 7.2 THE RESEARCH

This chapter reports on empirical work conducted with youth in predominantly Shi’a communities in the south Lebanese city of Tyre (*Sur*). Fieldwork for this study, built on previous extended research in the specific area and wider region, lasted approximately two weeks and was conducted in four private secondary schools and two universities. One school was owned and operated by a Lebanese Shi’a political organisation, one school had a strong Shi’a religious focus (although it was open to students from other sects), one school was officially and operationally secular with a mixed student body and teaching staff (but with a Shi’a majority), and one school had a strong Christian focus (but was open to students from all sects). Both universities in which focus groups were conducted were private and secular but had a majority Shi’a student population and faculty. Educational contexts were specifically chosen to reflect the broad range of Shi’a experience amongst youth within south Lebanon. Access to institutions was facilitated by the presence of gatekeepers known to the researchers.

Within the educational contexts mentioned above, eight single-sex focus group discussions (FGDs), four female and four male, and two mixed FGDs were conducted with a total of 58 youth (Table 3.2). Each focus group comprised approximately five students, aged 16-24, with the mean age of participants being 19 years. With the exception of the FGD conducted with Christian Lebanese youth at the Christian school, all students that were interviewed self-identified as ‘Shi’a Lebanese’. Two students self-identified as ‘Shi’a’ in relation to group membership, although they considered themselves to be Communist and secular/ atheist in terms of personal belief.

The country case-study was led by a researcher and co-author (with experience living and researching in the area) within a team based at the UK university looking at youth identities. In order to comply with cultural norms, FGDs with female youth were conducted by the female lead researcher, and these interviews were conducted using a mixture of English, Arabic and French (both researcher and respondents having some competency in these languages). The FGDs with male students were conducted in Arabic by a male research assistant, a Shi’a and local to the area. When appropriate, the research assistant was accompanied by the lead researcher. FGDs were recorded where possible, and when needed, later translated into English. Each FGD was given a code that denoted the religion, gender and age of respondents. So a code of MM18 refers to an interview with a Muslim, male 18 year old youth, and a code of CF20 is an interview with a Christian female twenty year old youth.

A reflective diary was kept by the researchers to record informal observations and responses to interview encounters.

The interview sample can be summarised in the table below:

**Insert Table 7.1 here**

The next sections will discuss the themes that emerged from the research, mainly those of nation, religion, ethnicity and gender, and the ways that Shi’a youth negotiate and make sense of these identities within the context of life in South Lebanon.

### 7.3 NATION AND EXTERNAL OTHERS

As discussed in Chapter 2 (Geographies of Identity), identity is not a singular linear narrative. Rather, all individuals bear multiple identities simultaneously, and at any given time, locality, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, class or generation (among others) can serve as the locus for identity, or for identity politics (Alexander 2002). Moreover, identities are not fixed. Rather, they are discursive constructions which are spatially and temporally situated. Individuals’ attachments to identity positions are strategic and positional, and individuals form temporary attachments to specific subject positions based on positions of perceived advantage (Bhaba 2004). In this way, identities are always in the process of shifting, transforming and ‘becoming’ in relation to changing life circumstances.

Attachment to the nation is one of the most important identity positions individuals can inhabit. National identity provides people with a point of origin, a space of collective belonging, and a sense of rootedness. Moreover, when it is accompanied by state apparatus and institutions, it confers on individuals important rights and responsibilities as ‘citizens’.

As all nations are comprised of diverse individuals, the nation must be collectively ‘imagined’ through the construction of an ‘authentic’, shared culture and an official national memory. Moreover, at least some of these imaginings must be exclusive enough to distinguish one nation from another. In other words, it is through the concept of ‘difference’ between ‘us’ and ‘them’, and the erection of boundaries between communities, that nations are forged (Anderson 1991).

‘The nation’ is often imagined by communities through narratives of shared history, culture, language, religion and/ or ethnicity. To some extent, narratives of shared history and culture are used by Shi’a youth in South Lebanon to construct the nation and notions of a distinct ‘Lebanese’ identity. For example, when asked what it meant to be ‘Lebanese’, a common response was ‘we have thousands of years of culture’. Moreover, when asked how they recognized other people as being ‘Lebanese’, many youth offered up cultural signifiers such as shared language (‘Lebanese accent’) and cuisine.

However, several of the signifiers of ‘Lebanese’ identity mentioned by the youth are actually common to the region (Arabic language, Arab ethnicity, regional history, cuisine), thus problematizing the notion of a distinct ‘Lebanese’ nation set apart from its Arab neighbors in the Levant. Moreover, some signifiers of Lebanese identity identified by the youth, such as cuisine, differ according to religious community. For example, some ‘Christian’ foods, such as escargot, are considered to be *haram* (forbidden in Islam) and are not eaten by Muslims. In this way, internal cultural segmentation works to challenge unified notions of ‘Lebanese-ness’ and to blur boundaries of the nation.

Because of Lebanon’s geographical positioning in the Eastern Mediterranean, its historical role as a crossroads of civilisations and its uniquely complex sectarian composition, there are no strong or unified narratives of shared kinship (inter-ethnic marriage is common), culture, lifestyle or religion amongst modern Lebanese. This lack of a clear, unifying and ‘authentic’ nationalist narrative has challenged social cohesion within the country and been at the heart of Lebanon’s political fragility. On the other hand, it is precisely this ontological uncertainty, complexity and ‘messiness’ that has opened up spaces for the youth to construct notions of a distinct and shared Lebanese identity based on narratives of pluralism and ‘cosmopolitanism’ (‘citizens of the world’) (Appiah 2006).

For young Shi’a in Lebanon, ‘Lebanese-ness’ is largely understood through cultural narratives constructed in relation to both ‘East’ and ‘West’ and perceived notions of ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’. For example, when asked ‘what does it mean to be Lebanese?’, youth often used traditional cultural values both to construct ‘sameness’ between Lebanese, as well as ‘difference’ between Lebanese and Europeans. As one female youth stated,

*Our traditions, generosity and hospitality to others. Family bonds do not exist among foreigners. Lebanese help their neighbours. We feel the pain and joy of our neighbours.* *(MF18)*

On the other hand, cultural values of pluralism and modernity were also used by the youth to construct ‘sameness’ between Lebanese, as well as ‘difference’ between Lebanese and other Arabs:

*Our openness, acceptance of new things and modern life. We travel. We learn everything quickly. We are educated and love science more than other Arabs. All Lebanese are smart. We speak more than one language (Arabic, English and French). We are like Italians. They are stylish and dress to impress, like us. All the world love Lebanese and they imitate them.* *(MM17)*

The construction of a shared ‘pluralist’ Lebanese identity was also evident when Shi’a youth were asked to decide which nationality they would like to take if Lebanese nationality was not open to them. To answer this question, the youth generally drew on narratives from both ‘East’ and ‘West’ and responded that they would like to take the citizenship of Iran (because of a shared ‘way of thinking’), China (because of a shared respect for tradition and elders), Europe and America (because of a shared respect for science, commerce and human rights) and Japan (because of a shared respect for social cohesion and stability). Despite a short period of colonial rule by France, French nationality was not specifically mentioned by the youth (Shi’a nor Christian) as one they wished to acquire.

Interestingly, despite Lebanon’s long history of sectarian strife, the youth understood ‘religious tolerance’ to be one of the key signifiers of Lebanon’s pluralism. As one male youth explained,

*Lebanon is the connection point between East and West. We respect other religions and sects. Lebanon is a lesson in cohesion among faiths. Lebanese have freedom to believe in God as we like. We are the only country in the Arab world that has a Christian president.* *(MM19)*

While the youth framed much of their discussion about Lebanon in relation to ‘East’ and ‘West’, the lived experience of several of the youth who had grown up in African countries[[8]](#endnote-8) (Nigeria, Ghana, Cote d’Ivoire) served to destabilise this simplistic ‘East/ West’ dichotomy.

Although nations are ‘imagined’ communities with boundaries that are continually being redrawn through discursive shifts, modern nation-states are anchored within physical spaces with fixed political borders. For Shi’a youth, Lebanon’s cultural boundaries may be fluid and permeable, yet its physical borders with Israel (its neighbour to the south) are static, and Lebanon’s territorial integrity is to be respected and preserved at all times and at all costs. One experience which unifies all Lebanese, regardless of religious sect, is the history of conflict between Lebanon and Israel. This is particularly true for Lebanese living within the south of the country, who lived under Israeli occupation until May, 2000 and have experienced recurrent conflicts with Israel ever since. As one male youth stated,

*Lebanese history is distinctive. We rejected the Israeli enemy and we saved our country. Everyone has sacrificed something for this country. My cousin is a shaheed (martyr). He shed his precious blood for his country. We have the duty to defend Lebanon and resist the Israeli enemy. (MM16)*

In other words, it is the experience of collective ‘suffering’ at the hands of (and ‘victory’ against) the Israeli ‘other’ within living memory that has helped the youth in South Lebanon to construct a shared notion of ‘Lebanese-ness’. The comment above is indicative of the ‘conflict narrative’ that permeated much of the discussion with the youth around what it meant to be ‘Lebanese’. For example, when asked to define the most important events in Lebanese history, virtually all youth (Shi’a and Christian) mentioned the 2000 expulsion of the occupying Israeli forces from South Lebanon, with the Shi’a youth emphasizing the 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel (and Hezbollah’s ‘victory’ in that conflict). Moreover, the Lebanese army was mentioned by both groups of youth as being the only unifying institution across sectarian lines in Lebanon (the majority of schools being private and denominational).

### 7.4 RELIGION, ETHNICITY AND EXTERNAL OTHERS

As discussed above, in the context of Lebanon’s geographical positioning, its historical role as a crossroads of civilisations and its uniquely complex sectarian composition, Lebanese youth are constructing notions of a distinctive ‘Lebanese’ identity based on shared narratives of cultural pluralism and a history of suffering (at the hands of the Israeli ‘other’). However, identity is:

[…fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions] (Hall 2000:17).

In the Lebanese context, a complex and historical internal cultural segmentation cuts through Lebanese identity around discourses of religion. While these discourses serve to unite religious communities within (and across) national borders, they also serve to challenge the notion of a culturally unified Lebanon and a distinct ‘Lebanese’ identity.

In the context of the contemporary Middle East, religion is one of the most important cultural spaces that individuals inhabit, and it serves as an important signifier of identity. For many Shi’a youth, Islam is important in their lives as a personal faith. As one female youth remarked,

*I love Shi’a. I read about all religions, and I read the Qu’ran. I find the Qu’ran summarises all other religions, and it is the most logical.* *(MF20)*

Within this are constructions of the true and ‘authentic’ Shi’a believer. When asked to name ‘good’ (exemplary) Shi’a (*mithal yuh’tatha*), the youth primarily drew on historical narratives of suffering, martyrdom and military victory and referenced male historical figures, such as Imam Ali[[9]](#endnote-9) or Imam Hussein[[10]](#endnote-10), who exhibited the traits of honesty, bravery and sacrifice to spread and defend Shi’a Islam throughout ‘1400 years of oppression’. These narratives were particularly taken up by youth attending Shi’a politically-affiliated and religious schools, where symbolic resources (such as shrines to ‘martyrs’) were used to keep historical ‘wounds’ against the Shi’a community open and fresh, and inscribe ‘memories’ of Shi’a collective suffering (largely at the hands of Sunnis) in the consciousness of young people.

However, what was noticeable was that these historical narratives offered youth very few examples of accomplished contemporary Shi’a to emulate beyond male military and political figures. This is significant as, mentioned earlier, the MENA region currently has the world’s highest youth unemployment rate, and Lebanon’s youth unemployment (22.1 per cent) is the highest of the country contexts discussed in this book (Table 3.1). Moreover, the Shi’a have traditionally been the most economically disenfranchised population in the country. By contrast, when asked to name examples of good Christian role models, Christian youth were able to draw on male and female historical and contemporary figures across the fields of politics, science, sports, art, music and literature, such as Khalil Gibran (author and poet), Fairooz (singer) and Maxime Shaaya (mountaineer who climbed Everest).

Despite the important role of religion in the lives of young Shi’a, not all youth are devout, and two youth respondents went so far as to self-identify as secular/ atheist in belief while maintaining Shi’a community affiliation and attachment. This helps to illustrate that although religion is important as a personal belief, it is also important in many other ways. For example, religion often provides individuals with ontological security in the context of chronic conflict, such as the territorial insecurity in south Lebanon. Within this context, religion can be seen as a ‘birth rite’ which is more ‘stable’ and ‘secure’ than national identity because it does not require land, and it cannot be taken away through military force (Stewart 2009). Moreover, for the youth, ‘Muslim’ is understood to be a subject position which is ‘innate’ and ‘fixed’. In other words, adherence to Islam is not a choice to be taken or an idea to be negotiated, and conversion to another faith is not possible, unlike national identities (and some religious affiliations in other contexts), which may be both acquired or relinquished. As this female youth stated,

*If my Shi’a identity is gone, what is left for me? If my Lebanese identity is gone, what is left for me is my Shi’a identity. We are not able to choose.* *(MF21)*

Religion can also provide individuals with a framework for interpreting nationalist struggles and function as an important rallying point for community mobilisation and political action. Although the Shi’a community has historically been both politically and economically marginalised in Lebanon, ongoing conflict with Israel and their self-appointed role as ‘defenders of the nation’ have provided Shi’a with a strong sense of belonging, honour and respect in the country in ways that affirm their sense of Lebanese national belonging. Moreover, it has given them a sense of purpose within the Lebanese nationalist project. As one male youth explained,

*Lebanon is the source of the Islamic Resistance (Hezbollah). The Shi’a have responsibility for Lebanon and the world. We defend our rights and the rights of the oppressed. In spite of all the wars in Lebanon, we are still standing and we defeated the strongest army in the world (Israel). We did not run away to another country. In spite of all the international pressure on Shi’a from some countries (America) and organisations such as Da’ash[[11]](#endnote-11) (so-called Islamic State), we are still stronger than them. We are the source of military power in Lebanon. The Shi’a resistance is the strength for Lebanon. We will not be weakened and we will never surrender.* *(MM18)*

The Shi’a self-positioning as ‘defenders of the nation’ is reflected in the youths’ understanding of what it means to be a good Lebanese patriot. When asked the question ‘who is a good Lebanese?’, the three figures most commonly mentioned by both male and female Shi’a youth respondents were Hassan Nasrallah (leader of Hezbollah), Musa Sadr (founder of Amal Movement[[12]](#endnote-12)) and Nabih Berri (leader of Amal Movement). What all three of these individuals have in common is that they are male, Lebanese leaders of Shi’a political/ para-military organisations. In other words, Shi’a subjects are recruited within specific representations of the community.

However, the relationship between nation, religion and ethnicity is very complex for Shi’a youth in South Lebanon. For example, when asked to identify ‘good Shi’a’, many examples provided by the youth were neither Lebanese, nor Arab. Rather, male Iranian political figures and religious leaders were often cited, such as Ayatollah Khomenei[[13]](#endnote-13) and Ayatollah Khamenei[[14]](#endnote-14). Moreover, ‘Iran’ was most frequently mentioned by the youth (both male and female) attending Shi’a politically-affiliated and religious schools when they were asked what country they would like to live in if residence in Lebanon was not open to them. This was despite the fact that virtually none of the youth had been to Iran before. One male youth explained it this way,

*They are similar to us. We understand their minds and are the same in terms of living and dressing. We have a common enemy – Israel. Iran helped the Shi’a in Lebanon with weapons and money.* *(MM16)*

By contrast, Christian youth generally felt that their ‘way of thinking’ was similar to that of Americans.

This comment above illustrates how a ‘supra-national’ Shi’a identity has been constructed, which transcends national borders and discursively unites Shi’a across ethnic communities, offering strength in numbers. It also illustrates how the relationship between religion and ethnicity has been a complex one for the Shi’a in Lebanon. On the one hand, Lebanese Shi’a are ethnically Arab and share much culturally, linguistically and economically with other Arabs in Lebanon and the neighbouring Arab countries of the Levant. On the other hand, most Arabs are Sunni (the dominant sect in Islam), while there is a significant Christian minority in Lebanon. Within this context, the Shi’a are simultaneously positioned as members of the Muslim majority in Lebanon and the wider region, yet constructed as ‘Muslim others’ in relation to the Sunni subject in the Arab world.

As religious identities are constructed in essentialist terms, the youth cannot be members of both Sunni and Shi’a communities. In other words, inclusion within one community results in exclusion from another. For Shi’a youth in South Lebanon, this sense of exclusion (which is reinforced in schools and through popular media) has resulted in feelings of mistrust and fear towards the ‘Sunni other’. As one female youth explained,

*I love Christians a lot. They are beautiful and sweet. We share their happiness and sadness. We are more free with Christians than with Sunni. Christians accept us more than other religions. Our conflict is with the Sunni. They hate us. Some Sunni say Shi’a are kafir (infidels) and it is their responsibility to kill us. (MF23)*

Ironically, during the Lebanese Civil War, sectarianism was largely framed as a conflict between Muslim and Christian communities, and Shi’a youth recounted how their parents were unable to visit Christian areas in Lebanon during this historical period. That the nexus of conflict has now shifted to Sunni/ Shi’a relations (although it has long historical roots) illustrates how identity positions and relations are contingent, and culture is dynamic and always in a state of flux.

Through their adherence to an ‘unorthodox’ and ‘suspect’ version of Islam, and by their very existence, the Shi’a challenge the presumed homogeneity, unity and unbroken historiography of the Muslim *ummah[[15]](#endnote-15)*. It is for this reason that the Shi'a are viewed by some as an unresolved ‘problem’ within Islam (Fuller and Francke 2000). In contemporary times, the identity construct of Sunni/ Shi’a tension is mediated through politics between the regional superpowers of (Shi’a) Iran and (Sunni) Saudi Arabia, with Iran being positioned as the spiritual homeland and champion of the Shi’a and Saudi Arabia (and to a lesser extent, Qatar) as the patron and defender of the Sunni. This political association has helped the youth in South Lebanon to conflate ‘Sunni’ with Saudi (and Qatari) foreign policy and influence in the region. Moreover, it has helped the youth to frame the conflict between Sunni and Shi’a as a moral battle of ‘righteousness’ in which Shi’a are hegemonically positioned above the Sunni. For example, when asked what the difference was between Sunni and Shi’a, one male youth remarked,

*We are better believers. We stick to the original meaning of the Qu’ran. Other Muslims have changed it. Sunnis don’t acknowledge the 12 imams. They don’t follow the complete Islam. Shi’a have fatwas (religious decrees) from well-educated and established ayatollahs[[16]](#endnote-16), but for the Sunni, any street boy can study for two years and they start giving fatwas in shedding people’s blood. If I were a Sunni, I would live in Saudi Arabia, be an extremist and follow Sunni politicians despite their corruption. Their weak leaders (such as Saad Hariri[[17]](#endnote-17)) take a ‘selfie’ (photo) and spread their message. Hassan Nasrallah (leader of Hezbollah) would never do that. They have no honour. They are ignorant and primitive. Saudi is a backward country full of terrorists. (MM19)*

Although the Shi’a youth went to great lengths to discursively construct ‘difference’ between themselves and Sunnis, most youth admitted that their lives in Lebanon would not be significantly different if they were Sunni due to a shared lifestyle amongst Muslims and a shared position of relative political and economic disadvantage in relation to Christians in Lebanon. As one female youth explained,

*Christians achieve higher positions in Lebanon. They can work wherever they want. Good jobs are usually reserved for Christians in the government. It’s easier for a woman who doesn’t wear a hijab (Sunni or Shi’a) to get a job. A woman who wears a hijab cannot enter the army or work in a bank or work as a flight attendant.* *(MF24)*

Interestingly, despite Shi’a youth perceiving there to be vast differences between Muslim sects and expressing closer affinity with Christians than Sunnis in Lebanon[[18]](#endnote-18), when asked what the difference was between Sunnis and Shi’a, the Christian youth responded that there was no difference and that Muslims were ‘all the same’. Moreover, a couple of Christian youth indicated that they felt uncomfortable around Muslims and preferred to remain within the Christian quarter of the city.

Despite these contradictions, conflict between Sunni and Shi’a communities has become very tangible for youth in Lebanon within the contemporary context of war in neighboring Syria, with Lebanese Shi’a Hezbollah fighters (backed by Iran) fighting on the side of Syrian president Bashar Al Asa’ad, and Lebanese Sunni rebels (backed by Saudi Arabia) fighting to topple the Alawi[[19]](#endnote-19)-led Syrian government. As all Lebanese are not Shi’a, and a significant number of Lebanese are Sunni, Lebanese youth have been confronted with conflicting loyalties between nation and religion. Within a ‘pan-Shi’a’ discourse, it is the duty of all Shi’a to defend other co-religionists. It is within this context that several male Shi’a youth taking part in this study indicated that they had gone to fight in Syria with Hezbollah against ‘the Sunni terrorists’ (and ‘other’ Lebanese) as a kind of ‘sacred duty’.

On the other hand, as the neighbouring conflict in Syria has spilt over into Lebanon, it has resulted in increasing tension and mistrust between communities and reinforcement of existing ‘sub-national’ identities within Lebanon based on religious sect. As one male youth stated,

*Sunnis are afraid to go to some places in Lebanon, but Shi’a will have their throats cut if they go to other places.* *(MM19)*

Fear of the Sunni ‘other’ among Shi’a youth has also helped to exacerbate existing wariness towards, and social exclusion of, Palestinians resident in camps and gatherings in Lebanon (who are overwhelmingly Sunni). Several Shi’a youth spoke of how they believed that Palestinians were sympathetic to *Da’ash* (so-called Islamic State) and that they were harbouring *Da’ash* fighters in the camps due to a (perceived) shared religious affiliation.

Interestingly, it is clear from Shi’a youths’ narratives that many of their impressions and understandings of ‘others’ are based on their consumption of media images (e.g. through *Al Manar* TV[[20]](#endnote-20)) rather than through direct personal contact with individuals from those communities. This has resulted in the portrayal of ‘others’ in a kind of over-exaggerated and essentialised caricature. As one female youth explained,

*We don’t see Shi’a kill anyone because of differences of opinion like we see Sunnis do on TV.* *(MF17)*

However, identity constructions are open to contestation, and some Shi’a youth did challenge essentialist notions of ‘us’ and ‘them’ by making the distinction between religious extremists and the general Sunni population (and Israeli Zionists and the general Jewish population). These youth tended to attend religiously ‘mixed’ schools and had the opportunity to travel abroad where they interacted with people from outside of their own religious community. Some youth also credited social media as being a medium through which they learned to communicate with other youth across sectarian lines. As one female youth stated,

*I think it (social media) changed the way we think about other people. In the past, the sects did not interact, but now we communicate with each other from other parts of Lebanon. I made a few friends from other sects and from other places, for example from Tripoli (northern Lebanese city which has a Sunni majority). We used to think that all Sunni don’t like Shi’a, but now we see that some of them like us. I communicated with Israelis who are against Zionism on social media. I also communicated with some American people who agreed with the intervention in (Shi’a majority) Iraq but changed their minds after I communicated with them. Sometimes social media makes relations closer. It helps us to understand other people’s opinions. (MF24)*

On the other hand, some youth felt that engagement with social media was intruding on family time and eroding traditional culture and values, thus challenging the notion of a distinctive ‘Shi’a’ identity for youth in Lebanon.

Essentialist notions of ‘us’ and ‘them’ were also blurred for Shi’a youth as they acknowledged variations in Shi’a devotional practice and performance around the world. Although the youth generally imagined the Shi’a to be a monolithic and politically unified community, their speech revealed ruptures in this narrative. As one female youth put it,

*Iran is more conservative than Lebanon. The most conservative communities are in Iran and Iraq. Shi’a in Europe don’t pray or follow the rules. Shi’a in South Lebanon are different than those in Beirut. We are more committed. Families in Beqa’a Valley are more conservative than others.* *(MF17)*

In other words, the youths’ speech revealed Shi’a youth identities to be highly context-dependent and mediated through other discourses, such as location, culture, ethnicity and politics (see Chapter two, Geographies of Identity). In this way, shared life experiences with ‘other’ young people in Lebanon often became more significant for the youth than shared religious affiliation with Shi’a abroad. As one male youth put it,

*There is no difference between people. We are all Lebanese.* *(MM23)*

### 7.5 GENDER AND EXTERNAL OTHERS

One of the key discourses through which identities are constructed and performed is ‘gender’. Gender does not produce categories of people in uniform ways. Rather it mediates the articulations and performance of other discourses, such as nation, ethnicity and religion. For the Shi’a in South Lebanon, gender intersects with other discourses to construct new configurations of identity and to call subjects into specific forms of representation of the community.

As discussed earlier, ‘pluralism’ is a key narrative through which Lebanese identities have been constructed. Just as there is no clear, unifying and ‘authentic’ nationalist narrative of what it means to be a ‘Lebanese’, so there is no particular way of understanding ‘Lebanese masculinity’ or ‘Lebanese femininity’. Rather, as the complex internal cultural segmentation that cuts through Lebanese society is framed around religion, it is largely through discourses of religion, which are mediated through culture, that gender identities in Lebanon are constructed. As one female youth explained,

*In Lebanon, women can wear what they want and get an education, but the problem is the society. She is forced to fit into societal norms and traditions.* *(CFT18)*

As Lebanese are generally homogenous[[21]](#endnote-21) in terms of ethnicity, Arabic culture plays an important role in mediating religious discourse and in the construction of gendered identities in Lebanon. Julie Peteet (2006: 107) argues that ‘Arab masculinity’ is,

[…acquired, verified and played out in the brave deed, in risk-taking, and in expressions of fearlessness and assertiveness. It is attained by constant vigilance and willingness to defend honour *(sharaf*), face (*wajh*), kin and community from external aggression and to uphold and protect cultural definitions of gender-specific propriety.]

In other words, the defining characteristic of ‘Arab masculinity’ is its oppositional status relative to ‘Arab femininity’. Therefore, tremendous emphasis is placed on preserving difference between men and women in Lebanese society. This involves maintaining a separation between the ‘public sphere’, where men are responsible for earning the household income and protecting the family, and the ‘private sphere’, where women are charged with maintaining the household, bearing and raising the children and protecting the family’s ‘honour’. These cultural values provide gender ‘scripts’ for both males and females, shaping and constraining their movements, activities, hopes and aspirations. As one female youth explained,

*The woman has endurance, patience and she sacrifices a lot, preferring to die for her children. But she is also discontent and demanding. She doesn’t accept a man who doesn’t have proper status. The man has to have high status, such as a house, car and money. (MF19)*

Moreover, these cultural values are largely adhered to across religious communities in Lebanon. As one female Christian youth put it,

*Men become independent before women. Men can work and travel alone. Even if women are educated, we are expected to stay home and take care of the children.* *(CF19)*

In this way, the performance of Arab cultural scripts ensures that women’s personal, educational and professional goals are subordinated to compulsory heterosexuality, marriage and childbearing. Moreover, the ‘innate’ differences between males and females constructed through this discourse are used to construct and regulate inequalities between them in terms of decision-making and participation in political, social and economic life. As one male youth explained,

*Men participate in politics, not women. No woman achieved anything in politics because the man is the supreme ruler. Women are more emotional. They don’t think logically. When women drive, they get confused and cause accidents.* *(MM16)*

In other words, women’s limited economic and political participation in Lebanon is the ‘natural’ consequence of their ‘weak’ and ‘unstable’ bodies. Within this discourse, Lebanese girls and women are encouraged to perform roles which fall within their ‘natural capabilities’ as ‘females’. In this way, discourses of gender and ethnicity intersect to shape the aspirations of Lebanese females, as well as restrict their opportunities to actively participate in public life. This helps to explain why both male and female youth had difficulty in thinking of any ‘good’ Lebanese women. When pressed, the youth often mentioned the wives, sisters and daughters of famous Lebanese men who had demonstrated the appropriately ‘feminine’ values of ‘compassion’ and ‘charity’ by caring for orphans and disabled people, or women who had patiently endured the deaths of husbands or sons to ‘martyrdom’ in battle. As one female youth reflected,

*Women don’t play an important role in Lebanon. They don’t have value in this society.* *(MF18)*

When traditional Arab cultural norms intersect with religious discourse, new gendered identities are constructed. For Shi’a women, this involves performing (Shi’a) Islamic scripts within the context of Arabic culture. As one female youth put it,

 *Women have to leave her work and raise the children to make God happy.* *(MF17)*

Within religious discourse, Shi’a Lebanese women are called upon to become ‘metaphors’ and ‘gatekeepers’ for the community and inscribe the collectivity on their physical bodies by following the Islamic dress code[[22]](#endnote-22), wearing the *hijab[[23]](#endnote-23)* and conducting themselves with utmost propriety in public spaces (Yuval-Davis 1997) (see Chapter two, Geographies of Identity). For the youth, these signifiers work to demarcate boundaries between ‘Muslims’ and ‘others’. One female youth explained it this way,

*Muslim women dress modestly. We wear hijab and loose clothes. She doesn’t do things that attract attention to her such as laughing and talking in a loud voice in the presence of men. We must be discreet. Women have to abide by religious doctrines more than men.* *(MF18)*

In other words, women bear the burden of representation for the collective identity and are made to embody ‘Shi’a ideals’ such as ‘tradition’, ‘culture’ and ‘honour’ through the regulation of their dress, movements and behaviour. Integral to this is a regulation of women’s biological reproduction, regulating when, how many and whose children women will bear. In order to prevent Shi’a women from marrying ‘outside the faith’[[24]](#endnote-24), and to ensure that any offspring produced from a marital union will be raised ‘Shi’a’, women’s sexuality before marriage is tightly controlled to ensure the ‘purity’ of the community (Yuval-Davis 1997).

Religious signifiers, such as the *hijab,* do more than just mark out ‘Muslims’ from ‘others’. They are also used to construct ‘difference’ between different kinds of Muslims and between members of the Sunni and Shi’a communities. For example, when asked how Sunni females could be differentiated from Shi’a females, one female youth explained it this way,

*We (Shi’a) tie our hijab differently. Most Sunnis wear white hijab. Some of us wear black chadour[[25]](#endnote-25). Every Shi’a will wear black for the first ten days of Ashura[[26]](#endnote-26). We also have different names[[27]](#endnote-27)*. *(MF16)*

Moreover, in their ‘role’ as ‘defenders of culture and traditional values’, Shi’a women are called upon to construct ‘difference’ and to erect ‘boundaries’ between their community and ‘others’ through the sanctity of their bodies. Within the context of South Lebanon, this involves Shi’a women differentiating themselves from Sunni women through marked performances of piety. As one female youth remarked,

*We don’t shake hands (with men) like Sunni women. They love money and showing off. Their hijab is pushed back on their head and they are not committed.* *(MF17)*

Although it is immediately evident if a devout Lebanese Muslim woman is Sunni or Shi’a from her appearance, it is not obvious if a Lebanese man is Sunni or Shi’a or even Muslim. Although Shi’a men can choose to adorn their bodies with jewellery embossed with Shi’a symbols, such as the ‘sword of Ali’, and they may adorn a short beard (in contrast to the long beard worn by some devout Sunnis), these signifiers of the Shi’a collectivity are optional for men.

Gendered identities are also shaped through conflict. As mentioned earlier, South Lebanon has experienced considerable conflict in the last century. For the Shi’a community in particular, conflict has been particularly influential in shaping identities. After a long period of relative economic and political disenfranchisement in Lebanon, the Shi’a rose to prominence through engagement in armed resistance against Israel. This provided many Shi’a with a strong sense of belonging, honour and respect in the country, as well as a sense of purpose within the Lebanese nationalist project. In this way, myths of wars, survival and heroic endeavours have been integral to the Shi’a experience and central to the construction of gendered Shi’a identities in South Lebanon. It is within this context that hegemonic Shi’a masculinities are produced, with males being constructed as ‘protectors’ and ‘defenders’ of the collectivity (both Lebanese and Shi’a). As one male youth explained,

*The man has the duty to defend the Shi’a community, such as by going to fight in Syria.* *(MM17)*

However, as explained earlier, identities of nation, ethnicity and religion often come into conflict for Shi’a in Lebanon. For example, within the contemporary context of war in neighbouring Syria, Shi’a men are being called upon to defend their co-religionists (other Shi’a) against fellow Arabs, as well as their Lebanese compatriots. In this way, religion is working to fracture both ethnic and nation affiliations for Shi’a men in Lebanon.

It is also within the context of conflict that men’s power over women is emphasized in the recall of traditional masculinities. Interestingly, gender ‘roles’ and women’s compulsory compliance with the ‘honour and shame’[[28]](#endnote-28) paradigm have been constructed as ‘religious duties’ through religious discourse. As these gender scripts are inscribed with the divine, they are not easily contested. One male youth explained it this way,

*Shi’a men dominate their wives and daughters. He has power over the woman. The man is the head of the house and responsible for it. He protects his daughters and his wife. He enforces the code of honour on the wife and daughters. He keeps the code to protect his honour.* *(MM17)*

Masculinities are also used to construct ‘difference’ between different kinds of Muslims and between Sunni and Shi’a. For Shi’a youth, ‘Muslim masculinities’ are hegemonically ranked, with ‘Shi’a masculinity’ being positioned above ‘Sunni masculinity’ in relation to the ‘Lebanese’ values of moderation and tolerance. As one male youth put it,

*Sunni men are more dominating than Shi’a men. Sunni women have less freedom. Shi’a men respect women. We are more open-minded. Shi’a women can inherit from her father, but Sunni women have to share their inheritance with their living male relatives. In Saudi Arabia, women have no rights. They cover their faces and can’t drive.* *(MM18)*

In this way, Shi’a males become constructed as good Lebanese patriots (in contrast to Sunni males). Moreover, Shi’a females come to feel fortunate that they are not subjected to ‘Sunni misogyny’, while at the same time willingly subjecting themselves to the status quo within their own religious community.

However, far from being coerced into Islamic subject positions, many Shi’a female youth in South Lebanon take them up voluntarily. In some cases, this is because Islam provides them with comfort and clarity in the often uncertain context of South Lebanon. Through Islam, Shi’a females are offered a guiding purpose, explicit rules for living, a framework for understanding the world and a social network of ‘sisters’ who share the same values. This is very appealing for many Shi’a girls and women who live their lives in the context of chronic conflict and economic hardship in South Lebanon.

Moreover, some Shi’a females feel empowered through Islamic discourse and believe that it is through Islam that they can claim their rights. Interestingly, some female youth feel that they would be better placed to claim their rights by living under an Islamic theocracy, as in Iran. As one female youth explained,

*Women and Shi’a never comes into conflict. Women have more rights in Iran. In Iran, Shi’a women can do any job because it is an Islamic Republic. In Iran, a woman can be a fighter jet pilot, but here it is the man who drives the car. In Lebanon, Shi’a are the minority and don’t have the opportunity to practice their complete faith. Lebanon would be better as an Islamic country to give women their rights.* *(MF20)*

In other words, it is the ‘dilution’ of Shi’a Islam within the context of a multi-cultural and pluralistic society like Lebanon, rather than Islamic discourse itself, which is the cause of women’s inability to live lives that they aspire to. This youth’s desire to voluntarily take up an Islamic subject position to achieve her goals and to attain a better life illustrates how identity is strategic and positional, and individuals form attachments to specific subject positions based on positions of perceived advantage. It also illustrates how religious discourse is often implicated in the construction of romanticised ideals and utopian politics (i.e. the perceived advantages of theocracy).

While attachment to Islam gives some female Shi’a youth a sense of belonging and purpose, others experience tensions between being a ‘good Muslim’ and achieving their own personal goals and aspirations. For example, one female youth lamented,

*The Islamic religion oppresses women in some matters. Sometimes I wish I had no religion. Women have to stay within the boundaries of her house. The man takes his decision without referring to anyone, but the woman always has to refer to the man. The man’s testimony is equal to two women. Inheritance for women is half that of a man. It bothers us, but women are not fighting for more rights.* *(MF21)*

As the comment above indicates, there is tremendous pressure on young Shi’a women to acquiesce towards the established social-symbolic order. However, contestations are possible, and a few female youth have found possibilities to act out within the system in ways that are subversive and transformative to form new ‘hybrid’ identities. As one female youth said,

*We don’t wear hijab or keep the dress code, and we listen to music (which is traditionally forbidden). But we pray and fast and do Ashura. We are Shi’a on our own terms.* *(MF18)*

This comment powerfully illustrates the importance of agency. Although the dominant culture may try to dictate what can be thought and what can be done through a sustaining of the certainties associated with history and historical practices, it does not stand uncontested. Rather, emergent culture in the form of new values, meanings and practices puts pressure on the existing dominant culture while guiding its future directions. In this way, Shi’a youth identities are constantly being transformed through the processes of contestation, negotiation and accommodation.

### 7.6 CONCLUSION

The discussion above has highlighted the ways that Shi’a youth in South Lebanon construct and negotiate their identities of nation, religion, ethnicity and gender within the local context of Lebanon’s complex sectarian balance and within the broader context of contemporary regional conflicts.

In the context of Lebanon’s geographical positioning along the Eastern Mediterranean, its historical role as a crossroads of civilisations and its uniquely complex sectarian composition, the absence of a clear, unifying and ‘authentic’ nationalist narrative has long been at the heart of the country’s political fragility and social strife. Yet, the resulting ontological uncertainty, complexity and ‘messiness’ have opened up spaces for the youth to draw on cultural narratives from both ‘East’ and ‘West’ to construct notions of a distinct Lebanese identity based on ‘pluralism’. Moreover, Lebanon’s long history of conflict with Israel has helped the youth to construct a strong nationalist narrative based on discourses of shared ‘suffering’ from a common ‘enemy’. In this way, the youths’ lived experiences of conflict with the Israeli ‘other’ have helped to construct a specifically ‘Lebanese’ identity that unites individuals across religious sects.

However, ‘the nation’ is not constructed through a singular or linear narrative, and a complex and historical internal cultural segmentation cuts through Lebanese identity around discourses of religion. For the Shi’a in South Lebanon, historical narratives of suffering, sacrifice, martyrdom and military victory are used to construct ‘sameness’ with other co-religionists (as well as ‘difference’ from ‘other’ religious communities) and to recruit subjects within specific representations of the nation, both shaping and limiting the experiences and life choices of Shi’a youth. This is often accomplished through formal educational processes, particularly in schools that are politically or religiously affiliated. While these discourses serve to unite Shi’a communities both within and across national borders, they also problematize the relationship between nation and religion for the youth in Lebanon. As religion is implicated in the construction of both ‘supra-national’ and ‘sub-national’ identities within this context, it serves to challenge the nation, as well as the notion of a distinct ‘Lebanese’ identity. On the other hand, as Shi’a identities are highly context-dependent and mediated through other discourses, such as location, culture, ethnicity and politics, shared life experience in South Lebanon with ‘other’ Lebanese often becomes more significant for the youth.

The relationship between religion and ethnicity is also problematized for Shi’a youth in Lebanon. On the one hand, Lebanese Shi’a are ethnically Arab and share much culturally, linguistically and economically with other Arabs in Lebanon and neighbouring Arab countries of the Levant. However, most Arabs are Sunni (the dominant sect in Islam), whereas globally most Shi’a are not Arab. Within this context, the Shi’a are simultaneously positioned as members of the Muslim majority in Lebanon and the wider region, yet constructed as ‘Muslim others’ in relation to the Sunni subject. This has been challenging for the youth, as the war in neighbouring Syria has meant that Shi’a men are being called upon to defend their co-religionists against fellow (Sunni) Arabs, as well as their (Sunni) Lebanese compatriots. While the current national and regional nexus of conflict is focused on Sunni/ Shi’a relations, historical tensions between Muslim and Christian communities in Lebanon illustrate how identity positions and relations are contingent, and culture is dynamic and always in a state of flux.

One of the key discourses through which Shi’a youth identities are constructed and performed is gender. Gender intersects with other discourses to construct new identities and to call subjects into specific forms of representation. In the context of Shi’a communities in South Lebanon, it is largely through discourses of religion, which are mediated through Arab culture, that gender identities are constructed. The cultural values that are produced through these narratives provide gender ‘scripts’ for both male and female youth, shaping and constraining their movements, activities, hopes and aspirations. These scripts largely position Lebanese Shi’a men as household breadwinners, defenders and protectors of the family and Lebanese Shi’a women as wives, mothers and protectors of the family’s ‘honour’. Gendered identities are also shaped through conflict, and armed resistance against the Israeli and Sunni ‘others’ has positioned Shi’a males as ‘protectors’ and ‘defenders’ of the collectivity (both national and religious). Within this narrative, men’s power over women has been emphasized in the recall of traditional masculinities. Moreover, gender ‘roles’ and women’s compulsory compliance with the ‘honour and shame’ paradigm have been constructed as ‘religious duties’ through religious discourse. The appeal to religion makes contestation difficult, as it is a claim by the earthly to godly authority to sustain inequalities.

Although Shi’a youth identities are constrained by multiple and intersecting discursive formations of nation, religion, ethnicity and gender, they are not determined by them, nor do these identities stand uncontested. Rather, Shi’a youth (female and male) in South Lebanon strategically negotiate their identity positions in order to gain positions of perceived advantage within any given context. This may include a strategic embrace of particular identities at particular times to achieve a specific purpose. In this way, Shi’a youth always have the possibility to exercise agency and to act out within the system in ways that are subversive and transformative to construct new identities.

### ENDNOTES

1. 1 Christian Lebanese sometimes reject the label ‘Arab’ because of its perceived association with Islam. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. 2 The 18 officially recognized religious groups include four Muslim sects, 12 Christian sects, the Druze sect, and Judaism. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. 3 The Shi’a represent the second largest sect of Islam globally. They are followers of the Prophet Mohamed’s son-in law and cousin, Ali, who they believe to be Mohamed’s successor to the Caliphate and the first Imam. Modern Shi'a Islam has been divided into three main groupings (Twelvers, Ismailis and Zaidis), who make up the majority in Iran, Iraq, Azerbaijan and Bahrain and significant minorities in Lebanon, Yemen and Kuwait. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. 4 Although only an estimated 15 per cent of Pakistanis are Shi’a, this Shi’a minority forms the world’s second largest Shi’a population and is larger than the Shi’a majority in Iraq. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. 5 one of the largest Eastern-rite communities of the Roman Catholic church especially prominent in modern Lebanon. The Maronites trace their origins back to St. Maron, a Syrian hermit of the late 4th and early 5th centuries.  [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. 6 Jos 19:29, 2 Sm 5:11, 1 Chr 22:4, Jer 27 3-11, Ez 26/27/28, Mk 3:8, Lk 6:17, Mt 15:21-28, Mk 7:24-31, Mt 11: 21-24, Acts 21: 3-7 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. 7 United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinians in the Near East [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. 8 Approximately 250,000 Lebanese live in West Africa, the largest non-African group in the region. Some settled there to escape the Lebanese Civil War, whereas others have been drawn by increased economic opportunities. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. 9 the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Mohamed, who ruled over the Islamic Caliphate from 656 to 661 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. 10 the son of Imam Ali (Ali ibn Abi Talib), the first Imam of Shi’a Islam. He was killed and beheaded in the Battle of Karbala in 680, along with most of his family and companions. The annual commemoration for him, his family and his companions is called ‘Ashura’ (tenth day of Muharram) and is a day of mourning for Shi’a Muslims. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. 11 a contemporary Sunni Islamist political movement attempting to ‘recover’ an ‘authentic’ past identity when Sunni Muslim Caliphates ruled a large geographical area in the modern Middle East. The Ottoman Caliphate, under the Ottoman dynasty of the Ottoman Empire, was the last Sunni Islamic caliphate. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. 12 a Lebanese political party associated with the Shi’a community. It was founded as the ‘Movement of the Dispossessed’ in 1974. Amal Movement is currently in an alliance with Hezbollah, the Free Patriotic Movement and the Progressive Socialist Party. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. 13 an Iranian religious leader, revolutionary, politician and leader of the 1979 Iranian Revolution which saw the overthrow of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran. Following the revolution, Khomeini became the country's Supreme Leader, the highest-ranking political and religious authority in the country. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. 14 the second and current Supreme Leader of Iran and a Shi’a cleric [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. 15 totality of the international Muslim community [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. a high-ranking Shi’a cleric considered to be an expert in Islamic studies, such as jurisprudence, ethics and philosophy [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Lebanese Prime Minister from 2009-2011, and son of former Lebanese Prime Minister, Rafik Hariri [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. At the time of writing, Free Patriotic Movement leader (and Maronite Christian), Michel Aoun, was in political alliance with Hezbollah leader, Hassan Nasrallah. Nasrallah was backing Aoun’s candidacy for the Lebanese presidency. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. a sect of Shi’a Islam [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Hezbollah-operated TV channel based in Lebanon [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Armenians make up approximately four per cent of the population of Lebanon. There is also significant intermarriage, with Lebanese men (and sometimes women) often taking spouses from abroad. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. revealing only face, hands and feet in the presence of men outside of their immediate families [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. a veil that covers the head and chest, which is worn by some Muslim women beyond the age of puberty in the presence of adult males outside of their immediate families [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Shi’a men may marry Christian or Jewish women (‘people of the Book’) as long as the women convert to Islam and agree to raise any forthcoming children Muslim [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. a full-body-length black semicircle of fabric that is worn as an outer garment by many Shi’a women [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. marks the anniversary of the Battle of Karbala when Imam Hussein ibn Ali, the grandson of the Prophet Mohamed, and a Shi’a Imam, was killed by the forces of the second Umayyad Caliph Yazid I at Karbala (present day Iraq) [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Some names have a sectarian marker. ‘Sunni names’ include the male names of Omar, Othman, Abu Bakr, Moawiya, Shimir and Yazid and the female name of Aisha. A Shi’a will almost never have one of these names. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. where the ‘honour’ of the husband and family rests on the propriety of female family members [↑](#endnote-ref-28)