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# **From Diwaniyyat to Youth Societies: Informal Political Spaces and Contentious Politics in Bahrain and Kuwait**

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is his own and that appropriate credit has  
been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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## **Abstract**

This thesis investigates the relationship between regime and everyday dynamics of sectarianism, comparing the two Arab Gulf countries of Kuwait and Bahrain. Both case studies are viewed through the central theme of an “informal civil society” and its subsequent impact on sectarian politics in both countries. In Bahrain, the state has forwarded a sectarian narrative of the post-2011 conflict while at the grassroots level, concerted efforts have been made to bridge relations between Sunni and Shia Muslims. In Kuwait, meanwhile, there are indications of a reverse trajectory coming to fruition; while the regime denies a sectarian image of the state, posing as a neutral arbitrator between various political blocs, at the communal level, people across the political and social spectrum are defining themselves through the lens of sectarian identities that have become increasingly salient across several platforms. What is discernable in both countries is the complex and dynamic nature of sectarianism at work, where it is at one and the same time amplified and negated.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

<b>BAPCO</b>	– Bahrain Petroleum Company
<b>BHRC</b>	– Bahrain Human Rights Center
<b>BHRS</b>	– Bahrain Human Rights Society
<b>BYHRS</b>	– Bahrain Youth Human Rights Society
<b>BYSHR</b>	– Bahrain Youth Society for Human Rights
<b>CSA</b>	– Coercive State Apparatus
<b>CSO</b>	– Civil Society Organisation
<b>I.R</b>	– International Relations
<b>ISA</b>	– Ideological State Apparatus
<b>GCC</b>	– Gulf Co-operation Council
<b>KABE</b>	– Kuwait Association for Basic Evaluators of Human Rights
<b>KHRS</b>	– Kuwait Human Rights Society
<b>MENA</b>	– Middle East and North Africa
<b>NGO</b>	– Non-Governmental Organisation
<b>RBA</b>	– Rights-Based Approach
<b>RSA</b>	– Repressive State Apparatus
<b>UN</b>	– United Nations

## **List of Diagrams**

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## Introduction

This thesis explores the interconnect between informal civil society and the issue of sectarianism, with a focus on the impact this has on the trajectory of inter-communal relations in two Gulf States – Bahrain and Kuwait. The research conducted for this thesis observes how sectarianism is being played out and articulated at the communal level, by looking at how grassroots activism in the form of civil society has sought to approach sectarian discourses that have become increasingly salient in recent years, namely following the 2011 Arab uprisings.

The principal rationale driving this research is the desire to move beyond the conventional wisdom that the sole catalysts for sectarianism are state-centric or driven by a pursuit for regional hegemony; in the idea that sectarianism and inter-communal tensions are either driven exclusively by the state or centered around the weakness of the state which then enables localised identities to become more prevalent or that sectarian articulations can simply be reduced to the enduring geopolitical struggle between regional countries, namely Saudi Arabia and Iran.<sup>1</sup> Not to dismiss such top-down approaches, these accounts do not however provide an explanation as to why sectarianism is still being utilised or at least becoming increasingly salient where the state is seemingly robust and by and large resilient to internal pressures for reforms, which is applicable in the context of Kuwait.

This research will therefore seek to complement existing scholarship by presenting a more holistic and multifaceted understanding of the top-down and bottom-up pressures that influence sectarian relations and to provide an account for the various ways in which the state can utilise sectarian narratives to extend its authoritarian reach but to also demonstrate how these narratives are actively countered or promulgated at the grassroots level. In addition, this thesis distinguishes itself by departing from conventional notions of civil society, to introduce what can be defined as an *informal* civil society, shifting from an organisational-institutional conception to a spatial understanding of civil society, whereby these informal spaces have, in some capacity,

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<sup>1</sup> Gause, Gregory F, *Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War*, Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper, No. 11, July 2014.

showcased an aptitude to be increasingly expedient by acquiring a role in redefining the trajectory of sectarian relations, and the potential to provide openings to forge cross-denominational coalitions where sectarian cleavages have often been instrumentalised by the authoritarian state and have long served as an impediment to cross-communal mobilisation.

Despite the ongoing predicament within academic scholarship as to how to accurately define sectarianism<sup>2</sup>, it has simply been defined by the Oxford dictionary as an “excessive attachment to a particular sect or party, especially in religion.”<sup>3</sup> But to understand what informal civil society comprises of, it would be conducive to look at a working definition of civil society more broadly. Civil society can be loosely defined as the "aggregate of non-governmental organizations and institutions that manifest interests and will of citizens; individuals and organizations in a society which are independent of the government".<sup>4</sup>

The simplest and most pertinent definition of “informal civil society” in turn is that it is a space (be it physical or virtual) whereby it has the potential capacity to make or influence significant political decisions outside the remit of the formal institutions of government and established Civil Society Organisations (CSOs). As Tun-Jen and Womack noted, some of the prevalent features throughout informal civil society can potentially signify “a surprisingly beneficial function in policy change; it can introduce new perspectives, provide information not filtered upward via bureaucratic channels or media outlets, incubates new proposals, and most importantly, allows the core leader at the centre to credibly inject new issues into the political arena.”<sup>5</sup> Again, the presence of an informal civil society can be incorporated into the broader umbrella of

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<sup>2</sup> Hadad, Fanar, ‘Sectarianism’ and Its Discontents in the Study of the Middle East, *Middle East Journal* 71, (2017) pp. 363-382.

<sup>3</sup> Sectarianism. Oxforddictionaries.com. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/sectarianism> (accessed: June 14, 2017)

<sup>4</sup> Civil society. Dictionary.com. *Collins English Dictionary - Complete & Unabridged 10th Edition*. HarperCollins Publishers. <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/civil-society> (accessed: June 16, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Cheng, Tun-Jen, and Brantly Womack. "General Reflections on Informal Politics in East Asia." *Asian Survey* 36, no. 3 (March 1996): 320-37. March 1996. Accessed May 17, 2015. doi:<https://doi.org/10.2307/2645695>.

civil society, defined here as a “society considered as a community of citizens that are linked by common interests and collective activity.”<sup>6</sup>

With that in mind, it is first important to consider the unique demography of both countries, as the demographic outlook in Bahrain and Kuwait provides a picture for how both states have dealt with their respective populations based on denomination and the rationale for the discourse they have sought to propagate when it comes to sectarianism. Where Bahrain has advocated an assertively sectarian stance, whereby the al-Khalifa regime employed a strategy of promoting divisive sectarian policies, including discrimination within the workforce, education and social security systems, electoral district gerrymandering and attempts at utilising citizenship for purposes of demographic engineering, as they recognised that cross-sectarian civic or political cooperation is the biggest internal threat to regime survival<sup>7</sup>, the Kuwaiti state, on the other hand has, at least in recent years, touted a fairly neutral line and tried to downplay sectarian sensibilities in light of key events. In particular the Emir and Crown Prince’s response following the 2011 Arab uprisings and more specifically the 2015 Imam Sadeq Mosque bombing. The first attack of its kind by ISIS on Kuwaiti soil, the Emir and Crown Prince both offered their condolences at the funeral of the victims and pledged to rebuild the mosque whilst the Parliamentary Speaker called for unity and solidarity between Sunnis and Shias.<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, it is important to recognise that both countries have sizeable Sunni and Shia populations with the notable distinction being that in Bahrain there is a Sunni minority in the form of the Al Khalifa monarchy that is holding onto power and is effectively propped up by their GCC neighbours, in the form of Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Whereas in Kuwait there is a Sunni majority with a Sunni head of state. In terms of the demographic breakdown and at the time of the last census conducted in 2010, Bahrain's 1.2 million population were made up of 568,000 Bahrainis and 666,000 non-

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<sup>6</sup> Civil Society. Oxforddictionaries.com. [https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/civil\\_society](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/civil_society) (accessed: June 16, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Moore-Gilbert, Kylie, Sectarian Divide and Rule in Bahrain: A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy? Middle East Institute, <https://www.mei.edu/content/map/sectarian-divide-and-rule-bahrain-self-fulfilling-prophecy> , (accessed: June 14, 2017)

<sup>8</sup> Kuwait News Agency (KUNA), "[KUNA : Gov't honour Kuwaiti mosque blast victims as martyrs while bomber's driver is caught – Society – 28/06/2015](#)". (accessed: June 27 2016)

nationals. Shia Bahrainis make up the majority of the population with two main ethnic groups: *Ajam* and *Baharna*. Most Shia Bahrainis in the country are Baharna, while the Ajam are ethnic Persian Shias, who have large communities in Muharraq and the capital, Manama.<sup>9</sup>

Sunni Bahrainis are mostly urbanised Arabs (or al Arab) or *Huwala*. Urban Arabs in the country are mostly descended from Sunni Arabs from various parts of the Arabian Peninsula. They constitute the most influential ethnic group in the country with members of this group holding most senior positions in the Bahraini government. The Huwala are descended from Sunni Iranians and Sunni Arabs. With regards to many official estimates, religious affiliation in Bahrain currently stands at approximately 70% Shia Muslim, with the remaining 30% being principally Sunni Muslim, alongside various other minority faiths.<sup>10</sup> However, due to policies such as the influx of naturalised migrant workers having a lasting impact on the sectarian demographic of the country, a more accurate reading would range closer to 55% Shia, and 45% Sunni respectively.

In Kuwait, meanwhile, it has been estimated that in 2016 the population was around 3.7 million. Expatriates account for about 70% of Kuwait's population, including 1.1 million Arab expatriates and 1.4 million Asian expatriates. There are several native groups in Kuwait, including Arabs from Najd, Iraq, Bahrain and eastern Arabia, as well as ethnic Persians. The Baharna ethnic group is the indigenous people of Bahrain and the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, while the Najdis are Sunni Arabs from Najd in central Arabia. The clear majority of these native Kuwaiti communities are Muslim, with around 70% coming from the Sunni community and 30% being Shia.<sup>11</sup>

Again, part of the rationale for observing these two case studies is that these countries have not been exempt from the cross-winds of sectarian polarisation within the Persian Gulf and the broader Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, particularly in the

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<sup>9</sup> World Population Review. <http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/bahrain-population/>. (accessed: June 15, 2017)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> World Population Review. <http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/kuwait-population/>. (accessed: June 15, 2017)

wake of the 2003 Iraq War and more recently in the case of the 2011 Arab uprisings with the perceived “sectarianisation” of the Syrian conflict, and of course events in Bahrain, which was one of several countries to be engulfed by protests.<sup>12</sup>

On the surface, and in the context of Bahrain, dominant regime-led narratives during the Arab uprisings via the state’s instrumentalising of sectarian rhetoric and policies are perceived to have practically facilitated a conflict along sectarian lines, with inter-communal divisions being particularly discernable in the events that followed the February 14<sup>th</sup> 2011 protest movement and the subsequent crackdown by state security forces. On the other hand, initial impressions of Kuwait would signal a more stable political outlook, with the incumbent Emir often being portrayed as a neutral arbitrator between the various political-sectarian blocs and the country viewed as relatively immune to major protests, at least prior to the 2011 Arab uprisings which then gained notable traction between 2011-2013; in turn, the conventional wisdom would still imply that inter-communal relations in Kuwait are far more cordial than in other parts of the Middle East, notably in Syria, Iraq and Bahrain itself.

These observations, however, cannot be sustained when domestic politics in both countries are viewed more scrupulously and once the emergence of an informal civic sector is taken into consideration. Indeed, the analysis of informal civil society will demonstrate a far less clear-cut picture of the current dynamic of state-societal and inter-communal relations in Bahrain and Kuwait, where informal civic spaces can occupy a role in which they can be equally culpable in exacerbating sectarian tensions, or they can serve as a model to undermining sectarian narratives, be they promulgated within the remit of the state or at the grassroots level. Why there is comparative merit in focusing on Bahrain and Kuwait therefore, is that the apparent difference in sectarian contestation in both countries is in part played out within the informal sector. By focusing on the role of informal civil society, this can change the commonly held perception that sectarian discourse can only be perpetuated (Bahrain) or countered by state elites (Kuwait). The influence of informal spaces in their ability to produce alternative discourses and counter state-sponsored narratives at the communal level

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<sup>12</sup> The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS), *The Gulf’s Escalating Sectarianism*, *POMEPS Briefings* 28, (2016).

indicates that the sectarian undercurrent is in fact more pronounced in Kuwait than it is in the Bahraini context, despite both regimes adopting different approaches in dealing with their respective communities. In this context, the assumption that the ramifications of sectarianism and the trajectory of inter-communal relations being solely dependent on the strategies of the state ought to be revised.

To understand the dynamics of sectarianism in both countries, exploring the role of informal spaces is significant for several reasons. First, informal political spaces have showcased their influence and political utility at various points in both Bahraini and Kuwaiti society, namely because they cannot be discredited in the way that formal civic actors have in recent times, which often act as an echo chamber for the ruling authorities to dominate and co-opt opposition movements and activities. A strategy more commonly known as state corporatism.<sup>13</sup> Informal spaces, meanwhile, can in many cases circumvent the authoritarian state's scope for interference, by operating within the private sphere and often go unchecked by state ministries that monitor CSOs. Likewise, such spaces have at times been utilised as an outpost for political mobilisation, and with it, inter-sectarian mobilisation. A pertinent example of which can be seen in the case of the Bahraini Majlis, an informal space usually located in the private confines of an individual's home or community centre which has long occupied a prominent position in facilitating cross-communal movements in Bahrain's modern history. This will become evident within findings from the empirical data.

### **1.1 Research Questions and Objectives**

As highlighted above, this thesis seeks to contribute to the growing body of literature on sectarianism and the dynamics of inter-communal relations, as well as ongoing debates surrounding the role of civil society in the Gulf region. This will be done by assessing the role of traditional and emerging spaces that make up informal civil society, and whether they have become increasingly influential in creating a viable space for grassroots activism following the Arab uprisings. Secondly, it will gauge whether these informal spaces have given rise to sectarian discourse by providing a

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<sup>13</sup> Hertog, Steffen, "The New Corporatism in Saudi Arabia: Limits of Formal Politics" in *Constitutional Reform and Political Participation in the Gulf*, eds. Khalaf, Abdulhadi and Luciani, Giacomo, Gulf Research Center, Dubai, UAE, 2006.

platform to vocalise divisive or hate-fueled rhetoric or whether individuals, be they prominent political figures, human rights activists or members of the public who have sought to downplay polarising narratives based on religious affiliation. The positive or counterproductive role each informal space occupies is often dependent on the type of space that is being analysed, as the thesis will observe various spaces that make up informal civil society in both countries. Finally, the thesis aims to expand on previous preliminary research conducted on civil society in the Gulf states, by forming a comparison between the various traditional and contemporary forms of informal spaces and moreover by establishing the linkages between their capacity for social and political mobilisation and the rising inter-communal tensions that have become pervasive within Kuwait and Bahrain.

With that in mind, it is important to identify the central focus of this research, which is primarily concerned with the mode/s of expressions and the dynamics of informal civil society within Kuwait and Bahrain. There are three interrelated themes that will hereby be of interest when it comes to dissecting the empirical data that emerges out of the research topic. Firstly, the formation and response of the traditional, well-established informal space – such as the Kuwaiti diwaniyya or the Bahraini majlis, to the increasing salience of sectarian expressions in official state policies and state-dominated discourse. Secondly, the emergence and popularity of alternative modes of civil society that operate outside the recognised remit of formal CSOs, such as unaffiliated youth movements, non-registered human rights organisations, cultural exhibitions, workshops. In addition to this, observing their responses to the Arab uprisings and the increasing visibility of sectarian sentiment in the public space, namely through traditional and more recently social media platforms e.g. Facebook and Twitter, where polarising opinions are arguably more accessible to a broader audience. Thirdly, the relationship between informal spaces and formal civil society, how do they compare, and what are the key variables that distinguish them regarding their capacity to harmonise inter-communal relations and form cross-cutting opposition alliances towards the state.

Following on from the research objectives spelled out above, and specifying the central themes of informal political spaces and sectarian relations, this thesis will

address the following two key research questions: To what extent have traditional and emerging informal political spaces/networks either mitigated or perpetuated sectarian sentiment in Kuwait and Bahrain, and if so, what are their reasons for carrying out such functions?

This overarching research question will then serve as the foundation for the rest of the thesis, which shall be complemented by a series of sub-questions that will aid in addressing the research objectives. For example, how autonomous are informal political spaces from the state authorities and to what extent do they impact on formal politics in Kuwait and Bahrain? Do informal political spaces serve as a reflection of pre-existing or changing social attitudes between communities in Kuwait and Bahrain? Are cross-sectarian initiatives more apparent or visible in the traditional or emerging informal spaces? Or are they prominent in both depending on the context? How influential are informal political spaces in forming cross-denominational coalition ties or in initiating domestic reform programs, particularly those that have an impact on inter-communal relations? Have emerging spaces replaced the function of the traditional diwaniyya or majlis when it comes to dealing with issues pertaining to sectarianism? Finally, how are informal groups affected or influenced by the policies and actions taken by the authorities and other established CSOs when it comes to the issue of sectarianism?

By incorporating informal political spaces as a central theme in understanding the dynamics of sectarianism in Bahrain and Kuwait, this thesis asserts that the instrumentalisation of sectarianism and the impact that it has had on inter-communal relations cannot be viewed solely through a top-down lens, which purports that it is all orchestrated by the state. Rather, the inclusion of an informal civic sector illustrates that there is a reciprocal relationship where sectarian tensions can be both exacerbated or mitigated, both at the state and communal levels. Indeed, what emerges from the findings of this thesis is that despite the Kuwaiti and Bahraini state adopting different containment strategies in trying to manage sectarianism, - with Bahrain taking a more assertively divisive approach, whilst the Kuwaiti state appears to take a seemingly reconciliatory position on the surface - there are in fact diverging trajectories taking place in both contexts. Whereby communal tensions are surfacing

in Kuwait, with polarising opinions in both Sunni and Shi'i communities gaining more traction in the public sphere, whereas Bahraini communities are recuperating from the initial ruptures manufactured by the state in its response to the 2011 uprisings, with promising signs that there is scope for communal reconciliation and grassroots activism based on mutual concerns, such as Bahrain's current housing crisis and the economic impact of migrant labour. All this, despite the regime's approach which attempts to maintain inter-communal hostilities as a containment strategy.

Albeit with few exceptions, what has become apparent is that Kuwait finds itself facing a bottom-up pressure whereby sectarian sentiment has become more pervasive across society and can be largely attributed to regional events in places like Syria, Iraq and Bahrain which have come to resonate in the domestic political sphere, despite their being a law in place that criminalises sectarian hate speech.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the role of social media in providing a platform for traditionally marginal voices, from outspoken clerics to religious media channels that often provoke sectarian sensitivities has seen itself being reverberated in some of these informal spaces which altogether has only exacerbated sectarian tensions and can now be witnessed at the parliamentary level, as despite a positive legacy of regime-minority relations, this did not deter seven Shia parliamentarians in April 2015 to criticise the Kuwaiti state's participation in the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen on the grounds that it violates Kuwait's constitutional prohibition on offensive war.<sup>15</sup>

It is often perceived therefore that sectarianism has been getting gradually worse in the Gulf, but many analysts generally conceive of this solely as an international process and negate domestic or communal factors that have given rise to it.<sup>16</sup> In Bahrain on the other hand, although there is a strong presence of regime-sponsored discourse in the public eye, particularly in its portrayal of the Shi'i community, the emergence and transformation of new and traditional informal spaces would indicate there are concerted bottom-up efforts towards rapprochement between Sunni and Shi'i

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<sup>14</sup> Matthiesen, Toby, *The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS), The Gulf's Escalating Sectarianism, POMEPS Briefings 28, (2016), p. 35.*

<sup>15</sup> Colgan, Jeff, *The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS), The Gulf's Escalating Sectarianism, POMEPS Briefings 28, (2016), p. 43.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

denominations. This is done by utilising those very spaces to challenge some of the misconceptions produced by regime narratives at the grassroots level and to shed light and emphasise the mutual concerns that both Sunni and Shia communities are facing within Bahrain.

## **1.2 Originality and Contribution**

Overall this research aims to contribute to the existing scholarship on two fronts. Firstly, it will contribute empirically by offering a comparative study of informal civil society and the dynamics of inter-communal relations in Kuwait and Bahrain. This will be the first of its kind as the research will draw parallels concerning the status of civil society between two Gulf states in what could only be considered as contrasting political scenarios following the 2011 Arab uprisings; one being situated in a country that was relatively immune to any major protests (Kuwait) and another still engulfed in daily protests until today (Bahrain).

What is most significant to note, is not only do these two countries warrant an investigation on their own merit, but what is worthwhile with regards to this research is the comparison between the two countries, as Bahrain and Kuwait are two cases that are paradigmatic for how sectarianism is dealt with differently by the authorities in both countries yet both have a renowned informal civic sector. This is key to the rationale as to why these two countries have been selected and no other Gulf states, which shall be further justified in the following section on research design and methodology.

Furthermore, this research will make a theoretical contribution, by demonstrating how existing debates surrounding civil society in the Middle East, particularly following the 2011 Arab uprisings, needs to reconsider and ultimately prioritise the undertheorised aspects of informal civic activism, as the research will aim to highlight how informal political spaces have made their mark on civil society in the Gulf. By observing informal spaces under the wider rubric of civil society, the author maintains this research is treading on new ground as it aims to prove how not only do they have the capacity to influence local/domestic politics by way of downplaying or exacerbating sectarianism within communities in certain contexts, but to put forth the argument that unlike formal

civil society networks that prop up authoritarian rule, informal spaces are effectively filling the vacuum of recognised political opposition. In this context, it will be interesting to explore the extent to which these spaces can oppose or express concerns/grievances regarding policies at the institutional level.

As alluded to, this thesis shall offer a new theoretical perspective on informal spaces and link them to the broader issue of sectarian politics. This will become evident throughout the theory chapter which incorporates pre-existing approaches to civil society from developmental studies such as the Rights-Based approach and the Multi-Dimensional framework. These approaches will enable to pinpoint the various features of informal civil society and how the transition from an organisation-institutional concept to an arena-spatial understanding of civil society is more conducive to assessing what bearing they could have on sectarian relations and the ways in which they could be influencing sectarian discourse. In comparison to formal CSOs which can only serve to repeat state mantra and ultimately have much less agency. By incorporating an expanded definition of civil society, this thesis is providing an alternative means to which social and political mobilisation can be understood in the MENA context. Moreover, by exploring the utility of informal spaces, this offers a way in which civil society can be viewed in relation to the impact it has on sectarian relations as well as the way in which the state approaches the issue of sectarianism. As mentioned in the case of Yasir Habib, the state had to react to and ultimately appease protestors which ultimately led to the revoking of his citizenship and not the other way around with the state orchestrating such policies, which would be the case in Bahrain. All the more significant then, that the media outlets and space offered to such polarising voices as well as the counter-protestors in response, signals a need to look at the informal spaces that formulate discussions concerning Sunni and Shi'i communities.

Secondly, this research will offer an empirical contribution to studies on civil society in the Gulf, by highlighting how the sectarianisation of politics has shaped and influenced informal civil society, and vice-versa how the discourse on sectarianism is being influenced by informal spaces. This will be examined in relation to the ideological state apparatus (or ISA) implemented by the authorities and whether those spaces are emulating or undermining such narratives. It is pertinent more than ever to observe

such spaces as the growing salience of sectarian identities and conflicts around the region is increasingly gaining traction within public consciousness. It becomes imperative, therefore, to observe informal spaces given their greater sense of autonomy to speak openly compared to their more formal counterparts. The informal sector can therefore be regarded as an ideal indicator of understanding how sectarianism is being perceived at the grassroots level and between communities.

More broadly speaking, this thesis seeks to explore two principal research themes that are at the forefront of emerging debates within extant scholarship on MENA (Middle East and North Africa) politics. The first of these themes concerns the more established commentary and debates regarding the agency and utility of civil society actors in the MENA, particularly in undercutting or circumventing authoritarian modes of governance, particularly in the context of the Gulf region. The other theme concerns the emerging body of scholarship on sectarianism, sectarian relations and the perceived salience of transnational sectarian identities in recent decades and how the dynamics and expressions of state-societal relations are constructed by ostensibly sectarian policymaking as a regime survival strategy, and to what extent that then influences the trajectory of inter-communal relations.

With sectarianism often being attributed to scholarship on identity politics, ethnic conflict and International Relations Theories, and discourse on civil society grounded in the literature on democratisation and authoritarianism, it is apparent that seldom have these two areas of research ever been observed in relation to one another. Moreover, the recent scholarship that does exist on sectarianism has only been explored through the lens of institutionalised politics, but it is yet to be seen how sectarianism and sectarian relations is influenced by the informal sector. The significance of observing such spaces is to show how them being insulated from the state offers the scope to reinvent prevalent sectarian narratives and discourses, for example by the state, or by social media platforms.

This thesis is therefore positioned at the intersection of two core research themes which are civil society's engagement with and approaches to sectarian discourse in Bahrain and Kuwait. In doing so, this research shall be able to re-examine some of the

normative assumptions and claims posited by previous scholars as the empirical focus of this thesis will be on the relatively undertheorised notion of informal civil society.

It is also important to recognise that to showcase the thesis's contribution to existing scholarship, it is necessary to first problematise the issue within current discourse surrounding the formation of sectarian identity and its political expediency for Gulf States to use as a containment strategy. With that in mind, it would be conducive to review how sectarianism has in the past been theorised in the context of the Middle East. Firstly, there are advocates of the orientalist and primordialist depictions of sectarianism which can be noted for instance within the works of Islamic historians such as Bernard Lewis. Lewis attributes religious schisms within the MENA to Islamic societies throughout history having acquired a prolonged and well-documented experience with religious sectarianism, and corroborates this claim by highlighting how Islam was politicised from its very beginnings. In addition, Lewis promoted a view which held sectarian identity as a permanent and historically rooted quality that has always been at the focal point of Middle Eastern politics.<sup>17</sup> This narrative becomes particularly significant to this body of research when Lewis concludes that "Shi'ism essentially became the expression in religious terms of opposition to the state and the established order, acceptance of which meant conformity to Sunni or mainstream Islamic doctrine."<sup>18</sup>

Contrasting this narrative, are critical theorists who have sought to demystify the Orientalist conception of denominational identity constantly being at the forefront of politics in Muslim-majority societies, one of whom is Augustus Richard Norton in his volume, *The Shi'ite Threat Revisited*. Norton plays down the Orientalist stance of presupposed sectarian divisions and with it the ancient origins of Islamic schisms impacting politics, by emphasising that merely less than a century ago, sectarian affiliation was neither a particularly important marker of faith nor an important basis for political action. In other words, religious denominations did not qualify to being a pre-requisite in the formation of political affiliations even within the relatively recent history

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<sup>17</sup> Lewis, Bernard, *The Arabs in History*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1993.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p.73.

of the Middle East.<sup>19</sup> On the contrary, scholars such as Norton and others, Shmuel Bar for example<sup>20</sup> have claimed there were several initiatives towards ‘*taqarub*’, or what is known as rapprochement, between faith communities in previous eras and in more recent times under a unifying political ideology. In this context, the advent of nationalism and Pan-Arabism following the emergence of the post-colonial state would appear to be most applicable. Norton therefore concludes that the “assumption of an unbridgeable gulf between the sects is a contemporary prejudice.”<sup>21</sup>

It appears that the main contention between both accounts pertains to when and how inter-communal tensions became a prevalent factor in response to the broader subject of political reform. Likewise, more recent scholarship on sectarian politics in the Gulf would attest to Norton’s thesis, highlighting specific turning points in which sectarianism became prominent across the region. Frederic Wehrey, author of ‘*Sectarian Politics in the Gulf*’, for instance, pinpoints to the 2003 U.S-led invasion of Iraq as well as the domestic and regional implications of the 2010-11 Arab uprisings as key turning points in determining the rise of more pronounced sectarian identities and with it, ensuing conflicts in the region being perceived through sectarian nomenclature.<sup>22</sup> The ‘politics of sectarianism’ – an expression to describe how sectarian differences are exploited primarily for political gains, can be intrinsically linked back to the institutional weaknesses within Gulf States, in that they are having to resort to accentuating sectarian tensions in an attempt to deflect criticism or perceived hostility towards the state.<sup>23</sup>

According to Wehrey, sectarian identity has assumed greater prominence and visibility at various points in modern history. Elites have instrumentalised it, and ordinary citizens have defined themselves by it, at the expense of excluding other affinities that could potentially aid in undermining state-led narratives and policies. In this regard,

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<sup>19</sup> Norton, Augustus Richard, *The Shi’ite Threat Revisited*, Current History, December 2007.

<sup>20</sup> Bar, Shmuel, Sunnis and Shiites: Between Rapprochement and Conflict, Hudson Institute, <https://www.hudson.org/research/9842-sunnis-and-shiites-between-rapprochement-and-conflict> , (accessed: May 22, 2016)

<sup>21</sup> Norton, Augustus Richard, *The Shi’ite Threat Revisited*, Current History, December 2007, p.436.

<sup>22</sup> Wehrey, Frederic M. *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf: From the Iraq War to the Arab Uprisings*. Columbia University Press, 2014.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

sectarianism is therefore solely viewed as a symptom of longstanding deficits in Gulf governance and the unequal distribution of political and social capital.<sup>24</sup>

As mentioned above, scholars dealing with International Relations theory as well as recent media discourse would point to key events such as Iraq War of 2003, the Arab Uprisings of 2010-11 and, prior to that, the 1979 Iranian Revolution as a way of understanding both the salience of sectarian identities and the exacerbating of sectarian tensions, and with it the emergence of Pan-Islamism and the subsequent impact Islamist politics would come to have on a transnational scale, as Jeff Colgan notes, “The last decade has deepened the sectarian divide, but it was politically activated much earlier, in a contest between rival narratives of legitimacy. In the 1960s and 70s, the Saudi government wanted to use pan-Islamism to counter Nasser’s pan-Arabism. When oil revenues boomed following 1973, the Gulf monarchies poured money into mosques and organizations like the World Muslim League. The influx of oil money came just at the wrong moment, when leaders and elites were looking for ways to politicize Islam. The Saudis later regretted that strategy after the Iranian revolution took pan-Islamism in a new anti-royalist direction.”<sup>25</sup> Again, these claims are used to explain how geo-political rivalries, such as in the case of Saudi Arabia and Iran, have only served to amplify sectarian sentiment and hostilities via proxy warfare.<sup>26</sup>

Like the 2003 Iraq War, and to a lesser extent the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 2006, Syria’s internecine conflict following the 2011 Arab uprisings, and more recently the GCC-led intervention in Yemen have enabled Gulf ruling monarchs, media commentators, religious clerics, parliamentarians and activists to invoke and amplify Sunni-Shi’i identities, often for objectives that are rooted in power politics and hegemony-seeking.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Colgan, Jeff, The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS), The Gulf ’s Escalating Sectarianism, *POMEPS Briefings* 28, (2016), p. 42.

<sup>26</sup> Al-Jazeera, Reality Check: The myth of a Sunni-Shia War, <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/upfront/2015/11/reality-check-myth-sunni-shia-war-151121105751227.html> , (accessed: May 8, 2016)

Not to refute or discount this explanation outright, it does however have its historical inconsistencies when cross-examined with the selected case studies of Kuwait and Bahrain. Despite sectarianism not being perceived as a salient identity marker, what becomes apparent in the context of these Gulf States, is that ostensibly sectarian policies and '*banaf*', or loosely defined as everyday societal sectarianism was, and continued to be, a lived reality for decades prior to the Iranian Revolution, even in an era of supposed religious rapprochement where inter-sect marriages between Sunni and Shi'i communities were once considered to be more commonplace for example. This will become evident from the empirical data when informed research respondents for this thesis document policies of naturalisation up until the present day in Bahrain but also from the 60s and 70s in Kuwait which granted Saudi citizens dual nationality and would ultimately alter the demographic make-up of the country, or gerrymandering policies to change electoral boundaries in past and recent elections as well as other isolated incidents, e.g. the imposition of specific levies on religious communities in Bahrain throughout the 1920s. These moments are all testament to a neglected account of history in the region.

Not to pander to primordialist accounts or wholly complement the existing IR laden narratives that place extensive emphasis on how sectarianism is utilised by regime elites, this thesis will therefore depart from both by affording agency to domestic non-state actors operating within informal civil society/political spaces that are overlooked by extant scholarship. As such, it aims to provide the potential scope for an alternative account of how sectarianism has been instrumentalised in Kuwait and Bahrain. This is not to discount existing top-down narratives of how sectarianism is utilised by authoritarian regimes, but rather to demonstrate, how the regime's use of the Ideological state apparatus (ISA) – that is, the tools at the state's disposal to propagate government-sponsored narratives pertaining to sectarianism, as well as the performative functions of informal civil society indicate that there is a reciprocal relationship and at times self-serving function in the dissemination of sectarian rhetoric at the discursive level, which overall influences the trajectory of sectarian relations.

By specifically addressing how sectarianism plays out at the grassroots level vis-à-vis informal civil society, this research will be able to complement existing commentary on

civil society and to identify possible openings in domestic politics and more crucially, cross-communal political participation in the Gulf that could potentially serve as an existential threat to the states in question.

Given that events in the region are constantly being framed through a sectarian lens, it would suffice to say that research into informal political spaces is more pertinent than ever, as it will offer an indication as to where regime narratives gain traction and can even garner support for its policies or on the other hand fails to resonate with its citizens and can ultimately lead to a backlash. This will demonstrate whether informal civil society has marked its influence over institutional actors in a bid to curtail and/or arbitrate on matters pertaining to inter-communal tension or on the contrary whether they augment the fraying co-operation and the perceived trust deficit between denominations.

In addition, it is important to acknowledge why informal spaces ought to be researched in the first place. Their analysis will not only complement existing scholarship on civil society within the MENA, but it is crucial to understand their role particularly in the post Arab Spring era. More recently, some of these spaces have acquired the ability to inject new ideas for reform into the public realm, and to act as an intermediary force between formal CSO actors and local communities. In that respect, it would be valuable to understand whether these informal spaces are now vying to fill the vacuum of active political opposition which in the context of both Bahrain and Kuwait, has been curtailed and largely suppressed through various legal and extra-legal means which shall be detailed in the background chapter.

This research will therefore contribute to extant scholarship by shedding light on alternative modes of activism which not only counter an ineffective and largely co-opted formal civil society sector, but to also assess whether the Kuwaiti and Bahraini governments themselves are implementing any proposals or initiatives that originated from amongst the informal space itself. If there is evidence of this taking place, then current understandings of civil society in the MENA will need to acknowledge the collective impact informal civil society can potentially have on domestic politics and ultimately towards reform processes in both countries. If not, it will likewise be just as significant to understand what is inhibiting the informal spaces from being effective in

pushing through reforms and facilitating cross-communal coalitions that can challenge the existing state apparatus or whether they too, are falling into the same trappings as formal civil society.

Furthermore, by addressing the role of both the traditional informal spaces, such as the *diwaniyyat* and *majalis*, as well as the upcoming youth societies and pop-up workshops/exhibitions, this research will be able to shed light on whether they have served to amplify the most polarising voices to an extent that they could even radicalise segments of both communities' youth, or alternatively provide political activists with another means of cross-sectarian networking that circumvent governmental efforts to control or limit such activities gaining momentum.

In addition, it is important to note that little has been documented on the relationship between formal civil society organisations (CSOs) and informal spaces and how they can be incorporated under the broader umbrella of civil society actors. This thesis will therefore offer a theoretical contribution by providing an alternative outlook as to how civil society can be studied within Bahrain and Kuwait. Moreover, by linking these spaces to the prevailing issue of sectarianism, this thesis will focus on the domestic implications of institutionalised sectarianism and its impact on inter-communal relations, as opposed to complementing existing debates which have often sought to analyse sectarianism by conflating the issue with broader politics pertaining to international relations and institutional politics.

To add further credence to the originality of this research, Asef Bayat's *Uncivil Society: The Politics of the 'informal' People*, quite accurately pinpoints to the 'belittled' or 'ignored' forms of un-institutionalised social activities that have dominated developing countries. In addition, he points out the significance of informal spaces in contributing to the debate on civil society and how these modes of participation can in fact be more constructive in airing social grievances of certain sectors of Kuwaiti and Bahraini society compared to their institutionalised and 'apolitical' counterpart. Again, this point bares importance with respect to the sectarian dimension, in addressing the question of how sectarian sentiment is possibly shaping the views and current issues being circulated throughout the broad spectrum of informal political spaces and vice-versa.

Bayat goes on to argue that without intending to downgrade the value of 'civility', the reductionism of the debates on 'civil society' and how civil society discourse is traditionally perceived to be Eurocentric, has ultimately construed civil society in relational terms to the state. This, if anything, is having a counter-productive effect on modes of political participation in the developing world, as Bayat claims the dismissal of informal spaces in the extant literature on civil society not only excludes but scorns modes of struggles and expression, which, in some societies like those in the Middle East, are more extensive and effective than conventional institutions outside the state.<sup>27</sup>

Another observer of informal political spaces is Mary-Ann Tetreault within the chapter *Bottom-up Democratisation of Kuwait* from the book *Stories of Democracy: Politics and Society in Contemporary Kuwait*. She argues that rather than a process of top-down liberalisation, which is seen to be customary in other Arab monarchies; Kuwaiti reform has taken a divergent path, despite the royal family not taking an interest in reform. She adds that the concept of indigenous democratisation has been greatly neglected in academic and popular literature because many analysts simply do not see its presence. Tetreault specifically cites the country's *diwaniyyat* as being the quintessential institution of civil society, given that it occupies a special political space because the traditional location of *diwaniyyat* being in the home insulates it from state intervention.

However, where this research will fit into this relatively scarce body of literature on informal politics and expand on Tetreault's findings is in analysing the way in which these spaces have developed over time and by looking at the evolution of the *diwaniyya* in some cases into *muntadas* (political forums) where the thesis will assess to what extent they are still cut off from state meddling or whether the emergence of the increasingly transparent and politicised *diwaniyya* mark the starting point in a period of state-recognised opposition within Kuwait and Bahrain. In addition to this, as Tetreault was specifically referring to the Kuwaiti context, this research will also be the first of its kind to physically conduct field research on Bahraini informal political spaces and form a comparative study of both case designs.

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<sup>27</sup> Bayat, Asef, *Un-Civil Society: The Politics of the 'Informal' People*, London, Routledge, 1997.

Another note to add is that, in contradistinction to Bayat and Tetreault's observations, this research will look to observe the gradual evolution of traditional spaces and on what grounds did the contemporary spaces form. Therefore, the research will look in depth into the nature and role of these political arenas and assess the exact turning points as to when and why they became politically active and moreover how these 'informal' affiliations would become a pivotal factor in the ongoing debate concerning the salience of sectarianism and sectarian attitudes within the Kuwaiti and Bahraini public sphere. By bringing informal political spaces into the framework, particularly in the wake of the Arab uprisings, this will be able to present a challenge to the conventional wisdom on Gulf civil society being relatively quiescent when it comes to political activism.

Simultaneously, the rise of social media in organising demonstrations and meetings has paved the way for youth societies/networks to establish themselves within the arena of 'free-form or informal activism'.<sup>28</sup> Kinninmont and Sirri suggest that many young people, not only within the MENA but throughout the globalised world, cease to see relevance of state-based politics, or state-orientated activism, and are no longer finding meaning in opportunities for traditional modes of affiliation and participation.<sup>29</sup>

As a result, debates have emerged regarding the issue of youth disengagement from political and civil life, as evidenced by conventional measures such as low voter turnout and reduced membership in associations. However, many critics are now pointing to new modes of participation exemplified by anti-corporate globalisation movements and growth of virtual communities. It has become more common to look at spectacular examples of new activism amongst youth as evidence of a generational shift towards unstructured and postmodern politics.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Kinninmont, Jane, and Omar Sirri. *Bahrain: Civil Society and Political Imagination*. London: Chatham House, MENA Programme, 2014.

<sup>30</sup> Harris, Anita, Wyn, Johanna, & Younes, Salem, *Beyond Apathetic or Activist Youth: 'Ordinary' young people and contemporary forms of participation*, Nordic Journal of Youth Research, Sage Publications, 2010, Vol 18, No. 1, p.10.

To summarise, the research will therefore look at how youth societies and networks utilise social media as an opening to engage in domestic politics and how the accessibility of such platforms has paved the way for a new brand of social activism that appeals particularly to younger generations, who in recent times perceive themselves to be politically and economically marginalised. The research will also probe further into who exactly comprises of these networks and will delve into some of the ideological motivations of emerging spaces that are specifically catering for youth.

As mentioned, the research will distinguish itself by incorporating informal spaces into broader civil society discourse, offer a comparative study by assessing their utility in the context of Bahrain and Kuwait where they are becoming an increasingly predominant feature of civic life, and evidence its originality by exploring their interaction with pressing issues of the day that have served to impede effective political participation and reforms. In this case, it is the issue of sectarianism and the ways in which they have approached the topic and how it has manifested in physical terms.

### **1.3 Research Design and Methodology**

One of the primary justifications for the selected case studies is that both Bahrain and Kuwait share a similar case design in many ways and are therefore applicable to the research aims and objectives. Both GCC states are in relatively close geographic proximity, both countries have a similar political model in that they are constitutional monarchies or emirates with Sunni monarchs as the heads of state. Both possess similar laws and implement similar extra-legal measures pertaining to grassroots activism, this will be evident in the background chapter which focuses on both nations' handling of CSOs. Both countries are also home to sizeable Sunni and Shi'i communities which makes the discussion on the sectarian dynamic and its interaction with civil society actors all the more pertinent. However, despite the similarities in case design, there are two notable distinctions which made observing these two countries even more important, and that is, acknowledging the different sectarian demography, with Bahrain having a Shia majority, whilst Kuwait holds a majority Sunni population. In addition to the various types of informal spaces operating in both countries, these factors will shed light on some key distinctions in the way state-societal relations

function in both countries and more importantly how authorities and local communities utilise and respond to events or policies that are construed in sectarian terms.

Kuwait is an intriguing case study to explore as it has had a rather notable and prolonged relationship with the traditional diwaniyya, and moreover the political transformation the space has undergone in recent years following the specific turning points within Kuwaiti and MENA history, referring back to key events that have previously marred inter-communal relations including the invasion of Kuwait, the Iraq war of 2003 and the recent Arab uprisings of 2011. Bahrain also constitutes an important case study in the wake of the Arab revolts that took their toll on the country itself, as the legitimate demands of protest movements seems to underscore prevalent sectarian influences that are both pro- and anti- constitutional reform. Therefore, Bahrain is an intriguing case to see what impact informal political spaces are having on inter-communal relations. In addition to this, little has yet been written on Bahrain's own informal political spaces, the long existence of their own version of the diwaniyya known more broadly in the Gulf as majalis, which the research will aim to investigate the possible reasons as to why they may not be as prominent as their Kuwaiti counterpart, within academic literature.

Another important factor that had to be taken into consideration is the feasibility or the scope of the research project itself, and in particular, the omission of other GCC states from this study. To clarify this point, it should be noted that the author is aware of the development of informal spaces within Saudi Arabia, which likewise boasts a similar tradition of having its own and intellectual salons, despite these spaces operating within a political environment that is narrowly circumscribed.<sup>31</sup> In addition, because research conditions are comparatively so much more difficult in Saudi Arabia, the country was not included in further analysis as it simply would not be feasible in terms of obtaining viable contacts and furthermore, state authorities in Saudi Arabia can be somewhat scrupulous in terms of visa entry when it comes to external researchers and this could cause further complications to the quality of research that could

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<sup>31</sup> Matthiesen, Toby, *Diwaniyyas, Intellectual Salons, and the Limits of Civil Society*, Middle East Institute, <https://www.mei.edu/content/diwaniyyat-intellectual-salons-and-limits-civil-society?print> (accessed: August 14, 2015).

potentially be obtained were the author unable to access certain areas of the country for instance.

Such logistical issues were also part of the rationale as to why the other GCC states were not selected as case studies. Comparing six states would be both time consuming and labour intensive in terms of practically carrying out fieldwork in each country as well as transcribing the data. A comparison of the two states therefore, was seen to be much more feasible and again applicable to the research aims and objectives that were initially set.

In terms of data, the thesis draws on a range of primary and secondary sources ranging from scholarly contributions that specifically deal with theory surrounding the central themes of informal political spaces, civil society and sectarianism. This also includes looking at more subject specific books within the context of Kuwait and Bahrain and cross-referencing scholars with regards to central themes of the research, as well as touching upon informal society in a broader, global context to draw some parallels in observation.

In terms of secondary sources, this research has utilised a plethora of scholarly works pertaining to the chosen research themes, typical bodies of scholarship include those working on civil society in the Middle East and International Relations (I.R.) approaches to sectarianism. This is supplemented by a host of policy papers and reports from various think tanks including the likes of *Brookings Institute*, *Chatham House*, *Carnegie Endowment* and the *Middle East Institute*. They have sought to project the future trajectory of state-societal relations in GCC states and the role civil society may occupy within these countries.

The research project was conducted via direct and indirect (in the form of online discussions) contact with research respondents. The primary research comprised of fifteen interviews in Bahrain (four majalis, two informed outside observers, eight youth/human rights societies, and a civil society group.) and twelve interviews in Kuwait (eight various diwaniyyat and four informed outside observers). This research took place over the duration of six weeks across Bahrain and Kuwait throughout May and June 2014, with follow-up interviews online in 2015. The number of research

participants altogether ranged from approximately 30-40 research participants in total, and this number was adequate enough in terms of elaborating upon the information obtained from the interviews whilst being able to detect anomalies.<sup>32</sup>

In terms of primary sources, the method of inquiry was based on qualitative research; therefore, the nature of the field work was conducted in the form of semi-structured in-depth interviewing and focus groups. This is important from an epistemological standpoint as the research is pertaining to abstract concepts such as sentiment and attitudes of individual participants and therefore qualitative analysis would be more conducive than quantitative. By applying both secondary and primary sources in the form of scholarly discourse, policy papers/media reports as well as the empirical data itself would altogether aid in corroborating the findings and observations that have emerged from this study.

As little prior research has been done on this subject, the author decided to take an inductive approach to the research, having a tentative hypothesis in mind, but consciously acknowledging that these preliminary ideas would be subject to change and would enable the researcher to formulate concrete theories and observations following the transcription of the data.

The justifications for using semi-structured interviewing are therefore several. For one, by having set questions, whilst having the ability to alter or probe further into questions, the chances are better to develop a positive rapport between interviewer and interviewee throughout the conversation, which often enables the participant to feel more comfortable in disclosing relevant information.<sup>33</sup> It also produces better quality responses, in that the participant can talk in detail and disclose the meanings behind a certain action and is able to speak with little direction from the interviewer. This essentially opens the conversation to ideas/thoughts/events that have not been considered by the author prior to the interview. In addition, complex questions and issues can be discussed or clarified, as the interviewer can probe into areas suggested by the respondent's answers, extracting information that had either not occurred to the

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<sup>32</sup> 'Focused Semi-Structured Interviews', <http://www.sociology.org.uk/methfi.pdf> , (accessed: January 28, 2014)

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

interviewer or of which the interviewer had no prior knowledge.<sup>34</sup> Another potential issue that was mitigated by applying semi-structured focused interviews is the matter of pre-judgement. With having only a few carefully selected 'set-questions', the interviewer is not pre-judging what is and what is not important or relevant information.

In terms of focus groups, it was important to opt for focus groups as oppose to employing participant observations. When observing group discussions, there were several advantages that focus groups could offer which participant observations are unable to achieve. The most apparent factor in focus groups is the authoritative role of the moderator; this ensured that the group conversation could retain its research focus, whilst simultaneously encouraging participant engagement without one individual dominating the meeting. Why this is important to bear in mind, is that when it comes to group observation, one issue that may have arose is that research participants may be discussing a topic that is unrelated to the questions that were intended to be addressed. However, by using focus groups instead, this enabled to determine the course of the conversation and to retain its focus on the topic of sectarianism and inter-communal relations.

Another advantage of focus group settings was the ability of group participants to interact with one another. This entails that when the participants were stimulated to discuss a certain issue, the group dynamics could generate new thinking about a topic which can then result in a much more in-depth discussion.<sup>35</sup> Likewise, the dynamic nature of the methodology means the moderator could modify the topics, which are prepared before the session to make the topic more suitable for the purpose.

Another factor which was important particularly when discussing more contentious topics, was the ability to utilise non-verbal communication as a researcher input. Therefore the expression, the attitude of an individual, the intensity of the conversation itself etc could be perceived by the researcher, which can modify the moderator's decision and can be counted in the research result. Finally, because every participant

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Issues including advantages and disadvantages. Available at: <http://focusgroups.pbworks.com/w/page/5677430/Issues%20including%20advantages%20and%20disadvantages> (accessed: Jan 28, 2014).

was under observation by the moderator and everybody knew the process was being recorded, it became somewhat easier to make participants fully engage even during non-discussion time.

Why focus groups were important to this research were for its emphasis on insights rather than rules. In that a focus group can provide trustworthy data that also lead to important insights about human behaviours by allowing all participants to say anything they would like in front of the whole group. Meanwhile, researchers listen not only for the content of discussions but observe something beyond talking, such as tone and emotions which help them to learn or confirm not only the facts but the meaning behind those facts.<sup>36</sup>

The notable distinction between the focus groups and the interviews carried out was that the former took place within the informal space itself (be it the dewanniya or majlis). Therefore, the focus group took the form of a group discussion, typical of any conversation taking place within those spaces, where participants could agree, disagree or interject other research participants. What distinguishes these focus group discussions from ethnographic observations for example, was in the fact that the researcher was dictating the questions to research participants who would then discuss the questions amongst themselves. This would differ from the more conventional interviews with informed outside observers as it would take place on a one-to-one basis with semi-structured questions forming the basis of the interview.

The rationale for omitting formal CSOs from the data gathering was in the admission that many of the participants, be it in the form of focus group discussions or outside observers, were already active members of recognised associations. Therefore, this potential issue is mitigated as many of the participants could already speak authoritatively on the issue of formal civil society. Furthermore, and linking to the broader thesis, the presence of such research participants showcases the cross-fertilisation that is taking place between formal and informal civil society, and how

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<sup>36</sup> 'Focus Group Issues'. Available at: <http://focusgroups.pbworks.com/w/page/5677430/Issues%20including%20advantages%20and%20disadvantages> (accessed: Jan 28, 2014).

these informal spaces can be viewed as socially and politically expedient, depending on the time and context.

In terms of the time frame for analysis, the research observes informal spaces in parallel with key moments in the modern history of sectarianism within the Gulf. Although spaces such as the *diwaniyyat* have been around since time immemorial in the traditional respect, the research explores how informal spaces operated in relation to sectarian ruptures both domestically and on a regional level. The research will aim to start from the 1980s when inspired by the Iranian Revolution in 1979, many *Khaleeji* (people from the Gulf) Shi'ites sought to increase political mobilisation and demanded further social freedoms from their respective governments to alleviate their status as a disenfranchised minority/majority. The research also looked at the impact the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait had on informal spaces in the 1990s, and more recently from 2003 onwards. This timeframe was set with a view to assess what steps or measures informal spaces have made in the last decade in order to curtail or exacerbate sectarian tension between religious communities within the Gulf.

The author would like to note that this thesis has addressed all the ethical issues within the ethical review application and likewise within the risk assessment which have been submitted to the faculty wherein both were accepted, the safety and wellbeing of both research participants and the author were considered in both these applications. Risks that had to be addressed were namely concerning data storage and confidentiality of research participants. All research interviews were safeguarded by being carefully uploaded onto the universities' security-encrypted N-Drive server and confidentiality of the research participants was ensured by anonymising the identities of all research participants. The data was transcribed manually from a Dictaphone and then analysed either via Word Document or more often in written paper format for sake of practicalities, as it enabled the author to make instant comments in response to relevant observations or comments by the research participants. This information was then organised into key common themes (e.g. location of space, scope of autonomy, the role of the state, the role of media etc) that were extrapolated from the data and would go on to form the basis of each section that made up the empirical chapters.

## **1.4 Thesis Structure**

The thesis itself is organised into eight chapters, including the introduction. Chapter 2 reviews the existing bodies of literature pertaining to the research at hand. These include extant literature on civil society in GCC states, the literature on civil society in the MENA region more broadly, and scholarship on the emergence and role of informal societal spaces and groupings in the Gulf region. The literature review serves as a reflection of the ongoing academic debates pertaining to civil society in the MENA region. It focuses on certain theories that have developed and subsequently shaped understandings of the role of civil society, the propensity towards authoritarian rule and how civil society is utilised in that respect, and the proliferation of sub- and supra-state identities due to key turning points in recent years, most notably what entailed the 2003 Iraq war and the 2011 Arab uprisings.

Chapter 3 then proposes theoretical lenses through which it is possible to explore the research questions posed and the empirical data gathered. These lenses combine the notion of the Ideological State Apparatus and incorporates elements of theory grounded in developmental studies; the rights-based approach (RBA) and the multi-dimensional framework which are centred on the utility of space/location and the discussions that arise from those spaces themselves. Again, this approach departs from traditional notions of civil society, which have too often focused on organisations. By applying these frameworks, this provided the research with a means to broaden the perceived requisites as to what can be treated as civil society.

Following on from this, Chapter 4 provides further insights into the nature and role of Kuwaiti and Bahrain informal spaces, how they compare to one another, the various types of informal spaces that exist in both countries, and where they fit within the broader context of civil society. It also explores the dynamics of state-societal relations and their impact on formal civil organisations as well as the legal framework that formal CSOs operate in, in contrast to informal political spaces.

The background chapter is then followed by three empirical chapters which seek to offer a snapshot of the various ways in which informal civil society functions in its approach to sectarian relations in both Bahrain and Kuwait. The key themes that arose

from the empirical data collated by the author are 1) the location of such spaces, 2) the activities research participants partake in and 3) what those spaces represent to people who actively participate within them. Chapter 5 incorporates these themes by focusing on the operationalisation of the informal space and with it, the emphasis on locality and the specific activities partaken within the informal space itself.

Taking a top-down perspective, Chapter 6 then explores the prevailing sectarian narratives that have been perpetuated at the state level and in wider society, and to examine how the Kuwaiti and Bahraini regimes have sought to reinforce their own ISA's through several themes that emerged from the empirical data. Those themes being the impact and role external/regional events are having at a domestic level and the role that education and media have played in public discourse.

Chapter 7 is the final empirical chapter which explores the traditional and emerging informal spaces under the broader rubric of civil society within Kuwait and Bahrain and linking it back to theoretical contributions by assessing whether informal spaces can be positioned within this broader framework or whether informal civil society should be defined as something completely distinct from traditional civil society organisations in the Gulf. More pertinent to the research aims and objectives, this chapter sets out to examine at what juncture informal spaces could be influencing sectarian discourse, and what active steps are being taken at the grassroots more broadly in addressing the increasingly pertinent issue of sectarianism in both countries.

Finally, a conclusion that brings together the key observations and arguments that can be taken away from the research collated while conducting fieldwork in Kuwait and Bahrain and assessing whether there is scope for further analysis into informal civil society in the Middle East.

## **2. Literature Review**

Given that this thesis is concerned with the role of informal political spaces and the relationship/impact it has on inter-communal relations, this chapter will set out to review the existing bodies of literature pertaining to the study at hand. These include 1) the extant civil society literature on GCC states, 2) The literature on civil society in the MENA region more broadly, and 3) scholarship on the emergence and role of informal societal spaces and groupings in the Arab world/Gulf region.

What becomes apparent throughout existing scholarship on these chosen themes, is that there is an extensive coverage of formal civil society in general, and this has been debated and observed namely through the lens of democratisation; with the notion that civil society can act as a conduit to bring about democratic change and reforms within the MENA region and the other scholarly body being centred around authoritarian resilience, which takes a look at the mechanisms at the state's disposal to co-opt and render civil society ineffective and can even buttress authoritarian rule. Considering these debates, what is evident is that there has been little reference made to the existence and emergence of an informal civil society, not at least in the commentary on civil society in the MENA region or more specifically within the Gulf States. Furthermore, what has been presented, has rarely, if ever, addressed civil society vis-à-vis inter-communal relations or the issue of sectarianism and the formation of sectarian articulations.

Conversely, examining the literature on sectarianism, the debates are often framed via primordialist or instrumentalist approaches, with the former body dominated by orientalist scholars who forward the idea of sectarianism being an impermeable feature of societies in the Middle East, alluding to the idea that sectarian expressions and contestations are almost a self-fulfilled prophecy or an inevitable reality. Whereas in an attempt to demystify sectarianism, advocates of the instrumentalist approach, often posited by International Relations (I.R) scholars, take a top-down perspective on sectarianism by presenting contemporary points of rapprochement and division as evidence to suggest that inter-communal tensions are in fact a contemporary prejudice born of out greater power machinations and can be reconciled as oppose to being perceived as some unbridgeable gulf.

With that in mind, this research has identified a gap within existing debates by looking to identify civil society's engagement and interaction with sectarianism and sectarian discourse, something which neither approach has sought to observe. Furthermore, by shedding light on the relationship between civil society and sectarianism, this will account for the bottom-up forces that can potentially influence and contribute to the trajectory and perception of sectarian relations in certain contexts, in this case, Bahrain and Kuwait, which has been explored by focusing on the agency of informal civic spaces.

Firstly, it is important to observe some of the classical works that have investigated state formation in Bahrain and Kuwait and how it informs some of the key research themes for this thesis. One of which is how sectarian dynamics has impacted the trajectory of inter-communal perceptions over the course of the states' founding. F I Khuri in his seminal 1980 work on *Tribe and State in Bahrain*, documents how the modern state of Bahrain had been built on the military submission of the native Arab Shia *Baharna* population. This was carried out by a coalition of Sunni tribes from the centre of the Arabian Peninsula, *Najd*, by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. Khuri describes how Sunni conquerors who monopolised political and economic power imposed a quasi-feudal system of exploitation on the Bahraini peasantry.<sup>37</sup> In more recent times, the lack of formal recruitment procedures in the public sector reinforced the feeling that a small clique controlled the country, as employment was largely obtained through personal contacts.<sup>38</sup> This facilitated the monopolisation of entire sectors of the bureaucracy by one family, social or ethnic network with top positions being largely held by those with close ties to the ruling family.

In terms of the historical context of civic activism within the Gulf, Rumaihi documents important labour movements that were influential for political mobilisation in Bahrain. This movement emerged from the first great strike of 1938, organised by the Bahraini workers of the Bahrain Petroleum Company (BAPCO). During this strike the labor

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<sup>37</sup> Khuri, Fuad I, *Tribe and State in Bahrain. The Transformation of Social and Political Authority in an Arab State*. Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1980, p. 35.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, p. 123.

leaders connected with the merchant community who had launched an initiative to demand the establishment of a legislative body. The merchants, in their nascent struggle for power sharing, were amenable to the incorporation of some of the specific demands of Bahraini BAPCO workers into their agenda. While the term did not appear as such, Bahrainisation, or the idea that Bahrainis should be given priority over foreigners for employment, became a core demand of political mobilisation.<sup>39</sup> This mobilisation led to the creation of a trade union, the Bahrain Labor Federation (October 1955) with 6000 members, and the drafting of labor legislation subsequently submitted to the rulers.<sup>40</sup>

Within the Kuwaiti context, scholars such as Farah al-Nakib who has documented public spaces from 1938 – 2012 within Kuwait, makes specific reference to the semi-private spaces of the diwaniyat and other CSOs in giving form to the discursive public sphere. Furthermore, al-Nakib highlights how since the beginnings of associational life in Kuwait stemming from the 1940s, social and voluntary clubs were overshadowing the impact that diwaniyat once traditionally occupied.

“From the late 1940s onwards, newspapers and civil society organizations emerged as ‘new mediated forms of social exchange’ in Kuwait that became prominent tools of opposition. Technically classified as social or sports clubs, voluntary associations were hubs of political activity during the 1950s nationalist movement (*al haraka al-qawmiyya*)...The relocation of the townspeople to new residential areas after 1950 also meant that diwaniyat gradually ceased to be a feature of the city center. Suburbanized diwaniyat continued to be important spaces of expression and debate, but their role as bases of political participation, organization and opposition was overshadowed by the new social clubs, whose headquarters were in the city center. It was in clubs rather than in diwaniyat that the ‘young reformist movement’ met to discuss social and political issues.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Rumaihi, Mohammed G, *Bahrain: Social and Political Change since the First World War*, London, Bowker, Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies of the University of Durham, 1976, p. 197.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, pp. 214-215.

<sup>41</sup> Al-Nakib, Farah, *Public space and public protest in Kuwait, 1938 –2012*, City, Routledge, Vol. 18, No. 6, 2014, pp. 727-728

However, both diwaniyat and civil society organisations still served as a form of political commons, as a place for open discussion and debate over what power is doing and how best to oppose its reach. After their relocation outside the city center, civil society organizations became similar to diwaniyat in that they straddled ‘the public–private divide’. Both were semi-public spaces in the otherwise privatised world of the suburbs; yet both were semi-private despite being technically open to the public.<sup>42</sup>

## 2.1 Civil Society Literature on the MENA Region

When it comes to broader discussions on the status of civil society, the existing scholarship concerning civil society within the Gulf, and more broadly the Middle East, has given rise to two ongoing debates. The first of those seeks to assess the chances of an Arab civil society living up to its name, by forming a space that leads to democratisation, and has been intrinsically linked to political change. The second, which in part underpins the first discussion, centres on what constitutes ‘civil society’; an important question for those who seek to identify and emphasise the cultural component that is said to be impeding on a functioning civil society coming to the fore.<sup>43</sup>

Proponents of Eurocentric conceptualisations of civil society, most notably western liberal definitions, have long maintained that civil society requires a functional relationship with the state, moreover it requires a legally mandated autonomy involving rights guaranteed by the state. It should also be noted that commentators such as Gellner<sup>44</sup> and Shils<sup>45</sup> posit the view that civil society should be based on strictly voluntary associations between state and citizenry and not on any ethnic or religious considerations. However, the issue with applying this notion is that it simply has not proven to be the case in the context of Bahrain and Kuwait or for the MENA region more broadly, which then raises the question of whether civil society in the Middle East

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<sup>42</sup> Tétreault, M A, *Civil Society in Kuwait: Protected Spaces and Women’s Rights*, Middle East Journal, 1993, p. 279.

<sup>43</sup> Nonneman, Gerd. "Rentiers and Autocrats, Monarchs and Democrats, State and Society: The Middle East Between Globalization, Human 'Agency', and Europe." *International Affairs*, 2001, 141-62.

<sup>44</sup> Gellner, E, "The Importance of being modular" *Civil Society: Theory, history, comparison*, (1995) 32-55.

<sup>45</sup> Shils, E, "The Virtue of Civility: Selected Essays on Liberalism", *Tradition and Civil Society*, edited by Steven Grosby, Indianapolis, Liberty Fund, (1997), 339.

ought to be treated differently by incorporating an expanded definition of the term that is not construed solely in relational terms to the state. This offers further justification to consider the informal sector as a more authentic mode of associational life, as it does not face the same restrictions that recognised CSOs often encounter when dealing with the relevant ministries that monitor their activities.

Therefore, when approaching the relevant academic discourse on civil society in the Gulf States and more broadly within the MENA region, it is important to note three key approaches that have been used to promote the various positions taken up by scholars in the field. These positions all relate back to broader discussions concerning what exactly constitutes civil society, what is its designated role and function and to what extent are CSOs in the Arab world effective in bringing about democratic reform. The various bodies of literature that have emerged out of the topic on civil society (e.g. be it civil society and democratisation, civil society and authoritarian survival, civil society and rentierism, monarchical exceptionalism). These bodies of literature can be understood via three approaches: *Cultural*, *institutional* and *strategic*.

With regards to the discourse on authoritarianism and to explain the salient correlation between regime type and regime persistence, particularly within Arab monarchies including the GCC states, several analysts have pointed to culture, institutions and the strategies employed by these regimes or a combination of these factors to explain how these absolute monarchies have managed to maintain power. The cultural approach for example, has long maintained that Arab kingships enjoy traditional religious and tribal legitimacy which induces exceptionally loyal support from its citizens.<sup>46</sup> The Gulf States have grown accustomed to employing a range of cultural norms and premises to their advantage, whether it is Islam, nationalist sentiment or patrimonialism. Scholars who propose this approach have argued that such prevalent features in the region have been influential in enabling authoritarian governments to retain evocative and emotional links with a broad spectrum of society.

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<sup>46</sup> Yom, Sean L., and F. Gregory Gause. "Resilient Royals: How Arab Monarchies Hang On." *Journal of Democracy* 23, no. 4 (2012): 74-88.

Arising out of the literature on civil society and democratisation, the cultural component seeks to distance itself from socio-economic factors and focus on observing the cultural prerequisites to democratisation. Offering the case of Yemen, the work of Carapico incorporates the prevalent stereotype that there is something inherent in Arab/Islamic culture that prevents the emergence of a viable civil society.<sup>47</sup> Carapico comes to this conclusion vis-à-vis the Yemeni case, as the conditions are said to be too 'primitive' and 'primordial' to warrant any hopes for an effective civil society to flourish, advancing the view that 'mechanisms rooted within Yemeni culture as well as forms imported from abroad are put to various uses in struggles to improve both welfare and freedom.'<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, Carapico illustrates that when political openings do emerge i.e. in the context of regime change, civic activity is inhibited once more in the wake of repression; by which the state is dependent on co-opting civil society for its own survival. 'Each period of repression yielded a new regime needful of civic-state building efforts to fortify itself.'<sup>49</sup>

What renders civil society in the Arab world to be all but futile (according to advocates of the cultural approach) is premised in the assertion that patriarchal and tribal mentality acts as an impediment to the development of pluralist values.<sup>50</sup> In addition, this not only makes Arab citizens prone to accept patrimonial norms, but perhaps more crucially it effectively undermines efforts to foster a sense of national unity, which has been posited by several scholars over the years as a key prerequisite to achieving successful democratisation.<sup>51</sup> However it must be emphasised that these observations are premised on a liberal/institutional conceptualisation of civil society, and has not incorporated or taken into account the alternative modes of civic activities and participatory politics that is characteristic of informal civil society.

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<sup>47</sup> Carapico, Sheila. *Civil Society in Yemen the Political Economy of Activism in Modern Arabia*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>50</sup> Sharabi, Hisham. *Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

<sup>51</sup> Rustow, Dankwart A. "Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model." *Comparative Politics* 2, no. 3 (1970): 350-51.

Expanding on this view and pertaining closer to the interests and objectives of this research, recent observers such as Posusney, makes an interesting observation in singling out ethnic divisions, and namely sectarianism as an impediment to democratisation and ultimately the emergence of an effective civil society. 'Indeed, the ethnic divisions that are complicating the US effort to democratise Iraq have led numerous pundits to view sectarianism as the main barrier to democratisation in the region as a whole.'<sup>52</sup> Scholars such as Michael Herb have also corroborated with Posusney in that ethnic divisions pose a salient barrier to the development of parliamentarianism in several Arab monarchies. 'In Jordan', he observes, 'sectarian divisions in society are reflected in malapportioned electoral districts, which weakens the legitimacy of the legislature itself. One reason for the very limited powers that the Bahraini ruling family grants to the country's parliament is that the royalty is Sunni, whereas the country's majority population is Shi'ite.'<sup>53</sup>

Although Herb et al do not claim sectarian divisions to be a necessary or a sufficient condition to impede on democratic processes, they do concede to it emerging as a contributing factor to the robust presence of authoritarian rule in the region.

Examining this phenomenon more closely within the Bahraini context, Jane Kinninmont and Omar Sirri illustrate the impact recent events (namely the conflicts in Syria and Iraq) are having both domestically and across the region. The report highlights how political groupings formed across sectarian lines throughout the region have hampered the effective functioning of civil society. They do however acknowledge the prominent role that youth groups (both in Bahrain and across the MENA region) have played in bringing about change.<sup>54</sup>

They cite government repression and political polarisation as the chief causes for Bahrain's civil society to be damaged and divided in recent years, as the 2011/2012 uprising and the subsequent crackdown on pro-democracy protestors had proven to

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<sup>52</sup> Posusney, Marsha Pripstein. "The Middle East's Democracy Deficit in Comparative Perspective." In *Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Regimes and Resistance*, 4-5. Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2005.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Kinninmont, Jane, and Omar Sirri. *Bahrain: Civil Society and Political Imagination*. London: Chatham House, MENA Programme, 2014. 5.

be socially divisive. However, they do believe there is scope for change, as many Bahraini citizens can envisage the political conflict from multiple perspectives and have friends and relatives across the political divide. However, those seeking political reconciliation through effective dialogue would be inhibited by government restrictions on civil society effectively silencing any credible opposition and the media, which like other neighbouring countries, is state-regulated and critical voices are few and far between.<sup>55</sup>

This is telling in Kinninmont and Sirri's observations that there is a strong desire for genuine or perceivably more authentic forms of civic activism that can mobilise people and counter prevailing sectarian narratives, particularly from youth groups who are looking to circumvent the mechanisms that are utilised by the state. 'Today's younger generation activists and civil society movements are increasingly interconnected with international NGOs, trade unions and campaigners. However, the strong sectarian narrative pushed by other governments in the Arab region against the Bahraini opposition has left both the formal opposition and civil society groups critical of the government with only a limited number of regional allies.'<sup>56</sup>

One interesting point the authors do raise regarding the existing limitations on civil society is that there are Bahraini activists and civil society groups trying to move beyond the political and sectarian interpretation of how conflicts in the region have evolved. It must be noted, however, that many anti-sectarian activists are deeply demoralised to see how inclusive projects or shows of solidarity in Bahrain can make any difference when sectarian violence in the region has become so pronounced (namely in Syria and Iraq). This is evidenced in a case back in 2011, where efforts to organise a joint Bahraini and Syrian protest demonstrations that were to march on the two countries' neighbouring embassies foundered because of political polarisation along sectarian lines. In general, both in Bahrain and elsewhere in the region many of the civil society groups and idealistic young activists who played a key role in protests in 2011 are struggling not only with a loss of morale but also with a sense of

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Kinninmont, Jane, and Omar Sirri. *Bahrain: Civil Society and Political Imagination*. London: Chatham House, MENA Programme, 2014. 28.

powerlessness. This is true especially of those who want to avoid sectarianism and eschew violence but see the region on the whole moving in the wrong direction.<sup>57</sup> Once again, this could be the case for registered youth societies, but has not necessarily included the work of young activists and spaces that operate outside the confines of the state and are able to mobilise on a consistent basis.

In the context of Kuwait, cultural approaches to the study of civil society has been centred around debates on the notion of citizenship. Longva posits the view that 'citizenship' rather than being treated as some abstract institution that comes with a string of rights and responsibilities attached to it, is a relationship between individual and state, a complexity mediated by ideas of authority, legitimacy and allegiance. Longva argues that these ideas are rooted in cultural constructs that are subject to social circumstances and historical variations. In the case of Kuwait, both Longva and Tetreault, not only clarify the distinction between European and Kuwaiti conceptualisations of citizenship, but also the 'complexities and variations...in the way the different groups in Kuwaiti society understand the concept.'<sup>58</sup>

Tetreault expands on this distinction between *hadhar* (urban) and *badu* (tribal) conceptualisations of citizenship. 'Urban Kuwaitis share a cultural understanding of citizenship very similar to that of Europeans...While Kuwaiti *hadhar* experience citizenship in the context of modernity with its emphasis on equality and autonomy, significant numbers of tribally oriented Kuwaitis remain part of the old imagining. They are subjects of a ruler, personally tied to him by two-way vertical bonds of status and obligation.'<sup>59</sup>

Longva also notes that in contrast to *hadhar*, the tribes in Kuwait understand nationality and citizenship in the sense of *taba'iyya*, which can be translated as "following" or "allegiance" to a leader, in this case Kuwait's ruling family, Al-Sabah. The *jidhr* or "root verb" of *taba'iyya* means, among other things, to walk behind someone,

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 29-30.

<sup>58</sup> Longva, Anh Nga. *Citizenship in the Gulf States: Conceptualization and Practice*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000. 179-180.

<sup>59</sup> Tetreault, Mary Ann. *Stories of Democracy Politics and Society in Contemporary Kuwait*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000. 47.

to be subordinate to, to be under someone's command. The concept is evidently built on a notion of hierarchy and vertical allegiance, as oppose to the idea of similarity and horizontal solidarity more commonplace amongst urban Kuwaitis.<sup>60</sup>

Why these distinctive conceptualisations of citizenship within Kuwait are significant when trying to understand the cultural factors that have arguably impeded on associational life, is that the Al-Sabah monarchy (alongside several other regimes where a strong tribal/traditionalist element prevails) have utilised this latter model to shore up both their own legitimacy and the nation-building exercise. Again, this feeds into an earlier point as to the patrimonial ties that are said to prioritise allegiance to the ruling family, hence why some observers, like Longva and Tetreault who put forward these cultural explanations, conclude that citizens within these absolute monarchies are by and large apathetic to any form of civic activism.<sup>61</sup>

However, cultural explanations of civil society and the persistence of authoritarian rule have been largely contested throughout several bodies of literature. On the role of Islam for instance, Nonneman demonstrates how much of the extant scholarship on political Islam has corroborated in establishing that, in terms of political implications, there are many Islams; that there is nothing in the faith that is intrinsically incompatible with democracy, a political participation more broadly, and that there is both authoritarian and pluralist trends in past and present Islamic socio-political and legal theory as well as practice.<sup>62</sup> This is evidenced in the works of Kramer<sup>63</sup> and Ayubi<sup>64</sup>.

Likewise, within the literature on monarchical exceptionalism, Yom and Gause present a scathing rebuttal of the culturalist approach. 'Cultural arguments recycle old orientalist logic, are patently unfalsifiable, and ignore the historical reality that powerful ruling elites (including those in the Gulf) owe much of their modern power to colonial

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<sup>60</sup> Longva, Anh Nga. *Citizenship in the Gulf States: Conceptualization and Practice*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Nonneman, Gerd. "Rentiers and Autocrats, Monarchs and Democrats, State and Society: The Middle East Between Globalization, Human 'Agency', and Europe." *International Affairs*, 2001, 143-144.

<sup>63</sup> Kramer, Gundrun, 'Islamist notions of democracy', in Joel Benin and Joe Stork, eds, *Political Islam*, London, I B Tauris, 1997.

<sup>64</sup> Ayubi, Nazih, *Political Islam*, London, Routledge, 1991.

machinations rather than indigenous forces.<sup>65</sup> Following on from this logic, they argue that such explanations do not hold up under close scrutiny, citing the example of Bahrain as a near successful attempt at a social revolution and mass mobilisation were it not for intervention from GCC forces spearheaded by the Saudis who came into Bahrain to prop up the Al Khalifa monarchy.

Another approach to the study of civil society in the MENA region and in particular the dynamics of state-societal relations, is the institutional perspective. Unlike the cultural approach, which argues that loyalty to the state stems from traditional religious and tribal legitimacy, the discourse on institutions contends that because monarchs organisationally stand above everyday politics and possess the ability to skilfully intervene in the political system (i.e. amending the constitution) to spearhead controlled reforms that defuse public discontent. Dynasticism (a particular feature of Kuwait and Bahrain) wherein royal blood relatives monopolise key state offices, aids in keeping the regime intact.<sup>66</sup> It must be noted that although they do not advocate the institutional approach themselves, observers such as Yom and Gause do think it holds more credibility when compared to the cultural factors that are said to impede civil society, in that monarchs in liberalised monarchies often outmanoeuvre opposition by offering limited democratic openings.<sup>67</sup>

More broadly in reference to the democracy debate on the MENA region as a whole, Eva Bellin, one of several scholars who focuses on institutions, has also repudiated the seemingly orientalist logic, noting that other world cultures, notably Catholicism and Confucianism have at different times been accused of incompatibility with democracy. Nevertheless she observes, 'these cultural endowments have not prevented countries in Latin America, Southern Europe or East Asia from democratising.'<sup>68</sup> Bellin, who rejects both cultural and socio-economic prerequisites to understanding the absence of democratic structures, rather she attributes the

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<sup>65</sup> Yom, Sean L., and F. Gregory Gause. "Resilient Royals: How Arab Monarchies Hang On." *Journal of Democracy* 23, no. 4 (2012): 75.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Bellin, Eva. "The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective." *Comparative Politics* 36, no. 2 (2004): 139-57.

robustness of authoritarian regimes to the presence of institutional factors, in particular those that strengthen the coercive apparatuses of these governments.

Although it must be stressed that she does recognise rentier income to be salient, in that it contributes to the ability of authoritarian incumbents to maintain extensive and effective security agencies. Bellin also maintains that fiscal health is essential for rewarding those individuals who comprise the state's coercive apparatus, whilst the MENA region on the whole is distinguished by the markedly high proportion of government expenditure devoted to security.<sup>69</sup>

Other advocates of the institutional perspective like Longohr highlight the futility of CSOs as vehicles for change. She argues that in terms of NGOs, these have negative ramifications for Arab democratisation, as NGOs single-issue focus and dependence on foreign funding render them unable to mobilise and maintain widespread support.<sup>70</sup> Longohr's position has been corroborated by other scholars such as Carothers, who came to the conclusion that in terms of scholarly and policy analysis on democratisation in the region, it is more important to focus less on the role of NGOs and more on the importance of developing viable political parties.<sup>71</sup>

It becomes evident that these analysts feel it is imperative to look beyond the traditional confines of civil society that has been often cited as ineffective and redundant, particularly within the democratisation literature, that has demonstrated civil society to not only be susceptible to government interference but as mentioned in the background chapter when discussing the impediments of formal civil society, it can also serve to reinforce the strength of government institutions by acting as a form of state corporatism. This again could signify the need to observe more casual or fluid spaces that are more transparent in the way they function, by operating within the private sphere.

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<sup>69</sup> Posusney, Marsha Pripstein. "The Middle East's Democracy Deficit in Comparative Perspective." In *Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Regimes and Resistance*, 6. Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2005.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>71</sup> Carothers, Thomas. "The End Of The Transition Paradigm." *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 1 (2002): 5-21.

In addition to this, they argue that the reason the promotion of civil society, economic development and sanctions have not led to political reform in the Arab world is that none of these variables address the real obstacles to facilitating change in the region, which according to such scholars, are flawed institutions. According to Cook, institutions are the organisations, arrangements, laws, decrees and regulations that constitute the political rules of the game in any given society. Contrary to conventional wisdom, Arab states in fact boast a considerable number of institutions, the problem however is not the number but the nature by which these institutions operate.

Across the Arab world, and likewise within Gulf States, these institutions are tailored to ensure the authoritarian character of the regimes. Rather than guarantee rights or give citizens a voice, Arab political institutions are inclined to restrict political participation, limit individual freedoms and vest overwhelming powers in the executive branch of government. As of yet, discourse on Arab reform seems to have achieved little with regards to institutional change. Minor modifications have been made in some parts, but these are often viewed as token reforms again to temporarily quell dissent. Cook offers the example of Bahrain in 2002, when it initiated an experiment in political liberalisation, however this was soon to be undermined as authorities clamped down on CSOs in the country, including the closing down of Bahrain's leading human rights organisation and jailed its leader. This is also the case in Qatar where despite the promulgation of a new constitution in September 2004 saw greater political liberties, it simultaneously enshrined the absolute power of the emir and his family.<sup>72</sup>

Other readers such as Kazziha, who focuses on political liberalisation in the Middle East, combines both cultural and institutional variables to highlight the nature of political consciousness in the Arab world, where he claims it derives mainly from the education system, mass communication and the media. Unlike in the West, the prevalent education systems in the Middle East did not provide a breeding ground for the growth of democracy. Instead creating a political consciousness which features combinations of submissiveness, narrowness and dogmatism.<sup>73</sup> With regards to mass

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<sup>72</sup> Cook, Steven A. "The Right Way to Promote Arab Reform." In *Democracy in the Middle East*, 47. New York: Infobase Publishing, 2007.

<sup>73</sup> Kazziha, Walid. "Political Consciousness and the Crisis of Political Liberalisation in the Arab World." *Bound to Cooperate—Europe and the Middle East*, 2000: 342-358.

communication and media, TV remains to be the most important medium, as these were state-controlled for many years until the proliferation of satellite TV channels.

Again, this is one area that existing commentary has failed to address within the context of civil society in the Gulf region, as mass communication and media outlets traditionally constitute an integral part of civil society. The role of media particularly within the authoritarian context is integral in addressing some of the primary objectives of this research, as it serves as a reflection of how individual CSOs and civil society more broadly view and manage issues pertaining to sectarianism and sectarian relations. Especially within the Arab world, where regional mass media outlets play such a pivotal role in determining public opinion.<sup>74</sup> It will also become evident further on in the data analysis sections of this research, how much of an influential role both these outlets and social media plays within informal civic spaces.

Coming back to the discourse on institutions, one explanation for the ineffectiveness of civil society therefore comes from the need to reform state institutions. Berman, highlighting the Egyptian case makes an interesting assertion, in that the growth of civil society should not be considered as an indisputable good, but rather a politically neutral multiplier – neither inherently ‘good’ or ‘bad’ but dependant for its effects on the wider political environment and the values of those who control it.

Those addressing the need to reform institutions do believe, however, that the benefits of associationalism according to civil society advocates (particularly notable in the 1990s with scholars such as Norton and Ibrahim), providing individuals with political and social skills, creating bonds among citizens, facilitating mobilisation, decreasing barriers to collective action, training activists and leaders do clearly exist. However, where they differ is that these strategies can of course facilitate antidemocratic as well as democratic trends. Where this research will therefore seek to expand on previous observations, is by viewing the emerging informal spaces and to see whether they have been able to effectively replace existing civic societies that have been co-opted

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<sup>74</sup> Zayani, Mohamed, “Al Jazeera and the Vicissitudes of the New Arab Mediascape” chapter in *The Al Jazeera Phenomenon: Critical Perspectives on New Arab Media*, Pluto Press, London, 2005, p.9.

by the state, and to shift the debate away from democratisation to sectarianism which as previously alluded to has seldom been discussed in existing literature.

For Berman and others, if civil society is promoted in the context of weak, illegitimate states, Western donors may find themselves unwilling or indirectly furthering the cause of revolutionary movements, rather than assisting in a benign process of democratic development.<sup>75</sup> Therefore, it goes to show that advocates of this approach sought to move away from strengthening civil society itself and rather focus on developing more effective and responsive political institutions, which should in turn open up the prospects for a better functioning civil society. This stands in contrast to earlier scholars in the 1990s, like Norton and Ibrahim, who called for more endorsement of civil society which as shown may only have a limited impact and could perhaps even serve to exacerbate political instability and violence.

Within the literature on authoritarian survival, Norton would find himself asking a decade on why regimes in the region are so resistant to reform. As well as acknowledging other scholarship on authoritarian survival, his analysis on the external perspective would contradict earlier advocates of the cultural approach to understanding the inevitable flaws within Arab civil society. Kazemi and Norton, find that the root of some of the Middle East's problems can be traced back to crises associated with its emergence from the nineteenth and twentieth century Western colonialism and other forms of external domination following the Second World War. International forces, actors and groups have historically played important roles in the politics of the region, none more so than in the Gulf where Western allies have repeatedly offered impunity to these regimes as a result of vested security and economic interests. The vast oil and gas resources of Middle East and its vital role in the economy of the industrialised world have transformed the region into a centre of great economic importance to the outside world. This indigenous wealth has had the unintended consequence of exacerbating both political and economic problems in the region. They go on to speculate about the economic potential of the region if serious conflicts, such as the Arab-Israeli disputes were resolved.

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<sup>75</sup> Berman, Sheri. "Islamism, Revolution, and Civil Society." *Perspectives on Politics*, 2003, 266.

For Kazemi and Norton, the notion that Muslims or Arabs are unwilling to embrace democracy for deeply-seated cultural reasons simply does not weigh up, citing earlier work to show that they have been quite adept at forming political parties, interest groups and building effective coalitions. What makes these associations redundant, is the political economy of the contemporary gulf state, found within rentier literature, which they believe to be most compelling argument for the absence of social reform, the ineffectiveness of recognised CSOs and consequently the robustness of authoritarianism.<sup>76</sup>

Following on from this, the most sophisticated response to understanding the limitations on existing civil society and where this research aims to expand on, is via the strategic explanation, or what can be most commonly described to as political-economy approaches. Such arguments originally arose in the 1980s to explain the deviation of the region's wealthiest oil exporters from the correlation between countries with high per capita wealth and democracy. Civil society in several of the GCC (Gulf Co-operation Council) states utilise oil revenues as a major source of their economy and this enhances the state's ability to influence civil society, particularly with regard to funding, as the relevant state ministry often acts as the sole donor to registered CSOs. Within the Gulf States, the governments are the main resource for funding such organisations that operate as partners to the governments; consequently, civil society can hardly become autonomous from the government or the source of funding and the controller as well.<sup>77</sup>

According to early theorists proposing this view, oil revenues allow the state to undercut existing social groups and pre-empt the formation of new ones. Those revenues allow the state to lavishly provide resources, ranging from employment to housing and welfare that other social groups once provided or would come to provide in the absence of such wealthy states. More importantly, these revenues give the state the power to weaken social groups by co-opting them collectively or by fragmenting

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<sup>76</sup> Kazemi, Farhad, and Augustus Richard Norton. "Authoritarianism, Civil Society and Democracy in the Middle East: Mass Media in the Persian Gulf." *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* 40, no. 2 (2006): 201-02.

<sup>77</sup> Al Alekr, A, "Civil Society in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region: A literature Review, *The National Center for Studies*, Manama, Kingdom of Bahrain, (2010), 5-7.

them through selective co-optation of key members. This is the key premise by which rentier literature argues that oil revenues enable the state to weaken civil society.<sup>78</sup>

For Crystal, this enables us to understand why societal pressures for change might be muted and why governments might be able to contain even those muted pressures. It must also be noted that this was prior to several liberalisation programs in the early 2000s, Gulf monarchs had shown considerable antipathy to organised groups, even groups with seemingly apolitical motivations. They have gone to some lengths to prevent, pre-empt or remove a variety of social organisations.<sup>79</sup> However, Crystal notes that organised and independent groups with interests that demand to be accounted are present in the Gulf, actively petitioning the rulers. Something that is demonstrated within the discourse in more recent years.

As illustrated, some of the scepticism surrounding the utility of civil society in achieving democratic and social reforms had even been apparent within the discourse from the 1990s, during a time when, as previously mentioned, civil society was viewed propitiously. Even within the context of Kuwait, Hicks and al-Najjar, had noted how civil society institutions in Kuwait had developed in a political environment of controlled pluralism. They claim that there is a direct correlation between increase in oil revenues and the Al-Sabah's family influence, as the state would go on to take up primarily distributive functions and had no need to raise revenues from the population through taxation. The government permitted opposition movements to organise and express their opinions within professional associations, religious groups and cultural societies. However, the state maintained the power to suppress any group that went 'too far' in its criticisms and demands.<sup>80</sup>

Moving on to the broader scholarship on monarchical exceptionalism, advocates of the strategic approach to civil society suggest that what makes these states unique are the ways in which they penetrate their societies to implement policies and their

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<sup>78</sup> Crystal, Jill. "Civil Society in the Arab Gulf States." In *Toward Civil Society in the Middle East?*, 61. London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1995.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Hicks, Neil, and Ghanim Al-Najjar. "Civil Society in Kuwait." In *Toward Civil Society in the Middle East?*, 59. London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1995.

ability to safeguard their societies against pressures from regional and international systems.<sup>81</sup> Following this logic, the Gulf States are a case in point; oil wealth has undoubtedly served to buffer the external pressures on regimes' political capacity. The ruling monarchs can justify their existence and convey support for their legitimacy by ensuring that oil wealth benefits the indigenous population. Rentier politics has featured within the discourse on authoritarian survival, as it is thought by several scholars as being antithetical to democracy as these polities usually utilise their wealth to effectively bribe their society and to acquire the support of some people to enhance their control over the state.<sup>82</sup>

Expanding on this idea of monarchical exceptionalism, Yom and Gause, offer a strategic explanation or political economy approach that links the historical legacy of domestic choices with a permissive international environment. They offer three key arguments, one of which incorporates and expands on the earlier rentier literature to explain the persistence of Arab monarchies, which in turn can be utilised to explain the state of civil society more recently within the GCC. One of those arguments is that the monarchies have a record of mobilising cross-cutting coalitions of popular support, coalitions that have assisted in forestalling mass opposition and to bolster the ruling family against whatever opposition emerged.<sup>83</sup>

The second key argument which incorporates past rentier theories is the irrefutable fact that despite the claim that rentier politics does not feature as much compared to previous decades, it is evident that these states still reap ample rents from oil and foreign aid, allowing them to pay for welfare and development initiatives that are designed to alleviate public discord. Finally, the last argument, which is the claim that has arguably received least attention throughout existing discourse pertaining to civil society and Gulf states, is that when all else fails, these kingdoms have continued to benefit from the backing of foreign patrons who assist these monarchies through diplomatic assurances, economic grants and most notably within the context of

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<sup>81</sup> Hassan, Hamdi, "Civil Society and democratization in the Arab world", *Power to the people*, 2010.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.

<sup>83</sup> Yom, Sean L., and F. Gregory Gause. "Resilient Royals: How Arab Monarchies Hang On." *Journal of Democracy* 23, no. 4 (2012)

Bahrain, military interventions.<sup>84</sup> It must be noted that the US administration had played a pivotal role in offering international impunity to these absolute monarchies.

According to Yom and Gause, explanations for regimes of an exceptional type need not abide by essentialist logic suggesting that some innate feature such as cultural inheritance or institutional destiny predetermines long-term outcomes. They go onto re-assert that prospects for popular revolutions in the Arab kingdoms will remain minimal, so long as their leaders continue to maintain broad-based coalitions, secure access to hydrocarbon rents and enjoy ample support from foreign patrons.<sup>85</sup>

Those scholars who advocate the strategic approach cite the example of Bahrain to critique past assertions made about institutions by pointing to the practice of dynasticism which can have serious destabilising consequences. In the Gulf, ruling houses have many branches in which relatives of the monarchy occupy the top positions in the bureaucracy, the security forces and the economy. This tactic is to maintain regime unity and aims to reduce prospects for political reform by trapping the monarchy between interests of relatives and popular pressures for change. Making it all the more difficult for established civil society associations to call for more senior political openings to be available to people outside the King's family.

Moving on toward foreign assistance, it must be acknowledged that although the rentier state still applies to several of the GCC states, including Kuwait, it does not however necessarily hold up in the context of Bahrain and Oman that are running deficits. It is therefore much more dependent on foreign patrons to maintain its position. As Gause and Yom mention it is cross-cutting coalitions, hydrocarbon wealth and foreign allies which are said to be the roots of their exceptionalism. It should also be recognised that not all kingdoms possess all three factors, but each of those states possess two, except for Bahrain that possesses one, which makes it more vulnerable to unrest and instability, in which the 2011 uprising itself in Bahrain is testament to this.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Yom, Sean L., and F. Gregory Gause. "Resilient Royals: How Arab Monarchies Hang On." *Journal of Democracy* 23, no. 4 (2012): 75-76.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

One question this raises in both case studies is whether civil society and informal networks/groupings have been utilised by the Gulf monarchies to co-opt and maintain control over. One reason as to why Kuwait has witnessed limited demands for change in comparison to Bahrain is that there is a cross-cutting coalition comprising of the ruling family, Sunni merchants, Shia minority, who had showcased their loyalty to the Kuwaiti monarchy following the Gulf war, and tribal communities that the Kuwaiti monarchy has co-opted in recent years to their advantage. Whereas the same cannot be said in the case of Bahrain, as the disparity between power and support base seems to be ostensive and largely manifests along sectarian lines.

How this research therefore aims to contribute to existing literature and to the strategic explanations for monarchical exceptionalism, is to find out how CSOs have responded to this trend and whether they themselves operate along sectarian lines. This means looking at whether their interests, the issues they raise and the activities and advocacy work they do revolves around sectarianism, whether it be organising initiatives primarily along sectarian lines or to highlighting socio-economic disparities between communities, anything that makes sectarianism a more salient marker of identity to rally around. This could then provide some insights as to what may have caused alternative modes of civic activism to go underground, i.e. in the form of informal spaces which operate in the private sphere. Be it the desire of some informal spaces to work exclusively in the interest of the sect it claims to represent, so to amplify sectarian identities and discourses, or on the other hand to counter the sectarian composition and single-issue agendas of certain advocacy groups that may have become prevalent within the formal civil society structure.

Coming onto the post-Arab spring context, analysts such as Seeberg explain how much of existing literature on social movements has focused heavily on causes that might explain the uprising and consequences for strategic relations between Arab and international states. However, relatively few analyses have dealt with the new wave of political participation and mobilisation within a broader context of civil society and regional organisations that culminated into the Arab spring uprisings.<sup>87</sup> The idea that

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<sup>87</sup> Seeberg, Peter. "Bringing People Back in Politics: The Role of Civil Society, Political Parties, and Regional Organizations in a Changing Middle East." *Democracy and Security* 11, no. 2 (2015): 98-110.

there must be scope for change or potential with Arab CSOs if they were at least able to, in part, orchestrate the 2011 uprisings.

With the emphasis on popular mobilisation in understanding civil society, Seeberg corroborates his findings with earlier scholars such as Wiktorowicz, who had noted that in principle, there is always the possibility for a democratising pressure from below.<sup>88</sup> Despite the early optimism, Seeberg still acknowledges this to be a premature observation, in that much of the Middle East, civil society still does not act as a conduit for freedom; instead it further extends the state's social control over its citizens.<sup>89</sup>

However, taking the Arab uprisings into account, Seeberg does not refute the potential for change in the foreseeable future, as earlier signs of political and civic mobilisation were present in the previous years building up to 2011. This is evidenced in the work of other scholars such as Bayat, who argues that from the mid-2000s, new modes of mobilisation started to be seen in Arab societies and that those societies/activists developed new forms of protest or 'dissent, mostly in the form of civic campaigns, boycotting, youth civic engagement, cyber-activism and protest art.'<sup>90</sup> According to Bayat, surveillance from the state in fact forced civic activism into the institutional realm such as college campuses, schools, mosques and NGOs. As a result, public debates concerning human rights and democratisation started appearing more frequently. What is particularly interesting concerning this research is Bayat's observations of youth voluntarism being on the rise, often with dimensions related to Islamism in a new form which Bayat phrases as post-Islamism.<sup>91</sup>

The importance of popular mobilisation is none more evident than in the case study of Bahrain. Scholars have questioned the conventional wisdom surrounding Middle Eastern exceptionalism, highlighting the fact that Saudi Arabia had to send troops to prop up their Bahraini ally not because it was militarily threatened by an external

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<sup>88</sup> Wiktorowicz, Quintan. "Civil Society as Social Control: State Power in Jordan." *Comparative Politics* 33, no. 1 (2000): 43-61.

<sup>89</sup> Seeberg, Peter. "Bringing People Back in Politics: The Role of Civil Society, Political Parties, and Regional Organizations in a Changing Middle East." *Democracy and Security* 11, no. 2 (2015): 100-101.

<sup>90</sup> Bayat, Asef. *Life as Politics How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2013. 234.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

power, as would so often be the case previously in the MENA context, but rather because it was directly threatened by social protests which were orchestrated by segments of civil society.<sup>92</sup>

Moving on from the existing debates pertaining to civil society in the Gulf States and wider MENA region, the following section will now be dedicated to another central theme within this research, which is to observe the emerging discourse surrounding informal groupings/spaces more broadly and the commentary on informal civil society within the MENA region.

## **2.2 Research on 'Informal' Civil Society**

This section will explore the various bodies of scholarship that has sought to identify alternative conceptions of civil society. Regarding this research, it should be noted that due to its focus on Bahrain and Kuwait, the findings that come out of this thesis should, (as posited by scholars cited in this section), be put into broader perspective, and treated as a study of the workings of civil society in the non-Western context. This is done by shedding light on the debates in the studies on ethnic conflict and its relationship to civil society in the developing world.

This body of literature goes on to emphasise that it is the purposes of activity as oppose to organisations or associations themselves which should be the means test for civic life. As the literature seeks to undermine the prevailing notion that a vital pre-requisite to civil society is that it has a formalised structure, i.e. that it be a recognised association, that it is registered as a CSO, and has an internal bureaucracy when it comes to issues of membership, organising activities etc. Instead, it aims to showcase that the lack of effective and expedient civic organisations, does not necessarily negate the presence of authentic civic activities taking place. Something which existing scholarship on civil society in the Middle East has often overlooked. All in all, this section is a testament to the fact that literature on informal civil society is relatively scarce compared to the commentary on state-recognised associations. Furthermore,

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<sup>92</sup> Beck, Martin. "The End of Regional Middle Eastern Exceptionalism? The Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council after the Arab Uprisings." *Democracy and Security* 11, no. 2 (2015): 201.

it is also evidence that civil society more broadly has not been discussed in relation to sectarianism and how it can play a part in influencing inter-communal relations.

Several debates within studies of globalisation and ethnic conflict and its relationship to civil society have given rise to the concept of informal spaces. These debates typically revolve around their compatibility with common perceptions of civil society as well as in the functions and roles they perform in society and politics. The purpose of this section is to identify the debate about whether informal spaces can be considered to be a constituent of wider civil society. The other purpose, and more pertinent to the research objectives, is to identify the types of studies that have commented on the issue of informal civil society in the Arab world.

When looking at the discourse on civil society and globalisation for example, it does concede that institutionalised structures are typically associated with civil society and the public sphere, when discussing civil society within a Western liberal context. It does not however, suffice in explaining the various forms of participatory politics and the nature of civil society in postcolonial contexts, where the historical relationship between state and society, a false duality in itself, has been one of stark inequality.<sup>93</sup> In addition to this, when we are addressing civil society in the Gulf this is of course within the wider context of civil society in the non-Western world, and so this too would encompass patron-client relations as well as tribal and ethnic systems.<sup>94</sup> This ties into the need as to why it is significant to look at the relationship between existing CSOs and the prevailing, if not increasing, prominence of sectarian identities and how civil society has contributed to these supra-state identities within localised contexts, something which existing scholarship has yet to address.

Again, looking more broadly, the existing debates pertaining to informal civil society stem from certain queries with regards to its conceptualisation, the modes of operations and the overall expediency of informal spaces. Previous literature on civil

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<sup>93</sup> Bhandari, V, "Civil Society and the predicament of Multiple Publics", *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. 26, No. 1, (2006), 36-37.

<sup>94</sup> Schulz, Michael. "The Role of Civil Society in Regional Governance in the Middle East." In *Civil Society and International Governance: The Role of Non-state Actors in Global and Regional Regulatory Frameworks*, 166. London: Routledge, 2011.

society and ethnic conflict within the context of developing societies has raised the question as to whether non-associational (informal) groups/spaces can also be categorised as civic or part of civil society.<sup>95</sup> Concerned with Indian politics, Varshney for example, has suggested, that only by systematic empirical investigations of the associational and non-associational forms of civic life can we determine whether the functions and norms attributed to civil society in the normative literature exist as more than simple theoretical propositions. From an empirical perspective, whether such engagement is conducted solely in associations or in traditional sites of social gatherings depends on the degree to which urbanisation and economic development is apparent. According to Varshney, cities tend to have more formal associations, whilst villages/rural areas make do with informal sites and meetings.<sup>96</sup>

An example of non-associational life can be seen in 'street-corner activity', which can be considered an authentic civic form if more organised and institutionalised civic sites are not available. The point being is not that formal associations bear little importance in this regard, rather the utility of formal associations remains central to any initiatives towards democratisation. However, it must be acknowledged that in social and cultural environments that differ to those of Europe and North America, it is the purposes of activity rather than the forms of organisation itself that should be the critical test of civic life. This outlook could present a more favourable picture of both formal and informal civil society depending on the context in which those spaces are located. This is particularly striking, as it intrinsically links back to the discourse on civil society and authoritarian survival, in the fact that formal associations are either banned or severely impeded by the relevant social ministries precisely because of their activities as oppose to their presence.<sup>97</sup>

Again, in response to Eurocentric conceptualisations of civil society, larger studies in the non-Western context particularly on ethnic conflict, would also indicate that ethnic and religious associations do combine ascription and choice. Weiner, as far back as in the 1970s, for instance, documents how ethnic associations can perform many

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<sup>95</sup> Varshney, A, "Ethnic conflict and civil society", *World Politics*, Vol. 53, No. 3, (2001) 362-398

<sup>96</sup> Ibid

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

'modern' functions.<sup>98</sup> These include practices such as participating in democratic politics as well as establishing financial schemes to encourage members of the ethnic kinsmen into modern occupations and modern occupation. In addition, a similar objection can be forwarded with respect to the presupposed requirement that associations be of a formal nature. As within much of the developing world, especially in rural communities, formal associations do not often exist. That is not to suggest, however, that civic interconnections or activities are absent.

It goes to show, that advocates of informal spaces and their incorporation within the broader spectrum of civil society can be accounted for so long as they connect individuals, build trust, encourage reciprocity and facilitate the exchanging of views on matters of public concern – be it economic, political, cultural or social issues.<sup>99</sup>

Moving on to discussions on informal spaces within the Middle Eastern context, it must be said that the literature is relatively scarce when compared to the existing bodies of literature dedicated to formal civil society. However, over the years there has been some commentaries made specifically on diwaniyyat and majalis within the context of democratisation, but most recently these spaces have received little attention within academic scholarship and moreover there has been no mention of its relationship with sectarianism and inter-communal relations.

However, it should be noted that scholars such as Varshney, Huwaidi and Shehata, believe informal networks may have its limitations as to their utility yet they maintain an optimistic view that these spaces could be perceived as an alternative response in creating a more effective civil society by facilitating grass-roots activism. In addition, they go on to specifically outline informal spaces as the greatest potential force for democratic transition as they serve as a reflection of the underlying civic culture that is prevalent (to some degree) across the region. 'Informal social groups, such as mutual-aid networks, cooperative societies, recreational clubs and youth leagues – These casual organisations are more communally orientated than other CSOs and draw a stronger following from the poor. Indeed, the UNDP views them as the richest

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<sup>98</sup> Weiner, M, *Sons of the Soil: Migration and ethnic conflict in India*, 1978.

<sup>99</sup> Varshney, A, "Ethnic conflict and civil society", *World Politics*, Vol. 53, No. 3, (2001) 362-398

source of civic activity in the Arab world, guiding citizens with an invisible social hand.<sup>100</sup>

However, studies arising from the discourse on civil society and globalisation once again have sought to move away from addressing the perceived benefits informal actors may occupy when formal civil society is not present or active, which democratisation literature often centres its commentary around. Scholars such as Bayat, have been critical of the attention given to the notion of civil society, which according to him tends to belittle or even ignore the wide spectrum of un-institutionalised and hybrid social activities that possess a prominent yet simultaneously tacit role both in the Middle East and the wider developing world.

As mentioned, there is more than one, single conceptualisation of civil society and more significantly perhaps; are the other means of partaking in associational life that do not coincide with the institutional-formal realm. Again, criticising the existing debates in democratisation literature, Bayat suggests that the reductionism prevalent within formal civil society discourse has ultimately excluded and even scorned modes of struggles (which in the context of the Middle East) are arguably more extensive and effective than conventional institutions outside the state. Observers such as Bayat and Varshney sought to examine the dynamics of free-form or casual activism, which tends to characterise the politics of 'informal people'. This is the view that ordinary, everyday practices conducted by ordinary folk can in fact engender significant social changes.<sup>101</sup> It is inevitable therefore that such simple and everyday practices are bound to shift within the realm of politics.

This position is also corroborated by Rothstein, who emphasises the importance of socialisation processes, in that our perceptions and norms are in relation to our societal institutions and begin to be formed/conceptualised from a young age. Ranging from parents, family, tribe, the wider social environment, perceptions and collective memories of whom to trust are internalised, hence why it is important to draw attention

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<sup>100</sup> Huwaidi, I A & Shehata D, "Civil Society and Governance in Egypt", Country Report, *Institute for Development Studies – Civil Society and Governance Programme*, Sussex, UK, (1999) 26.

<sup>101</sup> Bayat, A, "Un-Civil Society: the politics of the informal people" *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 18, No. 1, (2007), 55-56.

to this aspect of informal political spaces, as it ought to be expected that citizens living within historically authoritarian structures that they are to develop their trust and values from such informal processes<sup>102</sup> i.e. congregations/gatherings between people who trust each other, and can open up on any particular issue and most importantly, are less dependent on the state.

Participants who engage in such collective action e.g. via informal gatherings such as , public and online forums, youth societies etc., only realise their actions to be politically motivated when challenged by state authorities who impede on their advances. Therefore, rather than acting through the formal channels of protest or publicity, these informal spaces take it upon themselves to fulfil their needs, albeit individually, without the assistance or more appropriately the intervention of formally recognised organisations and in a discrete manner. This is also known as ‘quiet encroachment’.<sup>103</sup>

Looking at the existing scholarship on democratisation and political participation, it should be acknowledged that informal spaces such as *diwaniyat* and majalis had been cited since the late 1980’s as one of the various ways in which dissent in GCC states can be voiced. Although at that stage it was still viewed to be circumscribed and severely restricted.<sup>104</sup> From the 1990s onwards, however, and particularly within the Kuwaiti context, scholars had started to see the advantages of alternative spaces like the , as from time to time, the Kuwaiti government had lost patience with constraints on its authority and dissolved parliament on several occasions. The emir ruled by decree from 1976-1981 and again between the years of 1986-1992, however absence of the assembly left the government with no outlet to obtain popular feedback on its policies. Scholars such as Hicks and Al-Najjar had noticed that with the national assembly dissolved and formal associations coming under increasing pressure, Kuwaitis had turned to traditional home-based meetings (i.e. the *diwaniyya*) to voice their concerns. Hicks and Al-Najjar highlight in this context the positive impact the *diwaniyya* had beyond the legislative reach of the government, as they had proven to

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<sup>102</sup> Rothstein, B, “Trust, Social Dilemmas and Collective Memories” *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, Vol 12, No 4, (2000), 477-501.

<sup>103</sup> Bayat, A, “Un-Civil Society: the politics of the informal people” *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 18, No. 1, (2007), 59.

<sup>104</sup> Peterson, John E. *The Arab Gulf States: Steps Toward Political Participation*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1988. 19.

be effective forums for campaigning for the restitution of the national assembly, showcasing the contemporary utility of a traditional informal space.<sup>105</sup>

Within earlier literature on democratisation, the documenting of diwaniyyat offered an alternative platform to practically defunct CSOs by which political activities were restored and grievances could be heard. This would also highlight their importance until today, particularly when it comes to forming political opinions and consensus, a prime example being between a prospective MP and their constituent who would frequent such spaces in order to garner support for their party. However, as Hicks and Al-Najjar note, that is not to say the more formal associations have not previously played a significant role at key junctures within Kuwaiti politics, a prime example being during 1990 occupation of Kuwait and with the collapse of the government, leaders and activists from professional, religious associations and co-operative societies formed the backbone of popular resistance to the Iraqi occupation.<sup>106</sup>

Moving to more recent discussions on informal spaces within the Bahraini context, scholars have sought to highlight how informal discussions with diverse young Bahraini people suggest there are many options for a political settlement that could provide not only a large degree of stability but also at least some measure of meaningful change. For instance, Kinninmont and Sirri cite one of the arguments from the strategic approach as a key limitation of Bahrain's formal civil society at present, highlighting how many locals in Bahrain feel disempowered by what they presume are the machinations of larger international powers.<sup>107</sup>

Moreover, what makes this paper particularly interesting is that it signals a shift in the way civil society is being reported on within the democratisation literature, as it uses a broad definition of civil society to refer to citizens' engagement in associational life, whether through formal CSOs or informally. Again, it is this informal aspect of associational life in Bahrain that is both recognised/acknowledged by existing

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<sup>105</sup> Hicks, Neil, and Ghanim Al-Najjar. "Civil Society in Kuwait." In *Toward Civil Society in the Middle East?*, 59-60. London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1995.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Kinninmont, Jane, and Omar Sirri. *Bahrain: Civil Society and Political Imagination*. London: Chatham House, MENA Programme, 2014, 3.

discourse but has been under-researched relative to more formal organisations, and despite the paper's acknowledgement of informal spaces it has yet to offer more in-depth detail on them. As Kinninmont and Sirri specifically mention majalis, the Bahraini counterpart to the Kuwaiti diwaniyyat be it with slightly varying functions, however they offer little more than identifying those spaces, as opposed to mentioning their purpose and their social and political utility within the Kuwaiti and Bahraini political landscape. They merely mention those spaces as part and parcel of Bahrain's illustrious history with active and vibrant civil society, yet they fail to mention how effective they are and in what ways could they be effective in the foreseeable future.<sup>108</sup>

The scarcity of existing discourse specifically referring to informal spaces such as Kuwaiti *has* been noted more recently by Redman<sup>109</sup> who points to earlier commentary made by Antoun, who criticised Norton's earlier work on *Civil Society in the Middle East* for its omission of any substantive discussion about the diwaniyyat. Antoun further criticises contributors within the field of civil society for their lack of serious consideration of informal institutions, asserting that 'many authors (in these volumes) allude to patron-client relations, religious networks, sects, tribes, ethnic groups, groupings based on social type and the diwaniyya, without giving them any attention.'<sup>110</sup>

With regards to discussions around such informal spaces being incorporated within the wider framework of civil society, Redman corroborates with Tetreault, in that these guestrooms occupy what can appropriately be described as an intermediate spaces between the social world of household intimacy and the wider, unrestricted community.<sup>111</sup> Likewise Delmas posits the view that *Kuwait's* diwaniyyat are presumed to reside somewhere beyond the privacy of the home (this of course being relevant specifically to public/MP) yet it still remains insulated from state meddling.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Redman, James Clyde Allen. 2014. 'The Diwaniyya: Guestroom Sociability And Bureaucratic Brokerage In Kuwait'. PhD, The University of Utah.

<sup>110</sup> Antoun, Richard T. "Civil Society, Tribal Process, and Change in Jordan: An Anthropological View." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 32, no. 4 (2000): 442.

<sup>111</sup> Tetreault, Mary Ann. "A State of Two Minds: State Cultures, Women and Politics in Kuwait." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 33, no. 2 (2001): 203-220.

<sup>112</sup> Delmas, Gervaise. "Le Système Politique Koweïtien [The Kuwaiti Political System]. *Actualités Du Moyen-orient Et Du Maghreb*." *Institut De Relations Internationales Et Stratégiques*. 6 (2007).

With ideas around acting as an intermediary between the state, society and home, it could be said that these spaces do encompass wider notions of civil society as 'most agree in describing civil society as an area of friendships, clubs, churches, business associations, unions and other voluntary associations that mediate between the vast expanse of social life between the household and the state. This associational sphere is seen as the place where citizens learn habits of free assembly, dialogue and social initiative.'<sup>113</sup>

Even as recent as 2015, discourse on associational life, in this case Saudi Arabia, has noted 'how since the 1990s, civil society has been seen more as an informal process of associations and activities than as a concept that requires an enabling political structure, and this is the case in the Middle East.'<sup>114</sup> However despite this recognition, informal discussions, spaces/groupings are still dismissed when it comes to addressing the political expediency of those spaces and in what ways they could be seen to facilitate civil society more broadly.

As alluded to previously, the commentary that has been made on informal civil society within the Middle East (most notably from the democratisation literature) has only offered a summary explanation of those spaces and in many cases have been viewed as part of broader civil society. In addition, despite its incorporation into more recent literature this has also left gaps in that these spaces have not been treated in the same way formal/institutionalised organisations have, which is to distinguish them outright and to assess their effectiveness.

Despite the literature addressing informal spaces in detail being few and far between, latest studies looking beyond the Arab revolts have sought to examine how the civil society landscape in the region has been conceptualised in the past and proposes a new typology for MENA civil society actors.

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<sup>113</sup> Hefner, Robert W. "Civil Society: Cultural Possibility of a Modern Ideal." *Society* 35, no. 3 (1998): 16-27.

<sup>114</sup> Montagu, Caroline, *Civil Society in Saudi Arabia: The Power and Challenges of Association*, London: Chatham House, MENA Programme, March 2015, 6.

From the context of democratisation in a post Arab spring era, Anders Hardig creates a typology in order to structure comparisons between disparate cases of civil society efforts and bring to the forefront issues of authenticity and legitimacy. These challenges emanating not only from an oppressive state, but from within civil society itself. The question Hardig seeks to ask is how best scholars can study the dynamics of “bottom up” pressures for democratisation, given the diverse and complex make up of civil society.<sup>115</sup>

From the theoretical perspective, Hardig incorporates the work of Gramsci, in that civil society ought to be conceptualised as a space as oppose to a community, where civil society should not be confined to the realm of non-state actors, but the site where ‘cultural hegemony’ is exerted by the state.<sup>116</sup> Gramsci understood that states do not simply rule by coercion, rather there has to be a level of consent involved. In this respect, dominant groups exercise cultural hegemony through civil society. However civil society is also the location where counter movements challenging the authenticity and legitimacy of the status quo are launched.<sup>117</sup> At any given time, there are a number of alternative ‘narratives of reality’ espoused through informal venues (in the MENA context – various Islamist narratives, secular-liberal narratives, anti-globalisation narratives etc.). State actors (as alluded to earlier in years building up to 2011 Arab revolts as noted by Bayat) respond to these challenges not necessarily through coercion, but also through entering the realm of civil society and engaging with CSOs both through contention and co-operation.

From the democratisation perspective, Hardig therefore asserts that if you want to understand how political participation is broadened, civil society needs to be known not as a club or association with members, but more broadly as a space where diverse actors engage both through contention and co-operation.<sup>118</sup> Hardig goes on to use Arabic terminology for civil society in order to introduce this typology. ‘*Al-mujtama ahli*’ and ‘*al-mujtama al-madani*’ – the term ‘ahli’ implying kinship or indigenous, and

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<sup>115</sup> Hardig, Anders C. "Beyond the Arab Revolts: Conceptualizing Civil Society in the Middle East and North Africa." *Democratization* 22, no. 6 (2015): 1132.

<sup>116</sup> Gramsci, Antonio. *The Prison Notebooks*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1971.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> Hardig, Anders C. "Beyond the Arab Revolts: Conceptualizing Civil Society in the Middle East and North Africa." *Democratization* 22, no. 6 (2015): 1134.

this category of civil society includes faith and community based associational forms that can be said to have deeper social roots and longer history in the region. (Pertinent examples in context of this research could include the Kuwaiti diwaniyya and the Bahraini *Matam* – a space not too different from a mosque where religious rites take place but would be likened more to a cultural centre.) The second term ‘madani’ implies a civic orientation and is more akin to Western-liberal conceptualisation of civil society, such as formal NGOs.<sup>119</sup>

This typology is based on a fundamental distinction between ‘indigenous’ and ‘civic’ civil societies, while recognising that members of each share the same realm of activity and are not necessarily in opposition with each other. One example could be someone who is a member of a registered CSO but also happens to attend diwaniyyat or majalis. What is particularly striking, is how Hardig notes that both emerging and traditional informal networks can be both ‘ahli’ or ‘madani’ and share one common theme in that they operate outside formal organisational structures. Hardig offers the examples of unemployed yet highly educated university students who were instrumental in both Tunisia and Egypt’s 2011 revolts. There is also a growing number of informal associations, active in various sectors such as poverty alleviation, advocacy and community organising. These informal associations are often critical of established CSO actors, who they merely view as development professionals (or opportunists) and are too dependent on foreign funding.<sup>120</sup>

For Hardig, informal associations potentially represent a new or as he phrases ‘organic’ civic segment of MENA civil society, a socially rooted civic movement wary of the global development industry, which is why these spaces tend to be found on the indigenous or ‘ahli’ side of the typology.<sup>121</sup> This typology showcases the vibrancy and (contrary to conventional wisdom throughout several bodies of literature) the strength of civil society as an arena for oppositional politics, but it also brings to the forefront the challenges that emanate from within civil society itself, as opposed to merely citing the difficulties operating within an authoritarian context, as much of the existing

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid, 1135.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid, 1139.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

scholarship tends to do. Therefore, taking seriously the scholarly framing of civil society as a realm of contention, populated by formal and informal actors, means having to establish an analytical construct that emphasises the specific ways in which efforts are made to broaden the space for political participation.<sup>122</sup>

Where this research will seek to expand on Hardig's typology, is to move the debate away from political participation as such and address the increasingly prominent issue of sectarian relations within Kuwait and Bahrain, and how informal associations have impacted on inter-communal relations and how these spaces have reacted to state policies toward both denominations.

This brings forth the next section, as this research seeks to contribute to the relatively scarce literature on informal civil society in two principal ways. Primarily it will offer empirical insights into the political expediency of informal political spaces in Kuwait and Bahrain. Moreover, what sets this research apart from existing discourse is by focusing on the potential impact they have on inter-communal relations, particularly in light of the proliferation and increasing portrayal of sectarian identities following the events of the 2011 Arab uprisings.

### **2.3 Scholarship on Sectarianism and Civil Society**

As this thesis is intimately concerned with the inter-connect between informal civil society and sectarianism, a closer look at the extant literature on this theme is warranted. Overall, a review of the extant literature reveals that what has emerged out of the contexts in which sectarianism has been studied, is primarily concerned with regional/transnational manifestations and causes that have instigated power shifts within the region due to the increasingly distinctive marker of sectarian identities. In addition to this, very little on the domestic level connect between civil society and sectarianism is available.

This section will therefore look at several approaches and in what context has sectarianism been discussed. In a recent paper on sectarian identity politics, Helle Malmvig typified the ongoing issues surrounding the three prominent approaches to sectarianism, those being primordialism, instrumentalism and historical sociology. The

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

principal issue being is that all three approaches have a propensity to explain away sectarianism by reducing the phenomenon to factors that are exterior to sectarian identity politics itself. With that in mind, these approaches have yet to provide an explanatory focus in terms of what sectarianism means, how it becomes a source of conflict and what makes it distinct and effective compared to other identity and ideational claims.<sup>123</sup>

The primordial approach can be seen most visibly across media coverage, and has also featured within policy analysis and diplomatic circles. Primordialism is premised on the idea that sectarianism lay at the heart of conflicts in the Middle East, with the Sunni-Shia conflict being viewed as an ancient and ongoing struggle. Sectarian identities are therefore perceived to be primary or natural and presumably played out between two clearly defined religious sects. Leaving little analysis for the study of overlapping or inter-sectarian identities, and although primordialists do acknowledge that sectarianism has varied historically, and therefore is not a constant in Middle East politics, this is largely interpreted as a type of overlay or repression that have kept latent sectarian identities under the radar.<sup>124</sup>

In contrast, instrumentalists are deeply sceptical about using a sectarian framework to explain the causes of the region's present struggles and rivalries. Sectarian identities are primarily seen as superficial political constructs, open to manipulation and exploitation by political elites, who use sectarian fear-mongering to garner vested patron-client relationships, as gateways to mass mobilisation, or as powerful levers in regional rivalries. To understand why sectarianism has risen over the last decades, instrumentalists primarily look to the way that authoritarian states have exacerbated sectarian divisions both domestically and regionally in order to prop up their regimes and remain in power.<sup>125</sup>

Precisely because sectarianism is exacerbated by, and plays into the hands of authoritarian regimes, instrumentalists are wary that the primordialist approach may

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<sup>123</sup> Malmvig, Helle, *The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS), The Gulf's Escalating Sectarianism, POMEPS Briefings 28*, (2016), p. 9.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid*, p. 10.

lead to dangerous political prescriptions, including that which is inclined towards solutions involving the heavy hand of the state to suppress the supposedly inevitable violence between sectarian communities.<sup>126</sup> Moreover, instrumentalists rightly point out that the primordialist approach often neglects the multiple crosscutting divisions, alliances and overlapping identities within the so-called Sunni and Shia camps. For instance, by analysing the Saudi-Iranian rivalry as a struggle driven by sectarian motivations, it is difficult to explain the alliance between Hamas, Hezbollah, Syria and Iran, as well as the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Indeed, both Iran and Saudi Arabia have crossed the sectarian fault line when seeking regional allies. Similarly to the logic in the domestic arena, Saudi Arabia may use sectarianism regionally to mobilise local clients in conflict zones, or as a way to discredit Iran.<sup>127</sup> Instrumentalists importantly point to the power and politics involved in sectarian identity politics, and to the analytical and political consequences of operating with an underlying assumption of essentialist identities. However, to instrumentalists, sectarianism is precisely an “ism”, a form of ideology up for grasp alongside other ideologies in the region. The conflation of ideology and identity is however problematic for several reasons.

In contrast to the primordialist, who implicitly assumes sectarianism to be a deep structure overlaid by power, instrumentalists see material power as a deep structure that moves sectarianism. This implies that sectarianism is removed from the equation and can be instead explained away.<sup>128</sup> Sectarianism is therefore assumed to be just another ideology cynically used by power-holders, but with this conclusion comes several discrepancies. One of which is that it does not account for sectarian identity politics having become increasingly prominent over the last decade, or what has made it become salient compared to other regional ideologies. In other words, given that instrumentalists presume sectarianism is a mere expression of continuous universal power struggles, they are less focused on the particularities of sectarian identity formations or what it means to make sectarian claims.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid, p. 11.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

On the other hand, advocates of the historical sociology approach who, like the instrumentalist, are still adopting a state-centric position but shifting its focus from a mechanism of the authoritarian state to arguing that it is foremost the gradual weakening of state structures, the army, the policy force and the ability to deliver protection and services that creates the conditions of possibilities for sectarianism.<sup>130</sup> To scholars inspired by historical sociology, the rise of sectarian identity politics is thus primarily a question of sufficient strong state structures (or the lack thereof) at the domestic level, prompting communities either to seek protection with sub-state actors or regional patrons. In contrast to instrumentalists, historical sociologists do, to a certain extent, analyse these identities as different from ideologies. Sectarian identities are seen as more entrenched than mere ideology and more difficult to change or reverse once they have become established in popular discourse and practices. However, as in the case of instrumentalists, sectarian identity itself is withdrawn from the explanation by making it a function of something else. Sectarian identifications constitute a type of fall-back position ready to be used in situations of heightened insecurity and state collapse, in which individuals or groups, out of rational self-interest, seek safety, goods, and order. However, as in the case of the instrumentalist approach, sectarianism is implicitly presumed to be a tool for self-preservation and a form of passive undercurrent available to sub-state elites when state structures collapse.<sup>131</sup>

Regarding the literature on post-colonialism, scholars such as Makdisi, notes how *ta'iffiya* or sectarianism, was a symptom of shortcomings of the relatively new Middle Eastern nation-state and operates as a countervailing force in the push for national identities to manifest. 'Sectarianism is a neologism born in the age of nationalism to signify the antithesis of nation; its meaning is predicated on and constructed against a territorially-bounded liberal nation-state. In Lebanon, sectarianism is as modern and authentic as the nation-state. In fact, the two cannot be dissociated.'<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Makdisi, Usama, "Reconstructing the nation-state: The modernity of sectarianism in Lebanon", *Middle East Report*, Vol 200, 1996, 24.

It is in this respect that much of the existing scholarship surrounding sectarianism has been written in the context of post-colonialism. Observers like Makdisi, note how sectarianism within the Middle Eastern context followed on from the advent of colonial modernity, as many of the new Arab states were confronted with the issue of defining the nation, this was problematic more so as many subjects of past empires had not been accustomed to the nation-state. With the notable exception of Egypt and Iran, the new-found nations had to invent their historical legacy, with many citizens turning towards religious identity as the most discernible marker of identity. This has even proven to be the case in the secular states of the Levant, 'Even though Lebanon is not an Islamic state, its society is a mirror image of the sectarian tension among various religious groups.'<sup>133</sup>

More recently, scholars such as Marechal and Zemni, have framed the discussions surrounding sectarian relations around the idea of transnationalism and how regional actors vying for influence utilise and play on sectarian identities in the region to their advantage, namely in the hope of establishing client states.<sup>134</sup> Following from this, it becomes evident therefore that much of the discourse around Middle Eastern sectarianism is often in relation to Iranian and Saudi foreign policy. Arguably commencing with the advent of Pan-Islamism in the form of the 1979 Iranian revolution, much of the discussions (particularly in Middle Eastern scholarship) had initially connected sectarianism with the 'Iranian threat' to regional Sunni powers which was none more exemplified than in the case of the Iran-Iraq war 1980-88. However, more recently, scholarship on sectarianism (through the lens of securitisation and authoritarian survival) have also focused on government policies of some Arab Gulf states, namely Saudi Arabia and Bahrain in stoking sectarian sentiment.<sup>135</sup> Analysts such as Hammond, for instance, note how there was a counter-Sunni mobilisation of sorts in the wake of what many had perceived as Iran exporting a revolutionary brand of Shi'ism.

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<sup>133</sup> Kumaraswamy, P R, "Who am I? The Identity Crisis in the Middle East", *MERIA*, Vol 10, No 1, 2006, 64.

<sup>134</sup> Marechal, Brigitte, and Sami Zemni. *The Dynamics of Sunni-Shia Relationships: Doctrine, Transnationalism, Intellectuals and the Media*. London: Hurst &, 2013.

<sup>135</sup> Wehrey, Frederic M. *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf: From the Iraq War to the Arab Uprisings*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.

As one particular incident that remains relatively elusive in the course of sectarian relations is the Wahhabi revolt that occurred in the same year as the Iranian revolution, also recognised as the *al-Sahwa* or the awakening. Hammond describes how the seizure of the Grand Mosque in 1979 by a group of Wahhabi zealots inevitably brought about the making of a neo-Wahhabism (or sometimes described as neo-Salafism) akin to the puritanism of al-Wahhabiya that now expressed the political concern of Sunni Islamists in the Arab context.<sup>136</sup>

With regards to the existing discourse on sectarianism, this development was a key determining factor in the trajectory of inter-sect relations in that it set the precedent for a new wave of revolutionary Islamic activism and would create fears for the Saudi monarchy, who saw their own political fate coming under intense scrutiny following the ousting of Iran's Shah, hence a process of religious assimilation to appease domestic Islamists was to become the appropriate course of action. Such a rationale is key to discourse on transnationalism, as this set the stage for both Iran and Saudi Arabia to exert their influence across the region, which includes the state ideologies they promote. This is particularly the case for Saudi Arabia, which has been reported by government officials and academics as having invested millions of its petrodollars into funding religious seminaries and other initiatives around the Muslim world.<sup>137</sup>

However, some of the discourse on nationalism has sought to downplay the role sectarianism has played across the region, particularly in its criticism of the claim that religion can easily counterweigh nationalist sentiment, with the popularity of Pan-Islamic thought. As Terhalle remarks, for instance, 'Nationalism has proven capable of outweighing religion where the Shias' loyalty to the state is concerned. From 1981-1988, Shi'i Iraqi fighters fought a remorseless war against Iran. Then, after the 1992 Gulf War, Iran remained neutral while the Iraqi Shia rose up against Saddam and were massacred. These two events illustrate the strength of nationalism. It divided Iran and Iraq decisively and is entrenched in the memories of both countries. During the war

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<sup>136</sup> Hammond, Andrew, *The Islamic Utopia: The Illusion of Reform in Saudi Arabia*, London: Pluto Press, (2012), 72.

<sup>137</sup> Kamran, Tahir. "Salafi Extremism in the Punjab and Its Transnational Impact." In *Communalism and Globalization in South Asia and Its Diaspora*. Oxford: Routledge, 2011.

between Iran and Iraq, the latter's nationalism appealed more to Shia Iraqi soldiers than did Iran's revolutionary rhetoric.<sup>138</sup>

However, as most of the literature deals with sectarianism in regard to the transnational influence it currently occupies within the Arab world, the direct relationship between civil society and sectarianism has seldom been mentioned in any theoretical and or empirical regional literature to date. The literature that does exist in this field and mostly in the Lebanese context has argued that there is a recursive relation between sectarian elites and civil society actors. With sectarian elites aiming to pursue their political and socioeconomic interests at the expense of civil society organisations (CSOs), whereas on the other side, civil society actors instrumentalise the sectarian political system and its resources to advance their own organisational or personal advantage. These mutually reinforcing dynamics enable sectarian elites to penetrate, besiege or co-opt CSOs as well as extend their clientelist networks to CSOs that should otherwise be leading efforts to establish cross-sectarian affiliations and modes of political mobilisation or those that expressly seek to challenge the sectarian system.<sup>139</sup>

However, as opposed to looking specifically at the Lebanese context and by focusing on Kuwait and Bahrain, this thesis will seek to specifically address the under-theorised relationship between sectarianism and the role played by civil society actors, which, until now, has insufficiently been examined both across the Middle East and the Gulf in particular. This research will aim to demonstrate how political events, both domestically and throughout the region, have impacted the way in which informal political spaces conduct themselves and moreover whether they have the ability to mitigate or perpetuate sectarian sentiment as securitising/de-securitising actors.

## **2.4 Conclusion**

As mentioned in the introduction, this literature review has sought to examine the various bodies of literature pertaining to civil society in Gulf States by clustering them

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<sup>138</sup> Terhalle, M, "Are the Shia rising?" *Middle East Council*, (2007), 71.

<sup>139</sup> Clark, J & Salloukh, B F, "Elite Strategies, Civil Society and Sectarian Identities in Post War Lebanon", *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol 45, (2013), 731-749.

into various approaches, *cultural, institutional and strategic*. These factors or explanations for the state of civil society in the region, highlight how civil society and its application particularly in the MENA region remains a contested notion.

This research however will seek to expand on the strategic explanation for civil society, as the criticism of dynasticism and the essentialist logic that arise from cultural or institutional factors, renders the strategic or political-economy approach to be the most sophisticated explanation as to the limitations on civil society and the robustness of authoritarian powers, whilst leaving scope for research to be conducted on emerging political spaces.

With regards to the debates evolving on informal civil society, much of the discourse has been centred around its conceptualisation, as several bodies of discourse, from civil society and globalisation to Eurocentric conceptualisations of civil society have contested as to what constitutes civil society and whether non-institutional, informal spaces can be classified as such. Whilst acknowledging the limited reference to informal associations in past discourse, the latest scholarship looking beyond the Arab revolts is starting to take notice of informal spaces as a need to re-evaluate pre-conceived notions of what civil society entails in the Middle East. A typology of the various spaces in associational life is therefore required in order to understand the latest phenomenon of popular mobilisation across the region.

Nevertheless, it is sufficed to say that little attention has been given to these spaces when observing civil society in the region more broadly, hence the need to look at the political efficacy of these spaces and the interconnect they have with the rising trend of sectarian identities.

When it comes to the discourse on sectarianism, even Malmvig acknowledges that despite the three major approaches lending themselves to understanding the existing regional order in the Middle East, they have yet to provide an account for why everyday local sectarian practices take place, and in different settings. It is here where it is

argued that more anthropological approaches maybe conducive to explore in understanding sectarian identity politics.<sup>140</sup>

Furthermore, and in relation to this research, neither instrumentalists nor the historical sociologists approaches can provide adequate explanations as to why, in the context of Kuwait for example, there are bottom-up pressures that utilise or play on sectarian expressions/rhetoric/articulations, given that the state has demonstrated, at least in recent times, that it is not actively seeking to exploit sectarian divisions, at least not to the level of its GCC counterparts, namely Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. A pertinent example of Kuwait's more measured response can be epitomised in the events following the January 2 attacks on the Saudi Embassy in Tehran in 2016. Kuwait did temporarily recall its ambassador following the event, however unlike the Saudi administration, it did not sever diplomatic ties with Iran.

“Instead, by taking limited action, Kuwait kept the door open for improved ties with Iran...The government's interest in not antagonizing Kuwait's Shiite minority was likely another factor in the decision.”<sup>141</sup>

Likewise, the historical sociologist approach is not applicable because the state is by and large stable compared to most of its neighbours. Conversely, where there is a rather assertive top-down instrumentalising of sectarianism, as is the case in Bahrain, it does not explain why there are grassroots movements that are looking to mobilise via cross-denominational coalitions. It is for that reason, that sectarianism ought to be studied in the context of civil society, and more specifically, the informal spaces that are looking to redefine sectarian relations by presenting an alternative outlook and presenting new discourses that could fly in the face of state-sponsored narratives on sectarianism.

However, a larger unanswered question looms as to what extent civil society itself has contributed to such narratives, much of the existing literature makes the assumption

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<sup>140</sup> Malmvig, Helle, The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS), The Gulf 's Escalating Sectarianism, *POMEPS Briefings* 28, (2016), p. 13.

<sup>141</sup> Cafiero, Giorgio & Bianco, Cinzio, *Regional Turmoil Threatens Kuwait's Calm*, Middle East Institute, published March 17, 2016, (accessed: Jan 20, 2017).

that it has attempted to draw bridges between denominations, however has its failure (at least in terms of formal civil society) in being effective been a result of civil society being drawn along sectarian lines itself. This is particularly pertinent to Islamist associations and their respective youth societies which will be elucidated further on in this research.

### **3. Theorising on Informal Politics, Civil Society and Sectarianism**

This chapter develops a comprehensive theoretical framework through which it will be possible to explore the research questions posed and the empirical data gathered. When reviewing the existing literature on civil society, what was apparent was a need for a theoretical approach that was more inclusive than traditional conceptualisations of civil society. The rationale behind incorporating elements of the rights-based approach (RBA) and multi-dimensional framework is grounded in its focus on the space/location and the discussions that arise from those spaces themselves. As oppose to traditional notions of civil society, which have often focused on organisations. Applying these frameworks will broaden the perceived requisites to what can be treated as civil society, particularly in the context of both case studies where traditional CSOs have often been co-opted by the state; regarded as ineffective and redundant by earlier scholarship.

Where RBA links to the central research theme of sectarianism, is in the precedence it gives to civic spaces complying with a universally recognised notion of human rights and the significance it places on capacity building. This is particularly important when approaching inter-communal relations as the discourse on rights, namely questions

pertaining to religious pluralism and cultural rights are central to existing debates on the nature of sectarian relations in both Kuwait and Bahrain. Likewise capacity-building, whereby the process of developing and strengthening the skills, interests, abilities and processes that both organisations and communities need in order to survive, adapt and thrive in a fast-changing world. This will serve to demonstrate or rather assess how effective these emerging informal spaces are in tackling contemporary issues. One of which, is the pressing problem of sectarian identities and the perceived polarisation of communities where political instability is felt.

When addressing the multi-dimensional approach, there are several sub-dimensions that are intrinsically linked to dealing with sectarian relations. Namely, those concerning the environmental factors in which civil society operates, under what conditions does civil society function in Bahrain and Kuwait and moreover its emphasis on interrelations within society. This will be factored into the research when measuring the impact or social utility of these informal spaces, particularly in dealing with sectarian relations.

The emphasis on environmental factors in which informal civil society operates shall directly feed into the model that will be applied when analysing sectarianism in both countries, which will be grounded in Althusser's ideological state apparatus or ISA. Distinguishing itself from the repressive state apparatus or CSA (which shall be discussed further on), ISA rather focuses on the institutions that are utilised by the state which tacitly disseminate an ideological narrative that serves to cement its hegemony over citizens. Prime examples of such institutions propagating an ISA would be state-run or state-regulated media outlets, the education system and government clergy/religious ministries. By operating through various mediums such as media and education, it will be beneficial to observe the rhetoric applied by state institutions and to assess how this sentiment could be reflective throughout society itself.

This eclectic theoretical approach, incorporating elements of various models, will ultimately make way for more informal, ephemeral arenas to enter wider civil society debates. Whilst altogether shifting the discussion on the role of civil society away from

democratisation/authoritarianism to other increasingly pressing issues within Kuwait and Bahrain, such as the politics of sectarianism and the forming of transnational identities that have arisen from recent events across the region.

### **3.1 Rights-Based (RBA) and Multi-Dimensional Approaches to Civil Society**

As previously mentioned, a key approach to broadening civil society in order to incorporate informal spaces is to observe the rights-based approach or RBA. This forms one of the key pillars through which informal civil society as a concept can be both observed and analysed when approaching the empirical data. The rights-based approach to development has been adopted by many CSOs and the UN as a relatively new approach within development studies. It combines many different concepts of international development, such as capacity building, human rights, participation and sustainability. The goal of a rights-based approach is to empower groups that do not exercise full rights and to strengthen the capacity of duty-bearers or the institution or government obligated to fulfil these rights.

Right-based approaches (RBA) seek to hold governments and other duty-bearers to be accountable to citizens and encourage rights-holders to claim their rights. Demanding accountability does not simply imply confrontation with the state.<sup>142</sup> In addition to this, rights-based approaches emphasise the importance of state and civil society dialogue and finding mechanisms for rights-holder and duty-bearer (i.e. the state) interaction.<sup>143</sup> This could be applicable when applied to the more established informal settings, such as public diwaniyyat and local majalis. In this respect, observing informal spaces through the lens of RBA can prove to show how the state (in some capacity) must interact with such spaces as they could circumvent their sphere of control, or in the case of diwaniyyat for example, they are protected by the constitution itself.

With this in mind, RBA can also be useful with regards to reframing the discussion on civic participation – making way for informal spaces to either bypass or have a more

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<sup>142</sup> Boesen, Jakob Kirkemann, and Tomas Martin. "Applying a Rights-based Approach: An Inspirational Guide for Civil Society." 2007, 12. <http://www.humanrights.dk/files/media/dokumenter/udgivelser/applying-a-rights-based-approach-2007-an-inspirational-guide-for-civil-society.pdf>.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid, p.26.

direct relationship with the state regarding demands or grievances. RBA provides a new frame within which to signal a move towards a more genuinely inclusive and democratic process of popular involvement in decision-making over the resources and institutions that affect people's lives.<sup>144</sup>

In addition to this, Gready highlights the value-added of RBA in its explicit reference to relations between civil society and the state. Gready notes how RBA re-centres the state and asks the question about its appropriate role in development. In this respect, RBAs add value by calling the state into account; building capacities of rights holders and duty bearers and encourages a new kind of ownership of human rights among CSOs.<sup>145</sup> Of course, this is regarding institutionalised or formal CSOs, but the inclusion of informal associations will become more notable with the multi-dimensional framework by Malena and Heinrich (2007) which shall be discussed further on.

With regards to civic participation and empowering rights holders, RBA ties in with the focus on inter-communal/sectarian relations; as the demand for universally recognised rights sheds light on more contentious topics – and in this regard sectarian policies. With this in mind, applying RBA will determine whether informal spaces are an expedient venue in airing grievances pertaining to sectarianism through open and frank discussions where human rights nomenclature often features, namely how the state may impede on religious pluralism and the cultural rights of religious communities. This could potentially provide a new model for capacity-building within those countries both on an inter-communal and state-societal level. Incorporating a rights-based approach will serve as a framework to assess whether informal associations in Kuwait are more proactive in the rapprochement between communities than in Bahrain. The infringement on rights within the kingdom at the level of the state, compounded by the instituting of exclusionary policies, has had an adverse effect when it comes to inter-communal relations. Compared to Kuwait where relations between religious denominations are perceived to be more cordial as state policies

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<sup>144</sup> Cornwall, Andrea, and Celestine Nyamu-Musembi. 2004. "Putting the 'rights-based Approach' to Development into Perspective". *Third World Quarterly* 25 (8). Taylor & Francis, Ltd.: 1424. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3993794>.

<sup>145</sup> Gready, Paul. 2008. "Rights-based Approaches to Development: What Is the Value-added?". *Development in Practice* 18 (6). Taylor & Francis, Ltd.: 735–47. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27751980>.

are not seen to disenfranchise particular groups and, therefore, do not actively seek to polarise religious communities to the same degree as in the Bahraini context. In sum, RBA, as promoted by development studies scholars such as Cornwall and Nyamu-Musembi and Gready rests on the following principles:

1. In the form of capacity building – through this feature, the research will seek to assess how effective informal spaces are in tackling contemporary issues and what skills/abilities/assets do they potentially possess over traditional CSOs that will serve them well in addressing the pressing problem of sectarian polarisation, where formal civil society may be unable to confront such contentious topics.
2. RBA also emphasises notion of state-civil society dialogue as oppose to merely direct confrontation, by focusing on informal spaces that can bypass the state's reach/influence. This could potentially pave the way for more direct dialogue between state and civil society in addressing social grievances. This can already be evidenced in the case of MP/Public diwaniyyat/majalis where citizens can air their demands/complaints or even raise a particular subject that may not see the light of day within co-opted CSOs or state institutions such as parliament.
3. RBA places the precedence on human rights when observing civil society, with this in mind, the research shall observe to what extent informal spaces are applying the language of human rights in raising the issue of sectarianism and how it impedes on several basic human rights, be it cultural rights or calls for religious pluralism to be tolerated and endorsed by the state. Informal civil society can therefore be observed through this lens – if it is effective in demanding human rights, does this extend to try curtailing sectarian policies by the state and any inter-communal tension that may arise from those policies.

One issue arising from the current discourse on civil society is that in contrast to the substantial literature on the concept itself, the study of civil society as an empirical reality, i.e. something observed, measured and shaped, is markedly underdeveloped. Over the last decade, it has become increasingly acknowledged that scientific and

practitioner communities know little about the strength and shape of civil society around the world let alone factors that are fostering or inhibiting its development.<sup>146</sup>

It is evident that when observing the existing debates on civil society, the concept has proven difficult to both define and operationalise. Broadly understood as a space in society where “collective action” takes place, Malena and Heinrich (2007) produced a framework and methodology for measuring and comparing the state of different civil societies around the world. Grounded in development studies, this re-conceptualisation of civil society(s), not only allows observers to recapture civil society within a more globalised context but enables researchers to bridge the perceived disconnect between theory on civil society and its practical application as a discernible reality.

Within the context of Kuwait and Bahrain, this research will seek to address this issue by incorporating the overlooked variable of sectarian relations which, depending on the context, could either be promoting or inhibiting the development of various civil society initiatives. The rights-based and multi-dimensional approaches will serve as practical models for not only observing informal spaces within the broader context of civil society but will also offer a platform for understanding some of the variables that determine the strength of a particular space or group vis-à-vis state impingement on civic life. For this to be possible, civil society ought to be treated as a public arena and to move away from the traditional Euro-centric conceptualisations that emphasise a focus on formal organisations.

Based on previous research within global development studies, conceptualising civil society as a public arena allows us to apply a more holistic view and explore critical factors that a narrower definition, which focuses solely on formal organisations would not detect. By focusing on arenas as opposed to organisations, this stresses the importance of civil society’s role in providing public spaces where diverse societal values and interests interact i.e. where people can come together to discuss, associate and seek to influence broader society.

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<sup>146</sup> Anheier, Helmut K. *Civil Society: Measurement, Evaluation and Policy*, London: Earthscan, 2004.

Another issue that ties into the objectives of this research is that civil society definitions that focus solely on associations fail to account for more informal and ephemeral forms of collective action. This is where the multi-dimensional approach will mark its presence, as it accommodates to more informal, fluid forms of collective action as oppose to Western-centric models of conceptualising civil society. It is also important to note that given the existing legal, extra-legal and bureaucratic impediments facing formal CSOs in Kuwait and Bahrain, the institutional vacuum that may become visible can be then aided or supplemented by informal spaces that have flourished in more recent years and practically (if not legally) have come to dominate the civil society landscape. A prime example would be the suspension of parliament (particularly throughout the 1980s and during the Gulf war), which at times, has been replaced by informal discussions that took place within Kuwaiti diwaniyyat and to a lesser extent in Bahraini majalis.<sup>147</sup>

The notion of “uncivil” civil society is also important to this research particularly with regards to sectarianism, which will feature as part of the multi-dimensional framework. Lawrence Whitehead, uses multiple criteria to define uncivil civil society, by 1.) The lack of commitment to act within the constraints of legal or pre-established rules and 2.) The lack of a spirit of civility i.e. possessing certain negative traits of interpersonal behaviour...this relates more to the ideals of organisations.<sup>148</sup>

This idea will be of particular importance when addressing sectarian relations as it refutes the normative content/assumptions that civil society is inherently democratic or even oriented towards the elusive concept of public good. Through the lens of global development, in real ‘civil societies’ throughout the globe, the scope of interests advanced collectively in the public sphere is broad. This includes democratic, progressive, as well as undemocratic, fundamentalist and uncivil ones, such as violent demonstrations, hate speeches or deal-striking behind closed doors. Again, this

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<sup>147</sup> Tetreault, Mary Ann. *Stories of Democracy: Politics and Society in Contemporary Kuwait*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.

<sup>148</sup> Whitehead, Laurence. "Bowling in the Bronx: The Uncivil Interstices between Civil and Political Society." *Democratisation* 4, no. 1 (1997): 94-114.

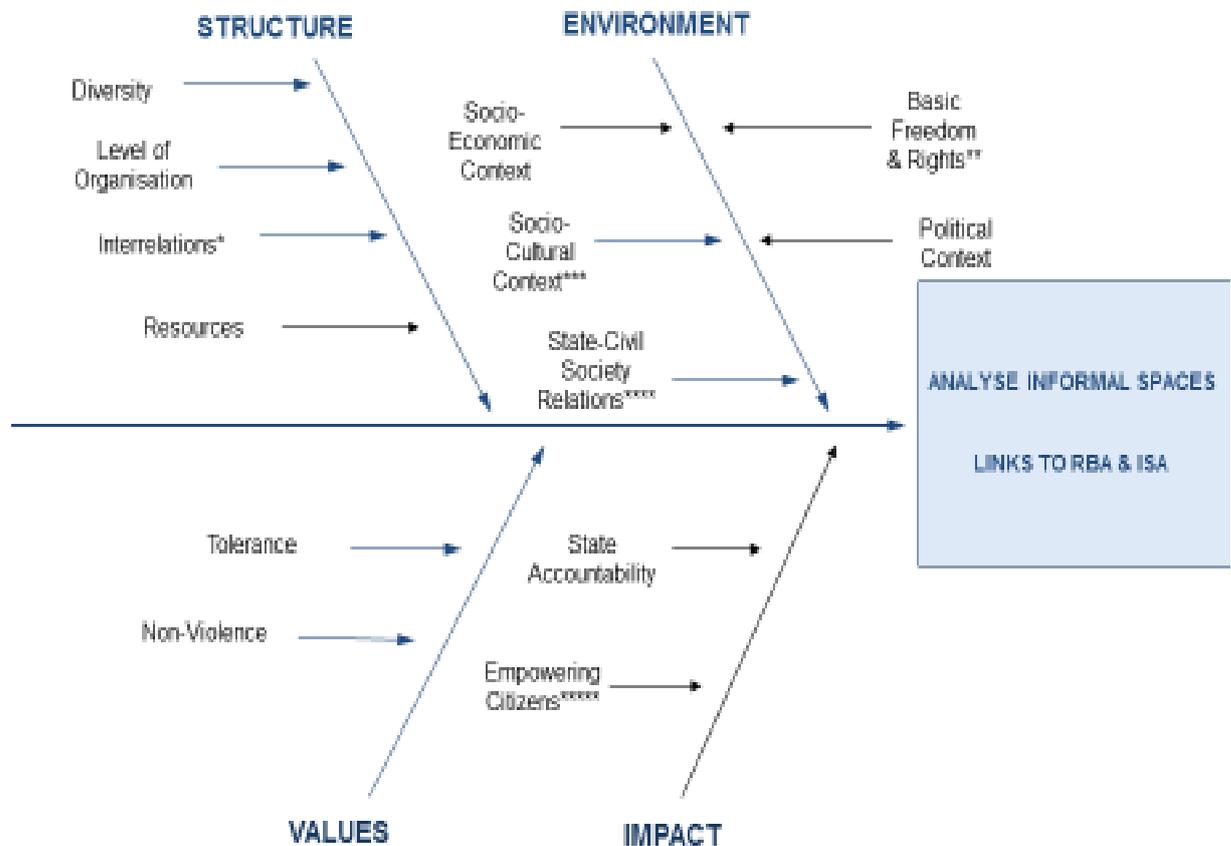
factors in sectarian relations, as initiatives or discussions around rapprochement and polarisation are both shaped by democratic and non-democratic elements of this broad public space, a key question that aims to be addressed as part of this research when looking at the impact and influence of informal spaces both in Kuwait and Bahrain.

It is also important to note that the emphasis on citizens within the multi-dimensional framework is crucial in theorising informal civil society as the venue itself is primarily influenced by who frequents the space and the ideas they harbour in discussions. Again this is in contrast to formal organisations – a feature more commonly affiliated with associational life.

To conceptualise the notion of civil society in a more holistic manner and in order to facilitate the inclusion of informal spaces so that it can be applied as a model to answer some of the key research questions. This research will, therefore, incorporate a rights-based and multi-dimensional approach grounded in development studies to the study of informal spaces and sectarianism in Bahrain and Kuwait. More specifically, it will adopt the four-dimensional framework proposed by Malena and Heinrich, in their theorising on civil society. They devise four key dimensions when examining the worth or rather the social utility of any CSO or informal space. Those variables are; *structure, environment, values and impact*. The four dimensions framework will serve as a useful template not only when analysing the empirical data but can accommodate or rather ties in with other theoretical approaches that will be relevant in answering key research questions.

## **Diagram A – Multi-Dimensional Framework**

## MULTI-DIMENSIONAL FRAMEWORK



Key to diagram:

\*Intrinsic link to central research theme of inter-communal relations.

\*\* Ties to RBA – Human Rights discourse.

\*\*\* Ties to ISA – Extent to which state narrative on sectarian relations reflective in spaces.

\*\*\*\* Ties to ISA – Extent to which state dominates informal spaces – potential limitations of informal civil society.

\*\*\*\*\* Ties to RBA – Informal spaces as platform for capacity-building.

The first dimension, *structure*, examines the overall size and make-up of the civil society arena, its actors, activities and resources. The second dimension, *environment*, focuses on the external environment in which civil society exists and functions, and the extent to which various aspects of that environment are enabling or disabling. The third dimension, *values*, assesses the values that are practised or promulgated within the civil society arena, and the extent to which these values serve the “common good”. The fourth dimension, *impact*, evaluates the impact of activities pursued by civil society actors, particularly concerning governance and development goals.<sup>149</sup>

When addressing the first dimension; structure, this feature is composed of a total of six sub-dimensions but only four of those sub-dimensions explicitly relate to the research at hand, namely when addressing the triangular relationship between informal spaces, inter-communal relations and homing in on the broader civil society debate. The first of those is *diversity within civil society*; by reconceptualising civil society as an arena where conflicting interests and power relations are played out, the equitable representation of various social groups within civil society, especially traditionally marginalised groups, is considered an important feature.<sup>150</sup> The emphasis on traditionally marginalised groups and its place within civil society is undoubtedly linked to this research. The focus on sectarian relations within informal spaces will enable to provide a better understanding of whether disenfranchised groups seek to look beyond the traditional confines of civil society and to see whether informal spaces (particularly emerging youth groups) resonate more with disenfranchised communities.

The next sub-dimension is *level of organisation*; this measures the stability and potential for expansion as well as its capacity for collective action. Indicators to measure this feature include the existence and effectiveness of CSO umbrella bodies and support organisations, alongside the efforts made to self-regulate, by members or visitors of that particular space. In respect to this research, this feature will be applied to see whether informal spaces (especially youth societies) are operating

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<sup>149</sup> Malena, Carmen, and Volkhart Finn Heinrich. "Can We Measure Civil Society? A Proposed Methodology for International Comparative Research." *Development in Practice* 17, no. 3 (2007): 341.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid*, 342.

independently or under the wing of a broader CSO. Moreover, the self-regulatory aspect will be a key feature when assessing informal spaces and the extent to which they can circumvent state authorities when carrying out their activities.

*Interrelations* is yet another sub-dimension that is vital to understanding the structure and ultimately the strength of informal spaces. *Interrelations* measures the extent to which diverse actors share information and co-operate with one another, by assessing the extent of communication and cross-sectoral cooperation and alliance-building among CSOs.<sup>151</sup> This serves as a critical feature when applied to the research at hand, regarding analysing data and answering key questions surrounding the level of co-operation that exists amongst informal civil society actors and the extent to which they can bridge gaps where the state has sought to polarise communities, as is the case particularly in the Bahraini context.

*Resources* are another component to measuring informal civil society under the wider umbrella of the structure of CSOs. This feature shall look to shed light on the resources available to the arena, space or group in question. It evaluates the extent to which CSOs have adequate financial, human and technological resources to achieve their aims.<sup>152</sup> This is important to assess when observing the overall efficacy of informal spaces. One question that may demonstrate their limitations is the inadequate lack of funds/donorships they receive from external non-state sources. However, some spaces, particularly those positioned in the home or community centre (e.g. diwaniyyat, majalis) may come to highlight that funding is not necessarily an essential feature to carry out its principal function of providing a platform for discussions and networking that could potentially materialise in some form of civic activism.

The second key dimension devised by Malena and Heinrich, is the *environment* in which informal civil society operates, is perhaps the most crucial factor incorporated into this research, particularly the interconnect with other theoretical approaches that shall serve as a template for understanding the way in which informal spaces function in Bahrain and Kuwait and their standing within wider state-societal relations. This dimension will become pertinent when establishing the link to another theoretical

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

approach widely known as ideological state apparatus, or ISA, which shall be touched upon in greater detail in section 4.3.

The dimension itself illustrates how enabling or disabling the external environment is for civil society and more broadly citizen empowerment. The emphasis on environment naturally distinguishes itself from conventional understandings of civil society. Not only does it observe legal factors that have often impeded on formal CSOs but also comprises of an assessment of political, constitutional, social, economic and cultural factors. Addressing these external factors are more conducive to understanding the manner in which informal civil society operates and how it can either succeed or fail in bringing religious communities closer.

Again, as with structure, the notion of environment is sub-divided into distinct sub-dimensions of relevance to this research. The first of these sub-dimension is *political context*. Factoring in the political context in both Kuwait and Bahrain is crucial in recognising the parameters by which civil society operates, which ties in closely with another sub-dimension, *basic freedom and rights*. More pertinent to the discussion on formal CSOs, this assesses the rights and liberties that directly relate to the functioning of civil society. Indicators that ought to be observed when addressing this feature would be to look at basic civil liberties (e.g. state of freedom of expression, assembly and association) and how are these circumscribed within the formal realm, and where informal groupings/spaces can potentially fill the void. This sub-dimension is ultimately used to measure the extent to which the law in both countries safeguards these freedoms and how well protected they are in practice.<sup>153</sup>

This feature could potentially provide explanations as to the emergence or increasing popularity and demand for informal associations within the context of Kuwait and Bahrain.

Another important sub-dimension falling under the external environment aspect is the *socio-economic context* and its impact on civil society. When drawing on the issue of sectarian relations, this feature deals with a range of conditions that are often known to stifle civil society. Within the context of this research, this needs to be taken into

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid, 343.

consideration, as severe ethnic or religious conflict have often stemmed from socio-economic disparity between various groups, which also has a detrimental impact on formally recognised civil society groups. One key question this research sets out to answer is whether informal spaces could be the exception to the rule or like formal CSOs is it influenced by broader social issues.

Closely linked to this sub-dimension is the *socio-cultural context* in which civil society functions. This feature seeks to measure levels of trust, tolerance and public-spiritedness amongst members of society, as indicators of the extent to which socio-cultural norms and attitudes are conducive to civil society.<sup>154</sup> The role of socio-cultural norms and attitudes within informal spaces will be pivotal when looking more closely at the ISA's operating within both countries and the extent to which the state's narrative on sectarian relations is reflective within these spaces. Furthermore, how could the state's portrayal of various communities be influencing the way informal groups operate – are they looking to replicate or break away from the state script and how does that bear on relations between sectarian communities? A prime example of this could be the state perception of the Shia community in Kuwait, which is largely favourable, often regarded as loyalists, whereas the Bahraini state views its Shia population as potential fifth columnists of Iran.

Linking to such questions is *the relationship between state and civil society* that shall be incorporated into the research by making the link between the multi-dimensional approach to informal civil society and the theory of ideological state apparatuses. This feature is intrinsic to this research as it focuses on the nature and quality of state-societal relations. It shall also observe the level of autonomy that informal spaces acquire vis-à-vis the state. Broadly speaking, this is seen to be more pertinent to informal civil society as in both the Kuwaiti and Bahraini contexts informal spaces are perceived to be more autonomous than formal CSOs in the region. One question that arises however, is the extent to which they are immune from state interference and depending on the results from the empirical data, how does that in turn impact inter-communal relations. If the state is also proven to dominate certain aspects of informal

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

civil society, in what way does that impede on inter-communal rapprochement, if at all, and which spaces in particular are effected?

Another indicator of this sub-dimension is to observe any state-civil society dialogue this is vital when addressing ISA's impact on sectarian relations and the extent to which dialogue has been initiated by the state and informal spaces, particularly when it comes to addressing sensitive or contentious issues like sectarianism. Additionally, the level of cooperation and support between the state and informal civil society also needs to be factored in when analysing the data, whether such a thing exists and in what capacity.

The third key dimension when incorporating Malena and Heinrich's multi-dimensional approach to informal civil society is *values*. As alluded to previously, the purpose of this feature is to consider values that are practiced or promulgated within the civil society arena and the extent to which these values serve the "common good". As the research looks to focus on sectarianism and inter-communal relations, what will be regarded as the common good, in the context of this research will be whether these spaces can and actively try to facilitate cross-sectarian discussions and initiatives. In contrast to attempts that seek to further antagonising or be seen to polarise communities during such turbulent times in a post-2011 uprisings era. Two sub-dimensions are of relevance to this discussion, namely issues surrounding *tolerance* and *non-violence*. With regards to tolerance, the multi-dimensional approach seeks to assess the balance between tolerant and intolerant forces within civil society and the extent to which civil society is engaged in promoting tolerance within society at large.<sup>155</sup>

This is once again significant when looking at sectarian relations and addressing the effectiveness of informal spaces, by asking the question as to how inclusive or exclusive they are of others and how often they look to reach out beyond their respective communities. With that in mind, comes the issue of non-violence. Malena and Heinrich note that when civil society plays an important role in denouncing violence and resolving conflicts, it is also at times an arena where groups use violent

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid, p.344.

means to express their interests.<sup>156</sup> Important to note that this research will apply this feature to see whether informal civil society can be used to diffuse tensions by asking whether they promote non-violence at the individual, household and societal levels and how these spaces can be used as a potential platform to address such issues surrounding inter-communal violence.

The fourth and final dimension put forward by Malena and Heinrich concerns the *impact* of civil society actors on citizens and society more broadly. Two of the sub-dimensions are of particular relevance to this research. One of those being the idea of holding the state to accountability, could informal civil society be used as a watchdog, holding state entities to accountability for their actions. A more notable sub-dimension is the notion of *empowering citizens*. This ties in with one of the key rationales for emphasising the significance of informal spaces, in particular, as it seeks to offer an avenue by which citizens have more options to participate in civic life than the traditional CSOs that are often co-opted by the state to its advantage, making them redundant. This harps back to the rights-based approach as one of the indicators for measuring citizen empowerment is to observe civil society's impact on building capacity for collective action. By that, supporting individuals and groups in their efforts to organise, mobilising resources and working together to solve common problems.<sup>157</sup> Whilst building social capital by promoting trust, tolerance and public-spiritedness, which informal spaces seem to have the potential or capacity to achieve in certain situations.

Another feature that touches on inter-communal relations once again is the idea of informal spaces having to meet societal needs; particularly in/for/with regards to marginalised sections of society. This sub-dimension aims to address how effective informal civil society is by meeting the needs of marginalised groups as compared with the state, who if anything, have instigated or exacerbated the problem in the first hand and how this may have detrimental implications for community relations. Therefore, one question this research will set out to ask is whether informal civil society can act as a platform to rectify inter-communal issues. As oppose to policies of alienating or

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid, p.345.

securitising populations that are ultimately infringing on the broader campaign for greater democratic liberties both within Kuwait and Bahrain.

Of course, there were other sub-dimensions which Malena and Heinrich apply to their multi-dimensional framework. However, for the sake of this research they have purposefully been omitted as they are solely pertaining to formal civil society and cannot be observed or analysed in relation to informal spaces and its impact on sectarian relations. It was therefore important to specifically pick out the key features of each dimension that can be utilised to analyse the empirical data and to assess the social utility of the informal arena. Be it efficacy of such spaces in overcoming the state narrative, the demanding/advocating of human rights pertaining to sectarian policies and the positive/negative impact that then has on the nature of sectarian relations between communities in Kuwait and Bahrain.

As noted in the diagram above, RBA and multi-dimensional approach come together within the *environmental* and *impact* dimensions, where the focus on advocating basic freedom and rights takes precedence in gauging the impact informal associations possess over the state. Moreover, the link between RBA and the multi-dimensional approach can be evidenced within the *empowering citizens* sub-dimension, which seeks to observe whether informal spaces serve as an ideal platform for capacity-building – namely whether it obtains the necessary features/abilities/resources to bridge communities together.

### **3.2 Ideological State Apparatus (ISA)**

Moving on from RBA and the multi-dimensional framework, the environmental factors within this model are inextricably linked to the following theoretical approach. In order to present a structural analysis of sectarianism based on the data provided, it is essential to look towards the notion of ideological state apparatus or (ISA) and how it distinguishes itself from the repressive or coercive state apparatus. Grounded in the works of Marxist theorists such as Althusser as part of his broader commentary on ideology, this apparatus will serve to facilitate a better understanding of how the state utilises sectarian policies through various institutional outlets or “soft power” mechanisms in order to assert its hegemony. By employing a dominant/normative

worldview on citizens through various avenues, the authoritarian state subsequently inhibits the otherwise potential influence traditional civil society actors could achieve and arguably alters the trajectory of inter-communal relations altogether in a detrimental manner. External factors (namely the state) and the resources it has at its disposal are crucial to evaluating the limitations of any CSO in achieving a notion of “common good” – as already established beforehand this would be seen as efforts to harmonise relations between religious communities in both Kuwait and Bahrain.

Althusser’s position on ISA and how it differs from CSA is grounded in Marxist theory on the state. Commencing with the premise that the state (and its existence in its apparatus) has no meaning except as a function of state power. The whole of the political class struggle revolves around the state. The apparatus, which serves to prop up the state presents itself in the form of distinct and specialised institutions. This would directly tie into government ministries in Kuwait and Bahrain that deal with licencing CSOs, but to what extent do they have a hold or can monitor informal groups remains to be observed. The following institutions are considered to be ideological state apparatuses: -

The religious ISA (the system of different mosques) – given this research is on religious communities in Kuwait and Bahrain, the role of state-sponsored religious institutions will undoubtedly play a role in determining the nature of sectarian relations – but to what extent they influence informal spaces, is something that has yet to be addressed.

Alongside this is the educational ISA (the system of different public and private schools), the legal ISA, the political ISA, the cultural ISA (Literature, arts, sports etc) and finally the communications ISA (Press, radio and TV) which will also be another important feature when addressing the role media outlets are having in disseminating polarising messages and whether that is reflective within informal spaces themselves or do they work to counter these narratives. What distinguishes the ISA from the CSA, is in the distinction that CSA functions primarily through violence (or what is often referred to as hard power), whereas the ISA by and large operates by ideology – a soft power mechanism.

It is important to note that although CSA functions predominantly on violence and repression, there is still however no such thing as a purely repressive apparatus. A prime example being the army or police who likewise function by ideology both to ensure their own cohesion and reproduction, and in the 'values' they propound externally. Likewise, there is no such thing as a purely ideological apparatus. Even schools and mosques use suitable methods of punishment, expulsion, selection etc. in order to be 'disciplined'.

Same is also true of cultural ISA with censorship for example to understand ISA and its influence on CSOs, it should be noted how it differs from the notion of the coercive state apparatus, or CSA. Althusser describes the CSA via three central elements: (1) the government and its administration; (2) the police and its specialised auxiliary corps, courts, and prisons; and (3) the army, which intervenes directly as a supplementary repressive force in the last instance.<sup>158</sup> When addressing the differences between ISA and CSA it needs to be understood that concepts of 'rule' and hegemony' are different in the way they operate in society. "Rule" is defined by direct forms of governance or effective coercion, in contrast to "hegemony," which consists of active social and cultural forces that dominate and subjugate individuals ideologically and symbolically rather than physically.<sup>159</sup>

Althusser accentuates differences between the ISA and CSA by stating that CSA functions as a unified entity (an organised whole, as evidenced above in its core elements) as opposed to the ISA which is diverse and plural. However, what unites the disparate ISA's is the fact that the ruling ideology ultimately controls them. Again this is applicable in both Kuwait and Bahrain, in that both countries are ruled by absolute monarchs who have a hand in all governmental ministries – including the Ministry of Social Affairs, which is where formal CSOs have to register and are monitored via legal, extra-legal and bureaucratic measures as mentioned in the background chapter. According to Althusser, a repressive state exercises its

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<sup>158</sup> Althusser, L. *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)*. Trans. B. Brewster. In *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972.

<sup>159</sup> Williams, R. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977. 109-110.

hegemony over the ISA, which functions primarily by reinforcing ideologies. Families, religious institutions, schools, and media may function as part of the ISA.<sup>160</sup>

Where the explicit links to the central research themes come in is not only in the external environment in which civil society operates in Kuwait and Bahrain but in the idea that ISA includes the private domain. Here is where both formal and informal civil society actors (depending on the space and context) could potentially have played a part in either perpetuating or trying to undermine the dominant state narrative. Rather than direct repression like the CSA and inflicting order through repression, ISA reinforces the rule of the dominant class, which in the Bahraini context is sectarian in itself, as the government seek to maintain their control over an increasingly restive population. Identifying ISA as a mechanism that maintains hegemonic world-views and limits changes in the existing power structure<sup>161</sup>, this could be none more evident than in the case of Bahrain, as recent commentary on authoritarian survival in Bahrain analyses the ISA that is in operation in order to undermine pro-democracy movements, as illustrated in this recent quote.

'In addition to the CSA...the government of Bahrain has utilized the media, schools, mosques, and private and public-sector jobs to create an ISA that encourages and coerces public affirmation of the status quo. Tactics include the characterization of Bahrain as Arab, Sunnī, and loyal to the monarchy and the protestors as dangerous, deceitful, sectarian, and loyal to Iran. Hardliners in the government particularly promote anti-Shī'ī agendas that stigmatize, disenfranchise, and repress the majority of its citizens.'<sup>162</sup>

Husayn adds to this observation by citing the example of patriotism being utilised as a form of ISA. As Husayn remarks: 'In support of the repression instituted by branches of the government, the ISA in Bahrain utilized patriotism as a reason to repress its population. Those who were loyal to the state were encouraged to identify all who

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<sup>160</sup> Althusser, L. *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)*. Trans. B. Brewster. In *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972. p.75.

<sup>161</sup> Heywood, A. *Political Ideas and Concepts: An Introduction*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994. 99-101.

<sup>162</sup> Husayn, Nebil. "Mechanisms of Authoritarian Rule in Bahrain." *Arab Studies Quarterly* Vol. 37, no. No. 1 (2015): 33-34.

participated in the protests through social media to facilitate their arrest. The government posted photos of protestors on Facebook and requested citizens to anonymously tag their faces. State media claimed the following: medics were diabolical forgers of medical records, protest was treason, and protestors deserved no leniency and the death penalty. The editors of an opposition newspaper as well as international journalists were forgers of news. Iran was a logistical and financial source of instability. Bahraini Shī'īs were disloyal.<sup>163</sup>

The importance of media outlets in disseminating the ISA is critical in establishing links with informal civil society, as the value-worth of informal spaces are expressed through the discussions that take place and the people who frequent that location as oppose to the organisation/association itself. In this regard, it is vital that we address the notion of rhetoric based on the discussions that take place within informal spaces – again, like state-civil society relations, a question that needs to be posed is whether the rhetoric emanating from these spaces, panders to or contradicts the state's narrative and in the context of Kuwait and Bahrain and depending on the arena in particular, the results could in fact vary between spaces.

### **3.3 ISA, RBA and Multi-Dimensional Framework: A Combined Approach**

As illustrated in the diagram, the eclectic incorporated into this research is reflective of the various central themes that need to be addressed in order to answer the research questions effectively. Those being the relationship between informal civil societies, inter-communal relations and homing in on the wider civil society debate.

Merging certain aspects of these three approaches will provide a robust framework when it comes to analysing the empirical data with each approach embodying or contributing to the other in some shape or form. The nature of the research requires a combination of inter-linked approaches as not only does it offer the most comprehensive understanding to approaching civil society vis-à-vis sectarian relations, but it provides a tool kit in order to explore and understand the key questions. Whether those questions pertain to sectarian sentiment or how autonomous informal spaces are from the state's domain, each theoretical approach will complement the

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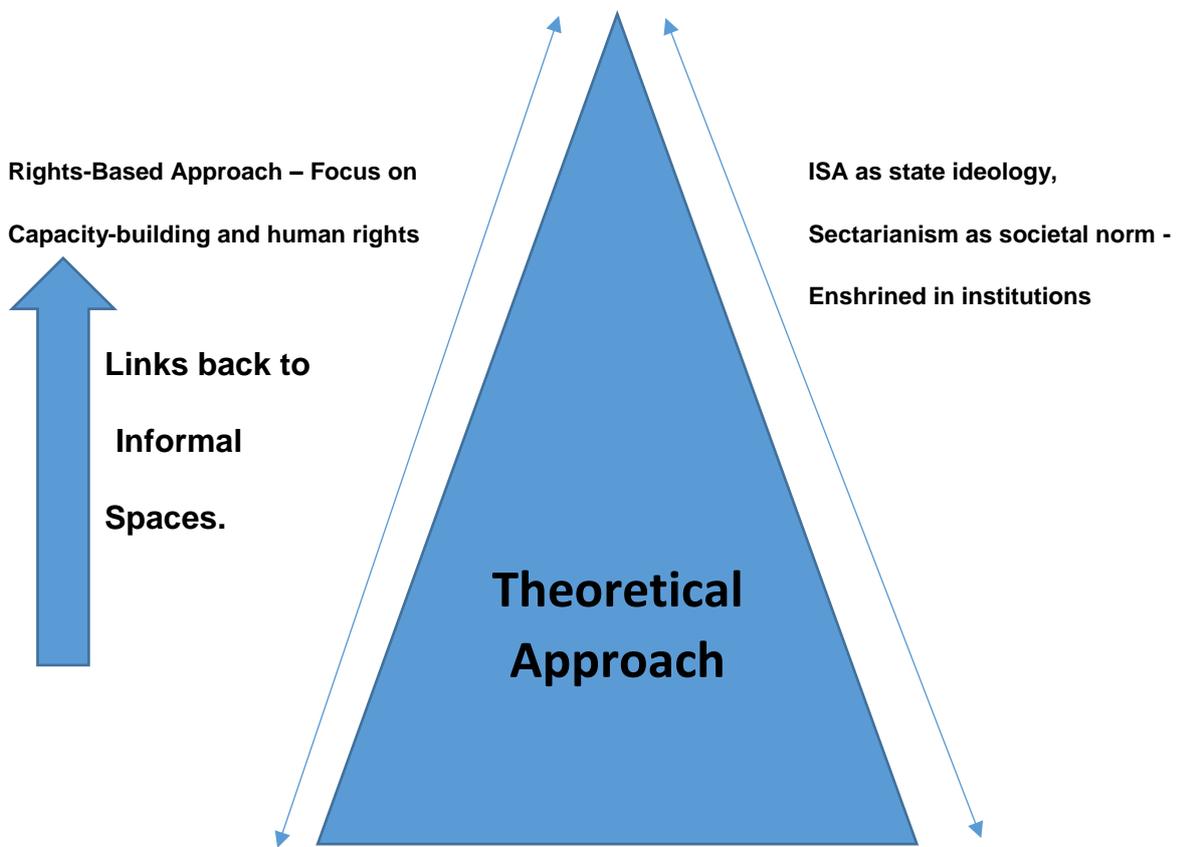
<sup>163</sup> Ibid, pp.41-42.

other in providing a clear-cut response and an explanation that is ultimately theory-driven from several angles.

As the model shows the framework applies elements of two approaches to civil society – RBA and multi-dimensional framework which are grounded in developmental studies to civil society but have proven the linkages and application to this research in several ways. RBA is found throughout the multi-dimensional framework and is applied in several contexts, via capacity-building, through the importance of state-civil society dialogue/engagement and human rights discourse which extends to issues surrounding sectarian policies. The environmental factors in which informal civil society operates is then intrinsically linked to another theoretical approach – the ideological state apparatus. With this in mind, this will focus in particular on the religious and communications ISA, as these institutions have arguably been the greatest contributing factors in propagating sectarian sentiment. The question that now arises, is whether informal civil society can find innovative ways to counter such narratives and to see what initiatives (if any) they have in order to tackle top-down sectarian sentiment that only serves to polarise communities.

## **DIAGRAM B: Theoretical Approach**

**Sectarian Discourse and Policies**



**Grounded in two approaches Multi-Dimensional Approach ISA**

**To civil society.**

**“Space for collective action” ISA**

**Environmental dimension –**

**Link to external influences**

**Inclusion of informal spaces.**

Move away from org-based to ‘arena-citizen’ based concept of civil society

### **3.4 Conclusion**

With the chosen theoretical approaches in mind that will serve as a practical framework to answering the key research questions/objectives, this thesis shall now turn to the empirical data chapters which focus on research collated from the chosen case studies of Kuwait and Bahrain.

### **4. Formal and Informal Civic Spaces in Bahrain and Kuwait**

As discussed in the preceding chapter, this research seeks to investigate the extent to which informal political spaces influence inter-communal relations in the Kuwaiti and Bahraini political landscape. This background chapter will therefore provide further insight into the nature and role of these informal spaces, and where they fit within the broader context of civil society organisations in the two countries. The following introduction of this background chapter will present a breakdown of the existing CSOs that exist within both case studies, as well as the legal framework and conditions by which they are conformed to operate under. This chapter shall then introduce the notion of an informal civil society, what exactly constitutes informal civil society and shed light on the various types of informal spaces that exist in both countries, whilst presenting a comparison of the features and the state's response to both formal and informal civic society.

To put into context why an informal civic sector has emerged and is gaining traction in the first place, it is first important to discuss formal civil society organisations and the existing impediments facing them when dealing with state authorities. This is because formal civil society has, in some respect, proven to be and large ineffective in challenging the state and in turn state-sponsored narratives on sectarianism. Whereas the unregulated, informal space has the capacity, depending on how the space is utilised, but nevertheless still has the capacity to provide or facilitate alternative narratives regarding sectarianism, be they conducive or detrimental towards sectarian relations.

For the sake of this research, formal spaces (or CSOs) are those associations that have been institutionalised. In that respect, they are obligated to register with the relevant social ministries, and often receive funding from state donors which in turn

enables them to co-opt and monitor their activities, this point will be explored in further depth when exploring the interaction between state and formal civil society. On the other hand, the various types of, majalis and youth societies which are the primary focus of this research investigation, shall be designated as informal spaces; as the distinctive hallmarks of traditional CSOs do not necessarily apply to these groups, which will become evident in the sections concerning informal civil society.

In Kuwait, formal civil society is known to be relatively small and composed of public interest associations. The Law of Association prohibits these groups to engage in what the state recognises as political activity, and almost all of the associations that are registered as public benefit societies receive some form of government funding. The state also reimburses such groups for the costs of attending conferences, seconds civil servants to assist CSOs and provides grants. However, state support does not extend to CSOs own costs and many primarily depend on their own fundraising. These associations may typically focus on gender issues, economic liberalisation or the promotion of Islamic values. More importantly concerning this research, is to acknowledge the hundreds of unofficial CSOs, which do not receive any government subsidies and have no legal status.<sup>164</sup>

According to the Arab NGO Directory, which is said to have one of the largest and most concise listing of Arab-based NGOs and charities, there are around 38 formal associations that are active and currently in operation within Kuwait. To understand what areas formal civil society is mostly invested in Kuwait and within the broader field of advocacy groups, there are 7 groups that can be broken down into 3 sub-sectors. 3 CSOs pertaining to civil and legal rights, 3 human rights organisations which are Human Rights Kuwait, the Social Work Society of Kuwait and Kuwait Bidoon Human Rights Organisation, and lastly, 1 group operating within the field of media, the Kuwait Journalists Society.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Rishmawi, Mervat, and Tim Morris. "Overview of Civil Society in the Arab World." *International NGO Training and Research Centre (INTRAC)*, no. 20 (2007): 16. Accessed August 1, 2015. <http://www.intrac.org/data/files/resources/421/Praxis-Paper-20-Overview-of-Civil-Society-in-the-Arab-World.pdf>.

<sup>165</sup> arab.org, NGO Directory of Kuwait, <https://arab.org/countries/kuwait/>, (accessed: July 7, 2017)

Within the development sector, there are some 15 organisations that are concerned with culture/leisure, research and sustainability. There are 5 cultural societies, two of which are dedicated to women. In research, there are 7 organisations pertaining to town planning and engineering, science and conservation; and there are 3 groups in sustainability which principally focus on economic development.<sup>166</sup>

Within the education sector, there are around 5 organisations such as the Kuwait Teacher's society. Likewise, there are 5 groups in the medical sector, ranging from nutrition and disability to smoking prevention campaigns. Finally, there are 3 faith-based charities such as Direct Aid, 2 organisations concerned with animal welfare and preservation and one Kuwaiti humanitarian society in the form of the Kuwaiti Red Crescent.<sup>167</sup>

When observing the legal environment under which these organisations operate, it becomes evident that based on some of the latest *Freedom House* reports, freedom of assembly and association is technically guaranteed by law but constrained in practice. Kuwaitis must notify authorities of a public meeting or protest, though it has been acknowledged that some peaceful demonstrations have been allowed without a permit. In 2012, the government declared public assemblies of more than 20 people to be illegal. The government routinely restricts registration and licencing of CSOs, forcing dozens of groups to operate without legal standing or state assistance. This also means that representatives of licensed CSOs must obtain government permission to attend foreign conferences.

In August 2004, for example, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour officially recognised the existence of the Kuwait Human Rights Society (KHRS) which had been founded 10 years earlier but operated without official status.<sup>168</sup> This demonstrates both the presence and a desire for proto-organisations to still operate irrespective of whether they are acknowledged or registered with the state, this disregard for state approval therefore becomes a prevalent feature of the informal spaces. Interestingly,

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> U.S Department of State, Kuwait 2009 Report, <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2008/nea/119119.htm> (accessed: June 17, 2017).

the 2009 U.S. State Department report into civil society activities in Kuwait, specifically notes that “NGOs may not engage in overtly political activity and are prohibited from encouraging sectarianism. They must also demonstrate that their existence is in the public interest.”<sup>169</sup> This could corroborate the thesis findings as the state having to exclusively spell out a prohibition on sectarian discourse and activities for registered CSOs, could in itself be indicative of a bottom-up pressure that has given rise to sectarian sentiment, and may therefore be a testament to the unencumbered informal sector acting as an incubator for polarising voices.

The state’s perceived apprehension towards sectarian discourse could be evidenced in its response to regional events, where Kuwaiti authorities also claim that it has increased monitoring of the country’s charities over concerns about financial support for extremist militants in Syria and Iraq originating from Kuwait.<sup>170</sup> The defiance of tens of thousands of demonstrators in 2012 and 2013 led to violent clashes with authorities, after peaceful demonstrations were held throughout 2012, mostly in response to charges of government corruption and the parliamentary crisis.<sup>171</sup>

Moving on to the political sphere, political parties are prohibited, although political groupings, such as political associations and parliamentary blocs, have been allowed to emerge and participate in electoral and legislative politics.<sup>172</sup> It has been reported, however, that the government has impeded their activities through harassment and arrests in the past.<sup>173</sup> Likewise, with regards to the legal aspect, Kuwait also lacks an independent judiciary. The Emir appoints all judges, and the executive branch approves judicial promotions. Authorities may also detain suspects for up to four days without charge.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Baylouny, Anne M & Mullins, Creighton A, “Kuwait: Center of Non-State Funding” chapter in *Cash is king: financial sponsorship and changing priorities in the Syrian civil war*, Routledge, 2017.

<sup>171</sup> "Kuwait." Freedom House. 2014. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2014/kuwait#.VeWM3PIViko>. (accessed: August 1, 2015)

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> "Kuwait." Freedom House. 2011. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2011/kuwait#.VeW0tvIViko>. (accessed: August 1, 2015)

The formal civil society landscape in Bahrain exposes similar characteristics to that of Kuwait, with most associations operating in the same sectors, with a total of around 64 groups. In the development sector, there are some 33 organisations currently functioning, which again encompass a broad spectrum of public interest groups from cultural societies all the way through to sustainability, sports and faith-based charities. In the advocacy sector, which ranges from civil and human rights to labour organisations, legal affairs and security, there are some 15 groups. Smaller sectors include the likes of health, finance, environment, animal welfare and relief or aid organisations of which there are around 10 CSOs. Finally, there are people-orientated groups which are specifically concerned with child and youth welfare as well as women and family issues, of which there are six groups specifically catered to this sector.<sup>175</sup> Albeit operating in their respective sectors, it should be noted that formal CSOs in both the context of Kuwait and Bahrain can have mutual concerns and interests in various sectors, one example to illustrate this would be a woman's organisation that may be dealing with broader developmental initiatives.

Considering the 2011 Arab uprisings that took place in Bahrain, associational life has by and large been met with a relatively harsher clampdown compared to its Kuwaiti counterpart. The 1989 Societies Law prohibits any nongovernmental organisation (NGO) from operating without a permit, and authorities have broad discretion to deny or revoke permits. Citizens must obtain a permit to hold demonstrations, and a variety of onerous restrictions make it difficult to organise a legal gathering in practice. Police regularly use force to break up political protests, most of which occur in Shiite villages, and participants can face long jail terms, particularly if the demonstrations involve clashes with security personnel. Prominent Bahraini human rights defenders continue to face harassment, intimidation, and prosecution on dubious grounds.<sup>176</sup>

Political societies had also once operated under this law which governed other CSOs, until the Law of Political Societies was drafted in August 2005. Political societies have

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<sup>175</sup> arab.org , NGO Directory of Bahrain, <https://arab.org/countries/bahrain/> , (accessed: July 7, 2017).

<sup>176</sup> "Bahrain", Freedom House 2017, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2017/bahrain>. (accessed: August 20, 2017)

de facto operated as political parties without being afforded any legal protection. As Niethammer examined, that similarly to the Law of Associations,

“it was restrictive, especially regarding external funding. Moreover, it forces political societies to recognise the constitution and forbids promoting ethnically and/or sectarian based programmes – a provision that could be used against all Islamic political societies since those cater almost exclusively to their own sects.”<sup>177</sup>

Bahrainis do have the right to establish independent labour unions, but workers must give two weeks’ notice before a strike, and strikes are banned in a variety of economic sectors. Trade unions cannot operate in the public sector, and collective-bargaining rights are limited even in the private sector. Harassment and firing of unionist workers does occur in practice.<sup>178</sup>

In 2013, in the wake of ongoing protests and rising levels of violence, King Hamad decreed additions to Bahrain’s antiterrorism law that imposed heavy penalties on those convicted of demonstrating unlawfully, measures that included large fines and revoking citizenship.<sup>179</sup>

It becomes apparent therefore, that as in the Kuwaiti context, there are various legal impediments on existing CSOs, albeit on a considerably severer scale. According to the 2002 Bahraini Constitution, freedom of association is said to be ensured in several instances. Article 27 states, “The freedom to form associations and unions...for lawful objectives and by peaceful means is guaranteed under the rules and conditions laid down by law and as long as the fundamentals of the religion and public order are not

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<sup>177</sup> Niethammer, Katja, *Voices in Parliament, Debates in Majalis, and Banners on Streets: Avenues of Political Participation in Bahrain*, European University Institute, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, Mediterranean Programme Series, 2006, p.5.

<sup>178</sup> “Bahrain”, Freedom House 2017, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2017/bahrain>. (accessed: August 20, 2017)

<sup>179</sup> Ibid, 2016 Report.

infringed. No one can be forced to join any association or union or to continue as a member.”<sup>180</sup>

Article 31 however later on states, “the public rights and freedoms stated in this constitution may be regulated or limited in accordance with the law, and such regulation or limitation may not prejudice the essence of the right or freedom.”<sup>181</sup> According to an explanatory memorandum of the constitution which explains the rationale for the limitations of the right to freedom of association and other public freedoms, it states; “these articles were amended in a way to guarantee the freedom of association...and in order to keep the Islamic principles and unity of the people.”<sup>182</sup> As is the case in the Kuwaiti context, there are specific legal provisions related to the formation, functioning and dissolution of associations. Although the constitution guarantees the right to freedom of association, the Bahraini legal and policy framework regarding freedom of association is restrictive and offers authorities a wide scope of control regarding the formation of an association.

Furthermore, with regards to the law of political societies from 2005, the law’s provisions grant further draconian powers to ministerial authorities;

“The law allows the minister of justice to refer to court any society that violates the provisions of Bahrain's constitution, or this law or any other Bahraini law. The minister of justice may ask the court to freeze the activities of the violating society for 3 months during which the society corrects the violation or removes its causes. The minister may also ask the court to dissolve the violating society, liquidate its assets and determine who receives them if that society commits grave violations of Bahrain's constitution or of this law or any other Bahraini law.”<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> "FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION IN THE ARABIAN GULF: THE CASE OF BAHRAIN, KUWAIT AND YEMEN." February 1, 2008. <https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/etude.pdf>. (accessed: August 1, 2015)

<sup>181</sup> Ibid, p.11.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> Wright, Steven, *Fixing the Kingdom: Political Evolution and Socio-Economic Challenges in Bahrain*, Center for International and Regional Studies, Georgetown University, 2008, p.7.

Again, the Law of Association states the legal recognition of a CSO is only realised after the application for registration is approved and published in the official gazette by the administrative authority (Article 1). Associations considered to compromise 'public order' and 'morals' or are established for an illegitimate aim such as undermining the wellbeing of the state or government shall be considered void (Article 3). Establishment of an association requires at least ten founding members (Article 4). In addition, (Article 11) requires that members should be 18 years or older.<sup>184</sup> The administrative authorities managing regulations on associational life, be it the Ministry of Social Development, Ministry of Justice or the Ministry of Labour for example, have the right to deny registration to an association if it considers there is no need for its services, or if another existing association fulfils the same objectives, or if its establishment is against state security interests, or if its formation is to replace another association that had been previously dissolved (Article 11, Paragraph 1).<sup>185</sup>

Again, in the Bahraini context (as in the case of Kuwait), several legal circumscriptions become apparent for registered CSOs, namely the right to be free of control, interference and supervision. For example, the Societies Law contains several provisions that ultimately restricts them from freely conducting their activities. Associations therefore must detail in their statutes their objectives and types of activities; the covered geographical area(s); the names and personal details of the founding members; its financial resources and its means of expenditure, the rights and responsibilities of members, the procedures for the amendments of the statutes as well as for merging or separation or setting up branches and the rules for voluntary dissolution (Article 5).<sup>186</sup>

Further to this, associations are not allowed to be involved in political activity (Article 18) and this prohibition must also be written within their statutes. The state's further inspections include examination of associations' internal records, documents and correspondence to ensure their compliance with the provisions of the law (Article 15). The intrusion of administrative authorities covers other aspects of internal organisation

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<sup>184</sup> "FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION IN THE ARABIAN GULF: THE CASE OF BAHRAIN, KUWAIT AND YEMEN." February 1, 2008. <https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/etude.pdf>. (accessed: August 1, 2015) p.12.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid, p.13

<sup>186</sup> Ibid, p.19.

and management of CSOs as well. They may add new conditions for the membership of the board (Article 43), call for a meeting of the general assembly (Article 30) or the board of the CSO (Article 45). The authorities can also attend general assembly meetings (Article 33) and CSOs must send the authorities copies of every decision taken by the board (Article 46).<sup>187</sup>

Like Kuwait, there is also the issue of seeking and receiving external funds. The Law of Association allows authorities to have tight control over funding of CSOs and makes the violation of the provisions related to funding punishable by up to 6 months imprisonment and/or fine (Article 89). The law also clearly states how CSOs must obtain prior approval from the relevant ministry before receiving any foreign funding (Article 20).<sup>188</sup>

The Bahraini authorities justify this monitoring of CSO activity by noting that it comes under their obligation to prevent money laundering, or in more recent years extremist financing as in the case of Kuwait, especially as Bahrain has to report to the World Bank in this regard.<sup>189</sup> According to the authorities, every ministry is responsible to supervise the flow of money transactions for the subjects that fall under its competency, including details of foreign sponsorship and the method of expenditure.<sup>190</sup>

It can be noted therefore that the legal framework in both countries has enabled the relevant ministries to monitor and constrain civil society through a plethora of mechanisms which in turn inhibit civil society to function in an effective manner particularly in the wake of the Arab uprisings. Issues concerning institutional transparency and a lack of adequate representation are the inevitable results which will become evident. The following section shall therefore observe the modus operandi and interaction between state and CSO by acknowledging the role of state corporatism in the Gulf and explore some of the extra-legal measures as well as the bureaucratic

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<sup>187</sup> Ibid, p.20.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid, p.24.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

and administrative elements that are currently in operation which have ultimately impeded the operation of formal civil society within both countries.

The remainder of the chapter shall then explore the various types of informal spaces that exist in Kuwait and Bahrain. It is important that these spaces be looked at in relation to what sets them apart from traditional CSOs - and where they could be perceived as a viable alternative to formal CSOs vis-à-vis their influence on issues pertaining to sectarianism and inter-communal relations. This will be brought forth in the following chapters as the research will touch on the initiatives by informal spaces/groupings as well as their responses to what are commonly perceived as sectarian policymaking by the state in the case of Bahrain, or the sectarian lens to which regional events and conflicts are portrayed which is the principal focus in the case of Kuwait.

#### **4.1 State-Societal Relations and Formal Civic Organisations**

One useful analytical frame to understanding state-societal relations and the existing impediments facing the civic sector is the long-established notion of state corporatism, which is particularly applicable to the GCC states. In most studies, corporatism has been confined to describe the relationship of the state, labour and employers, but as Phillippe Schmitter who provides a comprehensive definition illustrates, that corporatism can be broken down into two, state and societal corporatism. The latter is a more democratic conception, and has emerged from the relatively open contention of societal interests. However, in the case of this research, corporatism which is state-imposed remains one of the more expedient frameworks to explore the operational dynamics between state and civil society. For Schmitter, "corporatism can be defined as a system of interest representation in which the constituent units are organised into a limited number of singular, compulsory, non-competitive, hierarchically ordered and functionally differentiated categories, recognised or licenced (if not created) by the state and granted a deliberate representational monopoly within their respective categories in exchange for observing certain controls on their selection of leaders and articulation of demands and supports."<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> Philippe, Schmitter, Still the Century of Corporatism?", *Review of Politics*, Vol. 36, No. 1, January 1974, p. 93f.

Expanding on this notion, Collier and Collier present several themes that have sought to disaggregate corporatism; as a comparative study of two Gulf states, this is particularly beneficial to this research as it provides a scope to differentiate between more or less authoritarian corporatism. The variables of differentiation as cited by Collier and Collier are one, *state structuring*; so how much does the state aid specific institutions in their representational monopoly through licencing, compulsory membership etc. Another variable is *subsidies*, so how does the state pay for a group or help to finance itself, and lastly, *constraints*, so how the state controls the selection of leaders, the scope of collective action, group policies etc. With those variables of differentiation, they contend that the first two categories, i.e. state structuring and subsidies, can be classed as incentives which are then balanced against the constraints imposed by governments, albeit to varying degrees according to the type of political regime in question.<sup>192</sup> However the scope to which the civic sector can navigate its way through the existing state apparatuses by which they are confined can vary accordingly.

Furthermore, Steffen Hertog who has observed state corporatism in the Saudi context has argued that “corporatism is not a one-dimensional concept which can be described easily across a “more or less” continuum, but rather a cluster of characteristics. There are different subtypes, arrived at not only through specific variables being articulated differently, but also through the absence of specific characteristics: few political set-ups perfectly match Schmitter’s definition, but many can still be usefully categorised as corporatist.”<sup>193</sup>

What is particularly pertinent concerning this research are the observations Hertog had taken from the Saudi case study and its very own specific type of corporatism, whereby there is a surprisingly low degree of formal organisation of Saudi political interests within the social sphere, with only the business sector being a recognised negotiating partner for the Saudi monarchy. As Hertog notes, “this points to how

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<sup>192</sup> Ruth Berins Collier/David Collier, Inducements versus Constraints: Disaggregating “Corporatism”, *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 73, No.4, December 1979, p. 968.

<sup>193</sup> Hertog, Steffen, “The New Corporatism in Saudi Arabia: Limits of Formal Politics” in *Constitutional Reform and Political Participation in the Gulf*, eds. Khalaf, Abdulhadi and Luciani, Giacomo, Gulf Research Center, Dubai, UAE, 2006, p. 244.

different trajectories of political development shape and limit corporatist options for authoritarian regimes: The Al Saud have very few formal structures to co-opt and find it hard to impose new formal structures onto a society mostly organised along informal lines.”<sup>194</sup>

This observation not only showcases the potentially inflated projection of the state’s ability to practically dominate associational life altogether but could also elucidate on why informal civil society in Kuwait and Bahrain is gaining more traction and is being viewed increasingly as a more politically expedient outlet in channelling opposition interests; a more organic space operating outside the state’s recognised remit of accepted public discourse.

The impact of state corporatism is none more evident than in the extra legal and administrative measures the authorities have in place to circumscribe any dissenting views and activities, this also extends to the issue of escalating sectarian tensions. One Freedom House report noted how in August 2010, the Kuwaiti Shi’ite historian Yasir Habib made some provocative comments concerning revered personalities within Sunni Islam, this prompted some Kuwaiti Sunnis to call for public demonstrations. As tensions escalated, the interior ministry responded by banning all public rallies in September of that year. The Kuwaiti authorities also responded by revoking Habib (who now resides in London) of his Kuwaiti citizenship.<sup>195</sup> A possible sign that the state is attempting to exploit the pretext of escalating sectarian tensions both within the country itself and the wider region to further its own authoritarian reach. This could also be applicable in the case of the state’s closer monitoring of charity activities on the suspicion they could potentially be funding extremist activities both in Kuwait and neighbouring countries.

Expanding on the practical implications facing existing CSOs, an International Federation for Human Rights report specifically dealing with freedom of association within the Arabian Gulf made several observations. According to the 1962 Constitution, the Kuwaiti law guarantees the right to freedom of association. Article 34

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid, p. 242.

<sup>195</sup> "Kuwait." Freedom House. 2011. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2011/kuwait#.VeWOtvlViko>. (accessed: August 1, 2015)

states 'Freedom to form associations and unions on a national basis and by peaceful means shall be guaranteed in accordance with the conditions and manner specified by law. No one may be compelled to join any association or union.'<sup>196</sup>

So, there is no obligation to be a part of any association, but as alluded to, public gatherings require government approval, unlike the informal social gatherings like , which provide a forum for political discussion. The law, however, impedes existing CSOs, as it gives the government complete authority to regulate, ban or license any society and prohibits associations from engaging in political activities of any kind. As alluded to earlier, it was only up until 2004, that the government had granted formal recognition to human rights NGOs and had restricted their ability to organise publicly beforehand.<sup>197</sup> This also extends to any registered youth societies that either operate independently or as a branch or affiliate of one of the political societies. To understand many of the practical impediments facing Kuwaiti CSOs at present, many originate from earlier legal provisions. The state, through the Ministry of Social Affairs, practices close supervision over the associations' activity. The ministry can therefore dissolve the association's board of directors if they find out that it conducts what the state believes to be inappropriate activity or if their funds are 'mishandled'.

As mentioned, up until 2004, Kuwait denied legal recognition of all CSOs pertaining to human rights issues. It imposed restrictions on them that inhibit their ability to organise public meetings, even prior to some of these associations being legally recognised by the state. For example, in August 1993, the cabinet ordered the dissolution of all unlicensed human rights and humanitarian organisations.<sup>198</sup>

During the 1980s, following considerable political instability inside the country, the Kuwaiti government decided to halt the registration of all associations. This was only resumed decades later, when the Council of Ministers issued decision 836 in July 2004. It should be noted that designated human rights groups tend to go through a

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<sup>196</sup> "FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION IN THE ARABIAN GULF: THE CASE OF BAHRAIN, KUWAIT AND YEMEN." February 1, 2008. <https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/etude.pdf>. (accessed: August 1, 2015)

<sup>197</sup> "Kuwait." Freedom House. 2001. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2001/kuwait#.VeWmPflViko>. (accessed: August 1, 2015)

<sup>198</sup> Civil Society Kuwait, [http://www.la.utexas.edu/users/chenry/civil/Dead%20Sea%202005/CivilSocietyAndMedia/CivilSociety/Kuwait\\_CountryProfiles.pdf](http://www.la.utexas.edu/users/chenry/civil/Dead%20Sea%202005/CivilSocietyAndMedia/CivilSociety/Kuwait_CountryProfiles.pdf) (accessed: February 2, 2015)

more scrupulous process in obtaining their licence. This was the case with two human rights organisations which are registered as ‘socio-cultural organisations’ – KHRS and the Kuwait Association for Basic Evaluators of Human Rights (KABE). Their legal recognition and registration was only obtained after significant lobbying and pressure by those groups.<sup>199</sup>

In addition, those key impediments that restrict licensed CSOs are still in place, as highlighted in the Fidh report. One of those is the right of associations to be free of control, interference and supervision. The Law of Association currently provides authorities with a substantial level of interference in the associations’ statutory activities; CSO statutes therefore must specify the objectives and details of the organisations’ mode of functioning, such as its source of funding, the finances’ control procedures and the rules for amendments of its statutes. The authorities also have direct control over activities and finances of registered associations. That entails representatives of the relevant ministry, in this case the Ministry of Social Affairs, attending general assembly meetings and being able to investigate the association’s internal records and books.<sup>200</sup>

The Law of Association also infringes on the right to seek and receive funds, as the current law states that CSOs need to obtain permission from the state before carrying out any public fundraising activities (Article 22). CSOs may receive some state support, such as low-rent office space to use as a headquarters or support with maintenance and logistical costs e.g. hosting events or kick-starting campaigns, all of course with prior permission from the state (Articles 24, 25 and 26.) This means that CSOs are prohibited from receiving, directly or through any connections, money or benefits in the form of contributions of any kind from a person, association or body located outside the state of Kuwait, without the prior approval of authorities (Article 30).<sup>201</sup> The status of government support is not entirely clear either, Decision 836 in July 2004 made it that newly registered CSOs would have to make a formal commitment not to request financial support from the government, only those

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid, p.34.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid, p.39.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid, p.40.

registered prior to 2004 continue to benefit from government support. So that of course excludes the right to funding either from the state or outside Kuwait for the two human rights bodies that were legally recognised in 2004.

Another legal impediment for state recognised CSOs is the right of affiliation to regional and international organisations. Article 30 of the Law of Association stipulates that CSOs are prohibited from participating or affiliating with any association outside Kuwait without prior permission from the relevant ministry. Furthermore, in extra-legal terms, CSOs have the constant threat of suspension, closure or dissolution to contend with which is not protected by existing laws. Authorities can therefore take a decision to dissolve a CSO in the following cases if; the association's membership falls below 10 members; the activities depart from the original objectives of the association; the association commits a serious violation of its statutes (again bear in mind these statutes are closely monitored by state authorities); or it cannot meet its financial obligations (Article 27). In practice, since 2004 the ministry has confirmed that no human rights associations have been dissolved. However, human rights organisations must consistently make concessions in order not to displease authorities and run the risk of dissolution. Therefore, they must be prudent and act with precaution particularly when it comes to working on any politically contentious issues in order that they do not violate the constitution.<sup>202</sup>

Moving onto the case of Bahrain, a similar pattern is apparent in terms of the extra-legal measures being implemented as a result of the legal framework. According to the 1989 Societies Law, the government can refuse registration of any organisation. The official rationale behind this draconian measure is that society may not require their services or if there are other associations that fulfil the same need or activity. The role of these organisations particularly within the political arena is still severely restricted.<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> Ibid, p.42.

<sup>203</sup> Fakhro, Munira. "Civil Society and Democracy in the Gulf Region." *11th Mediterranean Dialogue Seminar: Security and Development in the Gulf Region*, 2005, 3-5.

According to a 2015 *Freedom House* report, the 1989 Societies Law prohibits any CSO from operating without a permit. In September 2014, the Ministry of Justice ordered all groups to obtain government permission before meeting with any diplomats and officials from outside Bahrain, limiting the contact of opposition and human rights networks with potentially supportive foreign governments and international organisations. The order also required a government official to be present at any interaction, which undoubtedly has an impact on the nature of the discussion if government representatives are present and involved in the conversation. A prime example of this would be when the Bahraini government questioned *Al-Wefaq's* (Shia political society) Ali Salman and Khalil Marzooq in July 2014 after they met with US Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labour Tom Malinowski; the Bahraini government requested that Malinowski leave the country shortly after.<sup>204</sup>

In addition to this, some of the extra-legal measures to curb formal dissent can be seen in the restriction of movement of prominent activists, as the government has continued to obstruct foreign travel by key opposition figures and activists in recent years. Authorities also restrict movement inside the country, particularly for residents of largely Shiite villages outside Manama, whereby a tight security cordon has blocked easy access to the capital.<sup>205</sup>

Again, the government's heavy handling of the civic sector was even discernible prior to the 2011 uprisings, in 2010 for example, the Bahraini government dissolved the board of directors of the Bahrain Human Rights Society (BHRS), and assigned a government-appointed director to run the organisation. The Bahraini authorities also blocked visits from foreign CSOs in 2012. Examples include delegates from the Physicians for Human Rights who were denied entry in 2012, as were delegations from the International Trade Union Confederation and the International Labour

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<sup>204</sup> "Bahrain." Freedom House. 2015. [https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2015/bahrain#.VeYGS\\_IViko](https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2015/bahrain#.VeYGS_IViko). (accessed: August 5, 2015)

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

Organisation. In April 2013, the government cancelled a visit by torture expert Juan Mendez, the UN special rapporteur on torture.<sup>206</sup>

Likewise, such extra-legal measures by the Bahraini state have produced further social and economic disparities based on sect, and this is none more evident than in the business sector. As although registered businesses are largely free to operate, obtaining approval can be difficult due to high capital requirements and political influence on the economy. Among the wealthy elites that dominate the business sector, property rights are generally respected and expropriation is rare. However, Shiite citizens encounter difficulties and in some cases, bans on purchasing housing and land, with the al-Khalifa family gifting vast swaths of land to regime cronies.<sup>207</sup>

Bahrainis technically have the right to establish independent labour unions, but workers must give 2 weeks' notice prior to organising a strike, and strikes are prohibited in a variety of economic sectors. Foreign workers lack the right to seek help from Bahraini unions. Among the several thousand-people known to have been fired in 2011 for allegedly supporting the pro-democracy protests were key officials in the General Federation of Bahraini Trade Unions. The government has generally accepted so called 'political societies' to operate, however, while the government claimed that political societies remained free to operate in 2011, it has imprisoned key opposition leaders, including Hassan Mushaima and Abd al-Jalil Singace (Haq), Matar Ibrahim Matar and Jawad Fairuz (al-Wefaq). Mushaima, Sharif and Singace were sentenced to life in prison for their activism, after a lengthy appeals process, Bahrain's courts upheld their sentences in September 2012.<sup>208</sup>

Academic freedom is not formally restricted but scholars who do criticise the government are subject to dismissal. In 2011, a number of university faculty members and administrators were fired for supporting the call for democracy along with

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<sup>206</sup> "Bahrain." Freedom House. 2014. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2014/bahrain#.VeYRBPIViko>. (accessed: August 5, 2015)

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> "Bahrain." Freedom House. 2013. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2013/bahrain#.VeYXFvIViko>. (accessed: August 5, 2015)

hundreds of students from the same faculty were expelled. Those who remained were compelled to sign loyalty pledges.<sup>209</sup>

The government continued its repression of Shi'ite political organisations in 2014. As in January, a Bahraini court officially banned the prominent Islamic Scholars Council following a lawsuit by the Justice Ministry which found it was an illegal society. Furthermore, police and armed forces continue to regularly use violence to break up political protests, most of which occur in Shi'ite villages.<sup>210</sup>

What is particularly interesting is that funding becomes an even more precarious issue for non-registered or dissolved human rights CSOs as they are not permitted to open bank accounts. Examples the report offers are Bahrain Human Rights Center (BHRC) and Bahrain Youth Human Rights Society (BYHRS) whose bank accounts are in the name of individual members. This may be an obstacle that prevents them from conducting internal fund raising or obtaining funds from foreign donors, if the government insists it will only fund registered organisations.<sup>211</sup>

Once more, the right to be affiliated to regional or international associations is restricted by law. The current legal framework requires CSOs to obtain prior approval from the relevant ministry for membership in other international organisations/networks. If the request goes without response for 45 days of application, this is assumed to indicate a negative decision (Article 20). The regulations state how CSOs must include in their own statutes a clause expressly saying they are 'forbidden from joining or adhering to an association that has its headquarters outside Bahrain without prior authorisation of the ministry (Article 7). In practice however, the two non-registered human rights associations are also members of international organisations. However, none of them have been subject to harassment on grounds of membership to international groups. The same can be said for registered associations.<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

<sup>210</sup> "Bahrain." Freedom House. 2015. [https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2015/bahrain#.VeYGS\\_IViko](https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2015/bahrain#.VeYGS_IViko). (accessed: August 5, 2015)

<sup>211</sup> Ibid, p.25.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid, p.26.

When it comes to the issue of suspension, closure or dissolution in Bahrain, the 1989 Societies Law gives authorities wide powers to take required actions affecting the functioning and stability of an association. These key decisions can address merging, suspending activities, closing premises and dissolving associations. Authorities are permitted to dissolve an association or close it for a temporary period not exceeding 45 days if the association; is no longer able to achieve its aims (Article 50); has used its assets for purposes other than the stated purposes of the organisation (Article 50, Paragraph 1-2); has not been able to convene the general assembly for two consecutive years (Article 50, Paragraph 1-3).

This happened to be the case in September 2004, as the government dissolved the BHRC on the pretext that they committed serious violations to the law and public order (Article 50, Paragraph 4). Coincidentally, it appears this decision to dissolve the group was taken only four days after the BHRC launched its report on poverty and corruption in Bahrain. The group challenged the authorities' decision in court and by 2005 had lost the case to reapprove their licence.<sup>213</sup>

Another issue particularly concerning CSOs in Bahrain is the right of members to protection from prosecution and discrimination and the right of human rights activists not to be penalised for belonging to a non-registered association. The Societies Law provides for prosecution of individuals who participate in the activities of a dissolved or unregistered organisation. Any person starting activities of a non-registered organisation or continues to be active in an organisation after its dissolution shall be sentenced to prison term not exceeding 6 months (Article 89).<sup>214</sup>

In practice however, members of the BHRC continue with their human rights activities. The authorities are said to be aware of these activities but are not taking any measures against them. However, the freedom to organise public events is limited as these activities require notifying authorities and such procedures. In order to circumvent the state, they are having to hold public meetings under the umbrella of other

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<sup>213</sup> Ibid, p.27.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid, p.28.

associations.<sup>215</sup> There is, however, the ability for some political manoeuvring of more formal civil society organisations which demonstrates some promising signs for civil society within the old rentier, corporatist Gulf countries, particularly in the Kuwaiti context. Albeit many of these voluntary associations still have to subscribe to the relevant authorities, new found movements are taking shape that are finding new methods to circumvent state interference. In addition to this, regime acceptance for co-operation between associations together with the proliferation of social media networks has proved to be a catalyst for an active political opposition coming to the fore, as evidenced in the case of Bahrain from 2011 onwards.

It must be noted therefore, that although there are significant constraints on formal civil society organisations (particularly from a legal standpoint amongst other factors), that is not to suggest that they are essentially futile or have no other means to being effective in the political sphere. The rise in new technologies over the last decade e.g. greater internet access and the proliferation of social media networks are already being utilised by established associations as a mode to expressing grievances towards the state and moreover as a facilitator for political mobilisation. Therefore, the point of highlighting these limitations is not merely to demonstrate that they bear little importance. On the contrary, the utility of formal associations remains central to any initiatives towards social reform, democratisation and in the context of this research the impact they have on inter-communal relations. However, it must be acknowledged that in social and cultural environments that differ to those of Europe and North America, it is the purposes of activity rather than the forms of organisation itself that should be the critical test of civic life. This outlook could look favourably or otherwise at both formal and informal spaces depending on the context in which these spaces are located.<sup>216</sup>

In summary, this and the preceding section have highlighted the main restrictions and issues surrounding state-recognised CSOs in Kuwait and Bahrain. Having dealt exclusively with formal civil society, the previous sections have touched on figures in terms of how many CSOs there are in operation, and what sectors they are actively

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid, p.29.

<sup>216</sup> Bayat, Asef. "Un-Civil Society: The Politics of the 'informal' People." *Third World Quarterly* 18, no. 1 (2007).

involved in. It also detailed the state's legal provisions concerning the freedom of association and how these laws infringe on those group's ability to operate effectively and independent of the state, by presenting tangible examples of how state corporatism has impacted the nature of state-civic relations and how it has been constrained in practice.

As international NGO reports such as Freedom House and Fidh illustrated the legal impediments existing CSOs currently face – from the lack of rights to be free of control and supervision, to the lack of rights concerning funding, to the issues surrounding affiliation to regional and international organisations and the right to protection from suspension, closure or dissolution by the state.

It is therefore suffice to say, that formal civil society within both cases, are for the most part, perceived as constrained in law and in practice which in turn makes it heavily dependent on the state. Not only does it serve to buttress authoritarian rule in the two cases, it simultaneously acts as an impediment to any genuine grassroots democratic movement and much of the existing scholarship from the late 1990s onwards would corroborate this position.

The next section will look into the emergence of an informal civil society in Kuwait and Bahrain, what are its characteristics or features that make it similar or distinct from recognised formal associations and the various types of spaces that currently exist within both states. This is with the view to assess whether these political spaces and informal civil society more broadly can act as a viable alternative to established or registered organisations, which have already showcased their ineptitude in the political sphere, by attempting to effectively channel opposition demands and forge coalitions/alliances, and to identify the impact they could have on the trajectory of sectarian relations.

#### **4.2 Informal Civil Society and Spaces: Diwaniyyat, Majalis and Youth Societies/Movements**

One of the key hallmarks of informal civil society that is discernible in both case studies is how informal spaces have greater room for manoeuvre, particularly as it is

commonly acknowledged that established CSOs are suppressed or co-opted by the state. The fact they operate as an unlicensed entity means they cannot be corporatised in the same way state-recognised CSOs are. In some cases, certain spaces (namely the Kuwaiti diwaniyya) are protected by the law itself, as the home, where the diwaniyya is most often located, is protected explicitly under articles 38 and 44 of the 1962 constitution and is the only secular space that enjoys such a high degree of formal protection. Ironically, it is this exclusive feature that enhances its appeal to political organisers whenever public meetings are restricted or banned. Even at the height of civil liberties being suppressed in Kuwait, (e.g. 1989-1990 pro-democracy movement), the privacy of the Kuwaiti home was rarely violated. This constitutes a stark contrast to the formal associations that are routinely inspected by the state.<sup>217</sup>

Interestingly, it is mentioned in one report how academic freedom, bar it does not touch on politically contentious issues, is generally tolerated. But more specific to this research, is how one report specifically cites how Kuwait allows relatively open and free private discussion, often in traditional gatherings or that typically only include men.<sup>218</sup> In another report however, Freedom House noted that in recent years, there have been indications that these traditional sanctuaries of free speech have come under increasing pressure. In November 2009, police arrested the prominent journalist Abdulqader al-Jassem for criticising the PM at a private diwaniyya, but he was later released on bail.<sup>219</sup> This could illustrate a sign that state interference is now becoming apparent in the informal realm, where these private spaces were once insulated from the state by law. As noted, the government imposes constraints on freedoms of assembly and association. In April 2008, the government issued a decree outlawing public assemblies and demonstrations, which includes some public, however the measure was quickly rescinded under popular pressure.<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> Tetreault, Mary-Ann. *Stories of Democracy: Politics and Society in Contemporary Kuwait*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000. 62.

<sup>218</sup> "Kuwait." Freedom House. 2012. [https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2012/kuwait#.VeWP\\_PIViko](https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2012/kuwait#.VeWP_PIViko). (accessed: August 1, 2015)

<sup>219</sup> "Kuwait." Freedom House. 2010. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2010/kuwait#.VeWR1vIViko>. (accessed: August 1, 2015)

<sup>220</sup> "Kuwait." Freedom House. 2009. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2009/kuwait#.VeWT5PIViko>. (accessed: August 1, 2015)

With regards to this research, based on a workshop that observed Kuwaiti civil society, as cited in a 2012 paper presented by Chatham House, participants noted how civil society groups,

“could play an important role in addressing the causes of sectarian tensions, promoting dialogue and calling for specific policies to address the spatial, economic, social and labour-market segregation that sometimes divides different religious and ethnic groups in the GCC. Professional associations can be important in bringing people together based on shared professional interests rather than religious or ethnic identities. They would, however, face resistance from political, religious and official leaders who personally benefit from sect-based divisions...Some participants however questioned whether civil society could effect change when senior decision-makers lacked the political will to see such changes through. Others argued that resolving social issues could be a catalyst for political change, and that building bottom-up support for dialogue and compromise could help to empower reformers within the regimes.”<sup>221</sup>

This will be important when observing informal spaces and whether they can be treated as a viable alternative in redressing existing sectarian disparities that have played out from the top-down, namely in the form of policymaking and bottom-up in terms of the perception of inter-communal relations.

To understand the background in which these informal spaces operate (i.e. majalis and youth groups) it is important to note that there is a wide spectrum of variables that distinguish one space from another. Examples of this could include who frequents such spaces, whether a membership of sorts is required. In many cases, people attending these spaces will possibly know one another within a personal capacity – friends, family members, work colleagues. Another distinguishing variable is whether a space operates within a public or private domain, in other words, whether anyone could turn up as an open invitation to a neighbourhood/community or whether it is

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<sup>221</sup> Chatham House, Kuwait Study Group: Identity, Citizenship and Sectarianism in the GCC, [https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/public/Research/Middle%20East/0212kuwaitsummary\\_identity.pdf](https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/public/Research/Middle%20East/0212kuwaitsummary_identity.pdf) , (accessed: April 19, 2017)

confined to a select group of people. Of course, these spaces share several common features between them but unlike formal political institutions such as a parliament which are proven to have designated functions, these informal spaces are very much determined by the nature of discussions that take place within them, as defined in the introduction.

It is therefore the content i.e. the topics discussed and the people who frequent such spaces which ultimately offers some insight as to whether they possess any social or political clout. This will be evidenced later when addressing the specific types of informal political spaces there are at present, but just to elucidate on the point is the example of a youth-orientated diwaniyya. On their own, they could acquire little political expediency if they are merely used for recreational or leisurely purposes. However, if they are affiliated to a youth society or more significantly a larger political society, then the discussions and the subsequent actions that arise from those spaces are more likely to resonate in terms of civic activism.<sup>222</sup>

It is also important to recognise the informal nature in which these spaces operate. Often, they can be a makeshift arrangement from a meeting in a coffee-house all the way through to spaces that are utilised for the sole purpose of hosting social functions, for example, most are an extension of the home. Furthermore, because of the informal or casual nature of these spaces, it is often commonplace for topics of discussion to vary from one subject to another, for example this would differ from the role of a council meeting that has specific issues it intends to address via minutes. Particularly within the context of diwaniyyat and majalis one finds that various discussions can take place simultaneously depending on the size of each space and the physical proximity between guests, i.e. if one group of people are in relatively close proximity to each other they could form their own circle for discussion.<sup>223</sup>

Another significant point to make prior to delving into the specifics of these spaces in Bahrain and Kuwait, is to recognise that they are not confined to one particular area or location and are seemingly prevalent throughout both countries. Their presence within Kuwaiti and Bahraini society can be traced across various classes, tribes,

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<sup>222</sup> Kuwait, Host, "Youth Diwaniyya 1 (Private and Inter-communal)", May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2014.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid (based on observations within the diwaniyya).

denominations and generations. It is because of this long-engrained familiarity and the cultural affinity people have to these informal spaces, that one often finds representatives of formal institutions utilising such spaces to their advantage, from sitting MP's and candidates in parliamentary elections, as well as working professionals. Likewise, there are formal civil society organisations, or at least members thereof, who at times operate within these informal spaces depending on the occasion, context or nature of a discussion taking place. In this respect, you find there is a cross-fertilisation, or overlap, between the formal and more informal spaces in Kuwaiti and Bahraini civil society which shall be illustrated further on in the vend diagrams below that highlight the fluctuation between the various types of spaces.

It is therefore the emphasis on activities as opposed to the organisation itself which not only ought to be recognised, but to be taken seriously as a viable alternative if not complementing existing civil society organisations that in some cases could be either banned or severely restricted. They can complement or work alongside more formal, institutionalised spaces as well as act as a replacement, depending on the context and circumstance in which they are having to function. A pertinent example of this can be illustrated in Kuwait, where parliament has been suspended on numerous occasions and so these spaces, particularly during Kuwait's electoral history, have come in to fill the void.

Without intending to demote the value of civility altogether, and to further add to the rationale for observing informal political spaces, scholars such as Bayat have suggested that the reductionism prevalent within existing discourse on civil society has ultimately excluded and even scorned modes of struggles, which in the context of the Middle East are far more extensive and effective than conventional institutions outside the state. Bayat aimed to examine the dynamics of free-form or casual activism, which tends to characterise the politics of what he referred to as 'informal people'.

Bayat posited the claim that ordinary, everyday practices conducted by ordinary folk can in fact engender significant social changes.<sup>224</sup> According to Bayat, it is inevitable

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<sup>224</sup> Bayat, Asef. "Un-Civil Society: The Politics of the 'informal' People." *Third World Quarterly* 18, no. 1 (2007): 55-56.

that such simple and everyday practices are bound to shift within the realm of politics. The participants engage in collective action e.g. via informal gatherings such as , public and online forums, youth societies etc. and in some cases they only realise their actions to be politically motivated when challenged by state authorities who impede on their advances.<sup>225</sup> Rather than acting through the formal channels of protest or publicity, these informal spaces take it upon themselves to fulfil their needs as an organisation, albeit individually without the assistance or more notably without intervention from formally recognised organisations and discretely. This process is also known as ‘quiet encroachment.’<sup>226</sup> This in turn means not having access to state sponsorship or backing, however these informal spaces can co-operate or forge links with other informal networks based on shared interests, just as recognised associations co-operate between themselves.

As alluded to previously, the rising prominence of informal political spaces and their pertinence within the political realm can be attributed to several factors. These reasons illustrate the expediency of these spaces to operate outside the confines of the Kuwaiti and Bahraini authorities. One primary explanation for this is due to their makeshift nature and their ability to improvise with those conditions imposed by the state on formal associations. Unlike formal CSOs, these informal spaces are not fixed institutions with designated functions. Rather, because of their casual arrangement/format, these spaces can often hold meetings or host a social event in various and transient locations, for example, many informal youth societies have no designated site and so members often frequent public spaces such as coffeehouses to hold discussions.<sup>227</sup> Likewise, many *are* situated within people’s homes. This also means that any potential discussions or meetings can be arranged at the discretion of those members and are not compelled to operate within set times where they could be monitored.

Why the makeshift nature of these informal spaces is so significant is because not only does it enable them to act autonomously but it insulates them from state

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<sup>225</sup> Ibid, p.58.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid, p.59.

<sup>227</sup> Bahrain Youth Society 1, Ex-President and Vice-President, BYSHR, Tuesday 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2014.

interference and any inspections made by the relevant social authorities. Were these informal networks to have a designated location or a headquarters, as many registered CSOs are required to have, their activities could then be easily monitored, making it far more difficult to lay the foundations for any initiatives toward grassroots activism.<sup>228</sup> Another reason as to why informal spaces could be viewed as a viable alternative in the political sphere is because of their non-compliance with state authorities, a prime example being not registering with the relevant authorities. The informality itself is an important characteristic to recognise here as this often entails having a complete disregard for legislation which requires associations to apply to become a registered civil society organisation. For many informal youth groups that work on matters pertaining to human rights<sup>229</sup>, they acknowledge that were they to apply, it is highly likely that their application would be rejected, whilst many existing organisations which are registered have been suspended because their activities are deemed to be political. Additionally, rather than being perceived to be ineffective due to their inability to access government funding, the fact that several youth societies now operate online, indicates that they may not require state resources to operate effectively.<sup>230</sup>

For non-registered and independent organisations<sup>231</sup>, being active online enables them to disseminate messages to a wider audience via social media outlets. In addition, this allows them to arrange meetings as well as orchestrate demonstrations and rallies, which in the context of Kuwait and Bahrain where freedom of assembly is severely restricted, this would be practically impossible for a registered organisation to attempt to replicate. It is suffice to say, that these spaces are better positioned in carrying out their functions, as many non-registered groups feel they can document issues with more transparency and less influence from outside parties. The same cannot be said for registered CSOs or as some research participants disparagingly referred to as Government-Organised NGOs or GONGO's who may be more hesitant in disclosing certain information that could consequently see them being stripped of any future funding from the state.<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

<sup>229</sup> Bahrain Youth Society 5, President of Bahrain Youth Centre (Al-Wefaq Affiliate), Saturday 7<sup>th</sup> June 2014.

<sup>230</sup> Bahrain Youth Society 6, Committee of Unemployed Graduates, Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> June 2014.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

<sup>232</sup> Bahrain Youth Society 1, Ex-President and Vice-President, BYSHR, Tuesday 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2014.

Another factor which has been touched upon is lack of funding from the state and how that may be of concern for registered CSOs, that is not to say however that insufficient funds is necessarily a major hindrance for informal groups to function effectively. As previously mentioned, because many groups are now online as well as their makeshift nature, people can meet in various locations without inspection from state authorities. In addition, and unlike many formal CSOs, the fact that many do not have access to funds means not only are they not dependent on the government but, more importantly, they are not acting at the behest of the state. This means they are not inhibited by having a single-issue focus which are conditions that governments and foreign donors often impose on formal CSO's. This ultimately enables them to discuss or act upon prevalent issues taking place, and in the case of human rights groups, they are not predisposed to government policies or obliged to detract attention from possible human rights violations.<sup>233</sup>

Another point to mention is that because of their informal/casual nature as it were, in terms of set-up and membership at least, anyone can participate depending on the social connections amongst those people whom attend that particular space, there are no formal requirements to becoming a member. Furthermore, because they are not authorised or regulated by the state, it also means that they are not held accountable for their actions within those spaces, an example to illustrate this case would be were a group to hold a meeting and they were speaking about contentious issues which cannot be aired in public.

To briefly summarise, these factors highlight not only the limitations of existing associations that are registered with the state, but how informal political spaces may be utilised as a viable alternative to formal civil society organisations and could even complement them depending on the context and the type of space in question. The next section is going to introduce the various expressions of informal civil society that currently exist in Kuwait and Bahrain, namely the diwaniyya in Kuwait and the majlis in Bahrain. This will consist of an introduction to the history of these spaces as well as

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<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

a typology of the various *and* majalis whilst highlighting their prominence within Kuwaiti and Bahraini society.

### 4.3 Diwaniyyat and Majalis: Structures, Functions and Types

It is commonly thought that the diwaniyya (roughly translated as a salon) has existed across GCC countries since time immemorial. Traditionally thought of as a reception area where men would welcome guests into their home, often typically comprising of business colleagues and male relatives, the diwaniyya would become well noted for the gatherings they held. Although variations of the diwaniyya exist across GCC States, it was within Kuwait where they would gain most popularity, as the act of visiting and hosting a diwaniyya is now an indispensable feature of a Kuwaiti man's social life.<sup>234</sup> However, the proliferation of mixed-gender and female in recent years, has transformed this space from an exclusively all men's club, yet it is still commonplace to find that most are frequented by men and those mixed-gender are often male-dominated.<sup>235</sup>

Seldom expressed in past civil society literature, these informal spaces have been heralded as the quintessential institution of Kuwaiti civil society, yet variations thereof exist across GCC States, namely in Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain. When mentioning the purpose and the function of *diwaniyyat*, it needs to be noted that the political space they occupy is an exclusive one within Kuwait. Their location in the home insulates them from state intervention, with their relative security being integral to grass-roots efforts that aided in bringing both periods of constitutional suspension to a close in Kuwait. As a result of the state protection granted to *diwaniyyat* under Article 38 and 44 of the 1962 constitution, since the beginning of Kuwaiti constitutional life, *diwaniyyat* have been regarded as favoured locations for political campaigning.<sup>236</sup> In addition, *diwaniyyat* have been crucial to political participation in Kuwait as despite

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<sup>234</sup> Based on several observations from outside observers and participants in diwaniyya gatherings.

<sup>235</sup> Tetreault, Mary-Ann. *Stories of Democracy: Politics and Society in Contemporary Kuwait*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.

<sup>236</sup> Tetreault, Mary-Ann. "Managing Contentious Politics: Women's Right's and Social Peace in Kuwait." Lecture, Bridging Multiple Divides, San Francisco, CA, January 1, 2008.

the diversity and transparency of other public political platforms, such spaces have proven unexpectedly vulnerable to closure over the last decade.<sup>237</sup>

The diwaniyya has its roots in the Arabian majlis, one space that is also prominent across the Gulf States and namely Bahrain, where people would typically gather or congregate to discuss pertinent issues of the day.<sup>238</sup> The more social/private diwaniyya would often vary in topics and matters of discussion which can range from day to day business all the way through to trivial small talk between family and friends. While the majlis, which will be discussed in further detail, may be described as more akin to a town hall in terms of function and formality, as it could be perceived as more of a communal space, the diwaniyya evolved as a more regular and casual gathering spot for families, friends, tribes and work colleagues. Due to the more private and enclosed setting of the diwaniyya, outside guests who do not often attend are welcome but would need to be invited by either a guest attending a diwaniyya or by the host themselves.<sup>239</sup>

As a social event, a diwaniyya takes place in the evening in a spare room or an annex which is often separate or removed from the rest of the house.<sup>240</sup> A typical diwaniyya setting would consist of soft benches and cushions along the wall whilst guests often converse between themselves over warm beverages and snacks. The casual, informal nature of the diwaniyya can also be seen with guests (particularly relatives and friends) coming and leaving throughout the evening. It is the responsibility of the host i.e. the owner of the diwaniyya meaning usually the home owner to be as hospitable as possible to their guests and if it is a social/private diwaniyya there often needs to be some form of entertainment.<sup>241</sup>

When examining the history and transformation diwaniyyat have undergone, one factor that does remain is their pivotal role in developing Kuwait itself. Over the last 250 years, they have been utilised to facilitate quick communication amongst

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<sup>237</sup> Tetreault, Mary-Ann. *Stories of Democracy: Politics and Society in Contemporary Kuwait*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000, p.60.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

<sup>239</sup> Kuwait Diwaniyya 3, Social Diwaniyya, Jabal Ahmad Area, Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> May 2014.

<sup>240</sup> Based on several observations inside various diwaniyya gatherings.

<sup>241</sup> Kuwait Diwaniyya 1, Family Diwaniyya of Journalist and Academic, Sulaibiyya, Friday 16<sup>th</sup> May 2014.

public/political figures as well as consensus building between local communities.<sup>242</sup> There are various types that have evolved from the original archetype and these can be distinguished in terms of the groups they serve and their level of formality. As the quintessential mode of Kuwaiti civil society, diwaniyyat are at the heart of Kuwait's social, business and political life. How these spaces showcase their expediency is by the topics being discussed within diwaniyya gatherings, on the political level, a whole host of policies are frequently discussed whilst election campaigns are often run from these spaces by acting as platforms for prospective MPs. In addition, they are often utilised for professional networking where associates are introduced to one another and alliances are formed.<sup>243</sup>

As alluded to above, the more politically prominent diwaniyyat are employed for specific purposes, most notably in election campaigns. These spaces form the basis of Kuwait's consensual political system. Visiting is not only commonplace in Kuwaiti social life but during election time these spaces demonstrate their influence as they are used by National Assembly candidates to reach out to their prospective constituents, likewise they can be used to insure or maintain their support base from past voters. The diwaniyya itself brings together various families, tribes and associates from the same district and can be viewed as a practical tool for National Assembly candidates to amplify their voices by getting any points or policies across to large segments of a single district. A list of diwaniyyat in various areas is prepared from the day electoral campaigning commences and with this information; candidates can then arrange appointments to visit those prominent diwaniyyat prior to the day that elections are held to try and maximize their potential reach.<sup>244</sup>

Diwaniyyat can also be employed to conduct business, as prominent figures from government ministries, public companies, CEO's of multinational corporations all receive guests on a weekly or monthly basis in the confines of their family/private . As part of traditional custom, the host, by being hospitable to his guests is obliged to listen

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<sup>242</sup> Kuwait Outside Observer 4, Former Independent MP and Professor of Political Science, Kuwait University, Monday 26<sup>th</sup> May 2014.

<sup>243</sup> Kuwait Outside Observer 2, Columnist and Contributor for Al-Rai, Al-Qabas and Al-Watan Newspapers, Beneid El Gar, Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> May 2014.

<sup>244</sup> Kuwait Outside Observer 4, Former Independent MP and Professor of Political Science, Kuwait University, Monday 26<sup>th</sup> May 2014.

and engage with proposals from those guests who have come to visit, particularly if it pertains to business. The diwaniyya is therefore an important space for guests (typically businessmen) to deliver an informal pitch or offer a proposal to a receptive host.<sup>245</sup>

Therefore, just to elucidate further on some of the points raised and to gain a better grasp of each space and its function, it makes sense to offer a typology of the various diwaniyyat that are prominent within Kuwait today:

**Social/Private diwaniyya** – The archetype of what a diwaniyya was once traditionally perceived as, this space is typically family-orientated and regularly attended by close relatives and friends; it is arguably the most common of all and is present in most Kuwaiti households. This is also the place where wedding ceremonies and funeral rites are often held for the male side of the family.<sup>246</sup> **Casual/Youth-Orientated** – typically comprising of a group of friends of a similar age, often young people frequent these spaces as a leisurely pastime. These spaces could be affiliated to a youth movement/society. They can also be mixed sect or sect-based depending on the people who attend.<sup>247</sup>

**Working Professionals/Colleagues** – These spaces are important for networking, forming alliances/connections and making important business transactions. This is of course dependent on the nature of work involved; it could just be a matter of work colleagues getting together. Likewise depending on the nature of their occupations this could be influential in Kuwaiti politics, for example a diwaniyya comprised of journalists.<sup>248</sup>

**Political/Public** – A relatively recent development of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century when Kuwaitis starting to seek political rights and more representation in a system that had become more skewed towards the absolutist rule of the Emir in contrast to the more participatory consensual system that existed earlier. These are often prominent communal spaces where National Assembly candidates would come to present

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<sup>245</sup> Kuwait MP Diwaniyya 5, Former Independent MP, Participant A2, Tuesday 27<sup>th</sup> May 2014.

<sup>246</sup> Based on observations from attending several social diwaniyyat.

<sup>247</sup> Kuwait, Host, Youth Diwaniyya 1, Private and Inter-communal, Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> May 2014.

<sup>248</sup> Kuwait Outside Observer 1, Journalist and Political Commentator, Beneid El Gar, Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> May 2014.

themselves during election time. However, this phenomenon of public figures visiting diwaniyyat is not confined to this particular space.<sup>249</sup>

MP – these are arguably the most significant in political terms; not only do candidates and existing MP's visit other diwaniyyat in electoral campaigns but they also host their own, in which guests, often from their own district, can attend to get their views and opinions on certain policies and it also provides an opportunity for their constituents to air some of their concerns or grievances to their local MP.<sup>250</sup> Finally there are *Sect-Based* - due to the familial and tribal composition of early diwaniyyat, many until today are affiliated based on religious denomination. There are of course cross-denominational or inter-communal, but one prominent feature particularly during Kuwaiti elections is the various sect-based spaces that could be of use to an MP who comes from a certain religious background.<sup>251</sup>

It is important to emphasise that the various types of that exist today are not mutually exclusive of one another and often their functions; which vary dependant on nature of discussion as oppose to the physical space itself, may be similar to one another depending on the occasion. For example, a social or private diwaniyya can have political implications; rather it is just dependant on the location and the people who attend that diwaniyya at the time of discussion as to whether it acquires any political ramifications.

Below is a Venn diagram to elucidate on the fluid relationship between the various types of diwaniyyat.

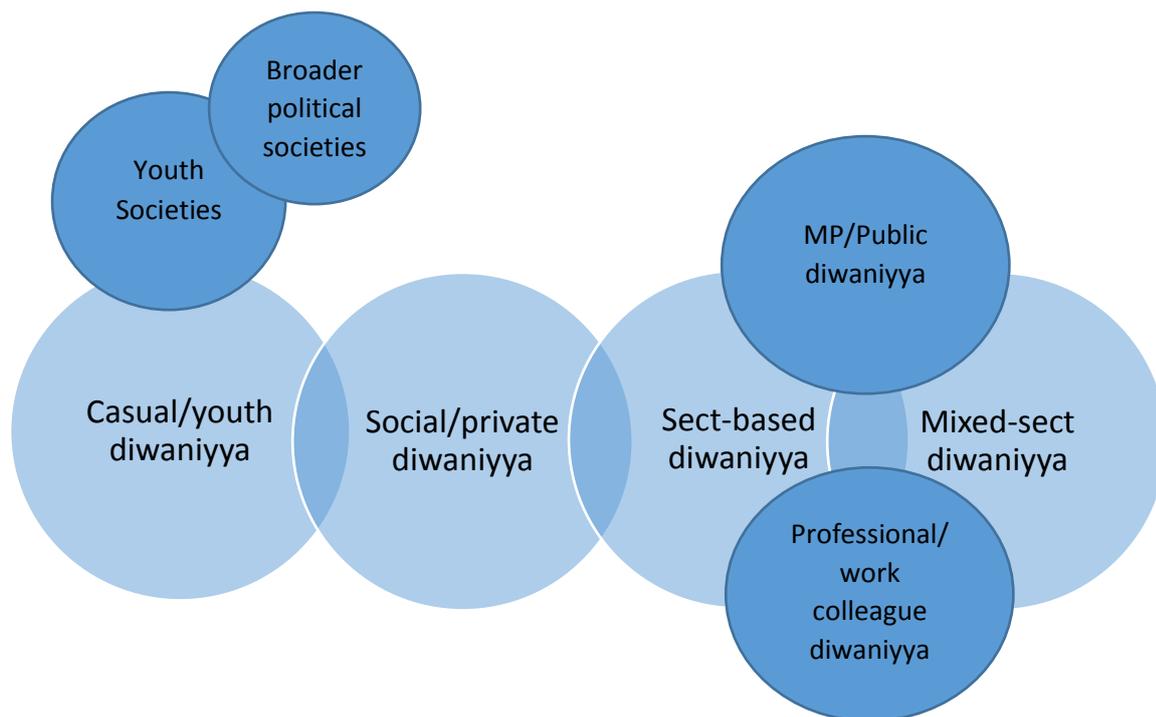
### **Diagram A: Types of Diwaniyyat**

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<sup>249</sup> Kuwait Outside Observer 4, Former Independent MP and Professor of Political Science, Kuwait University, Monday 26<sup>th</sup> May 2014.

<sup>250</sup> Kuwait MP Diwaniyya 5, Former Independent MP, Tuesday 27<sup>th</sup> May 2014.

<sup>251</sup> Based on observations from several sect-based diwaniyyat.



As expressed in the above diagram, these spaces fluctuate depending on the context of the discussions and the people who frequent the space. i.e. you could have an MP diwaniyya where both Shia and Sunni constituents are present, making it a mixed-sect MP diwaniyya and vice versa. It also important to note that the public or professional can appear to be more formal in appearance with orchestrated discussions where there could be minutes or set topics to get through. Nevertheless, these are no less informal than the casual, day to day *in* terms of having no membership requirements or a registration process. In this context, it is important to note the distinction between formal and informal spaces even where informal spaces appear to have more ostensibly formal undertones.<sup>252</sup>

Coming onto the Bahraini majlis, it is apparent that there are notable similarities with the Kuwaiti diwaniyya in the functions they perform. One key distinction between them however, is that the original diwaniyya was first utilised as more of a private space for family and close relatives to get together, whereas the original formation of the majlis acquired a more public/communal feature to it, almost akin to a local town hall in the Western context.<sup>253</sup> Another crucial point to bear in mind when contrasting the two

<sup>252</sup> Based on observations from Kuwait MP Diwaniyya 5, Former Independent MP, Tuesday 27<sup>th</sup> May 2014.

<sup>253</sup> Bahrain Majlis 1, Host, Saar District, Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> May 2014.

spaces is that although Bahrain's majalis are renowned and can be distinguished from other political spaces for having greater freedoms to discuss economic, political and social issues, this does not necessarily entail that they are insulated from state intervention in contrast to the diwaniyya which is protected by the Kuwaiti Constitution.

However, this does not imply that they have no influence in the political sphere. Like , majalis have traditionally expressed their utility during election time, as candidates for upcoming municipal and parliamentary elections often preoccupy themselves by preparing to visit the various prominent majalis, with the hope to win over constituents. During past elections in Bahrain, there has often been a tense rivalry between various political societies, particularly the Islamic affiliated ones, which often spills into these majalis.<sup>254</sup>

Like the Kuwaiti diwaniyya, there are thousands of majalis in Bahrain and an increasing number open during the Ramadhan period, a similar feature to . The proliferation of majalis opening during Ramadhan is often due to more people staying up late following their fast. Majalis have become increasingly influential in part because the various political societies are dependent on them, they can no longer depend on their in-house and charitable activities to reach out to voters, as they seek to control and attract some of these majalis to ensure their dominance in the polls.<sup>255</sup>

In addition, these majalis are proven to be effective in the political realm primarily because they are cost-effective and are useful as a facilitator for quick interaction between parliamentary candidates and constituent. The majlis is therefore important for any candidate because if they were to go and start a campaign it would be a costly process, compared to attending a majlis where constituents of various political and religious persuasions in one district are gathered. The majlis also plays a key role in gauging the chances of prospective candidates. Often considered to be highly reliable, to the extent that some political societies will use majalis to help determine which candidate to back during elections.<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> Bahrain Majlis 4, Former MP (Al-Wefaq), Host, Isa Town, Monday 9<sup>th</sup> June 2014.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid.

<sup>256</sup> Bahrain Majlis 2, Former MP (Wa'ad), Host, Muharraq Region, Friday 30<sup>th</sup> May 2014.

Like the Kuwaiti diwaniyya, there are several variants of the Bahraini majlis that require a typology to understand the key qualities and functions that differentiate them from one another:

Communal/Public Majlis – These spaces are also recognised to be the traditional and most popular majlis to date. Acting as a communal space for local communities to congregate, this space almost acts as a civic hall for pertinent issues to be discussed which may affect that local district/community. Candidates during election time will frequent these spaces to garner support and to obtain a vote of confidence from locals.<sup>257</sup> There are also Private/Family Majlis, again, this space is typically located in the home, and most often people who frequent this space are family members and friends.<sup>258</sup>

MP Majlis – Like MP diwaniyyat, these spaces are often located in the home and carry out similar functions. Guests from around the local district come to hear the views and get the opinions of the MP on government policies. Constituents can also express their concerns and air their grievances in order that these issues are raised in parliament.<sup>259</sup> Lastly, Sect-Based Majlis – With the perceived intense rivalry between Islamic political societies, it is commonplace in Bahrain to see majalis being used as political hubs for both Shia and Sunni communities. Having said that, there are also mixed-sect majalis but these tend to be more popular with secular/liberal orientated groups. However, these mixed-sect majalis are not solely confined to secularists or liberals, as Islamist societies have on previous occasions arranged mixed-sect majalis.<sup>260</sup>

## **Diagram B: Types of Majalis**

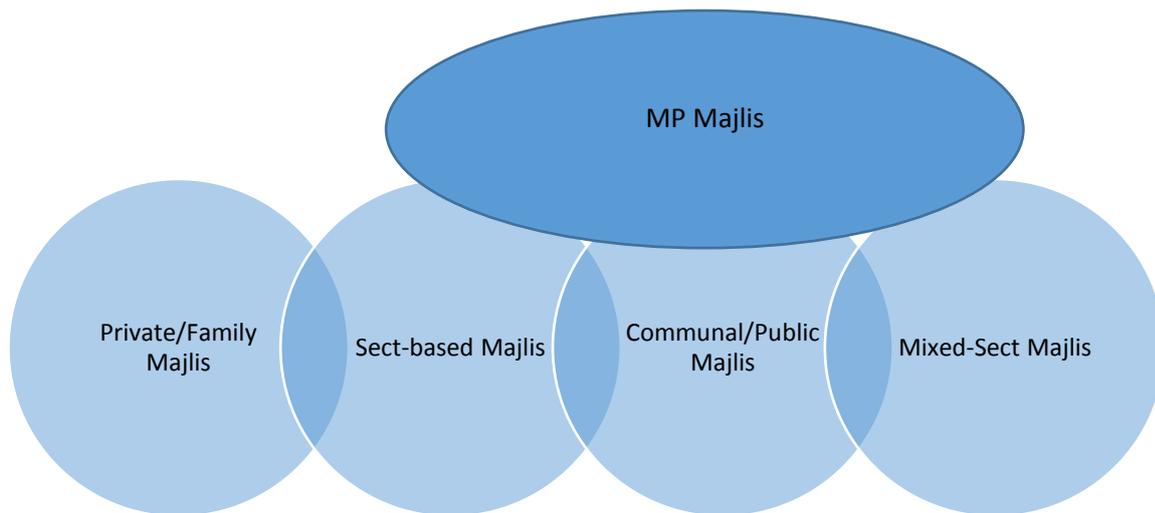
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<sup>257</sup> Ibid.

<sup>258</sup> Bahrain Majlis 3, Youth-Orientated, Samaheej District, Saturday 7<sup>th</sup> June 2014.

<sup>259</sup> Based on observations from attending several MP majalis.

<sup>260</sup> Bahrain Majlis 4, Former MP (Al-Wefaq), Host, Isa Town, Monday 9<sup>th</sup> June 2014.



As demonstrated in this diagram, MP Majalis could either comprise of both communities or be addressing only one denomination. This has a significant impact on the way informal spaces are impacting on inter-communal relations with regards to whether they are bringing communities together or facilitating a space for its polarisation. This will be discussed further on in the empirical chapters when it becomes apparent that sect-based majalis or can be used to offer prospective MP's who may themselves harbour radical/sectarian views a platform to enter the political fray, if elected this may then filter through at the governmental level – e.g. ongoing disputes between Shia and Salafi MP's in Parliament. However, the mixed-sect majalis, which may not necessarily discuss such contentious issues as sectarianism as frequent as sect-based majalis, could still be perceived to be more constructive in terms of rapprochement and could ultimately be better at getting people together to discuss the need for reforms, political openings and forming cross-denominational coalitions.

To summarise, both the diwaniyya and majlis appear to illustrate their utility in the political sphere namely via municipal and parliamentary elections, albeit one key distinction lies in the legal protection that is afforded to the Kuwaiti diwaniyya by the 1962 Constitution in comparison to its Bahraini counterpart that does not possess such safeguarding of free speech. In terms of structure and layout, the several variants that

have evolved out of the traditional diwaniyya and majlis demonstrate that they can operate both as a public or private space, depending on the occasion. One common denominator of both spaces is that they have played their part as incubators for political movements and civil society projects overall. What appears to be a functional distinction between the two spaces is that they are focused more toward social functions/gatherings, whereas majalis seem to have a more structured format, often initiated by a talk or lecture from the host or guest speaker, in the form of a political candidate announcing their nomination followed by a discussion amongst guests.<sup>261</sup>

#### **4.4 Expressions of Informal Civil Society: Youth Movements and Societies**

This following section introduces another key informal space in Kuwaiti and Bahraini society, the youth societies/movements. In Kuwait, and most notably Bahrain, these societies have gained significant traction as another expression of informal civil society. The section shall explore the hallmarks of emerging youth movements, in what context they have come to fruition and assessing the reasons for why they have gained traction at the expense of registered youth groups. This will be followed by a conclusion which provides a snapshot of the commonalities between formal and informal civil society spaces and presents a rationale as to why informal groupings/spaces have become increasingly salient in the wake of the 2011 Arab uprisings.

Although Kuwait and Bahrain share the longest history of civil society movements from across the GCC states, youth movements, societies and coalitions are a much more recent phenomenon to enter the political arena.<sup>262</sup> There are two known groups in Kuwait, Youth Association of Kuwait and Civil Democratic Movement, and in Bahrain, as alluded to in the preceding sections on formal civil society, there are a plethora of formal youth organisations that operate in several fields, namely within the development sector, often acting as subsidiaries of recognised political societies. What is discussed here however, is the relatively recent proliferation of non-registered youth societies, which can also be characterised as informal spaces.

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<sup>261</sup> Based on observations from several diwaniyyat and Majalis.

<sup>262</sup> Kuwait Outside Observer 4, Former Independent MP and Professor of Political Science, Kuwait University, Monday 26<sup>th</sup> May 2014.

Again, what distinguishes the formal from the informal youth groups are several variables, namely, non-compliance with state authorities in the form of registration, effectively operating illegally in some cases. They also have extremely loose internal structures, meaning minimal bureaucratic elements such as a monitored membership process that would typically impede formal CSOs. In addition, they have the ability to forge ties and alliances with whom that group chooses instead of being at the discretion of the state. They can be located across the country as in most cases they do not acquire a fixed location or have registered offices, a marked distinction not only from formal associations but from the traditional informal spaces that are also in a permanent location and more importantly in terms of social mobilisation they acquire a platform both physically and online. These, amongst other factors, shall be explored in further detail.

When it comes to understanding the catalysts behind the emergence of informal youth groups in recent years, it is important to note that the new generations in Kuwait and Bahrain are demanding a more modern country, more rational laws, less corruption and a merit-based economic system that helps the middle-class and the marginalised.<sup>263</sup> Furthermore, one of the pressing issues for both Kuwaiti and Bahraini youth that has contributed to the proliferation of informal youth groups/societies is due to demographic factors and increasing socio-economic disparities that highlight the need for structural reforms within Gulf States. Approximately one third of citizenry in Bahrain and one quarter of Kuwaitis are between the ages of 15-29, with unemployment figures among 15-24 years ranging between 17-24% in both Kuwait and Bahrain.<sup>264</sup>

Sustained joblessness on that scale could cause further political discontent amongst younger populations. Although Gulf rulers will no doubt dole out national largesse to muffle disgruntlement, a continuous predicament of the rentier state, many youths continue to search for dignified work and independent income, and so because of this

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<sup>263</sup> Boghardt, Lori Plotkin. "Youth Activism in the Small Gulf States." The Washington Institute. Accessed December 15, 2014. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/youth-activism-in-the-small-gulf-states>.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid.

disposable time, the youth are better positioned to focus their attention toward grass-roots activism.<sup>265</sup>

In 2012, Kuwait witnessed the founding of its first independent youth society in the Gulf, the Civil Democratic Movement. Though small, the movement has worked diligently to push opposition members of Parliament to agitate for an elected government.<sup>266</sup> This goes to prove that such youth movements operating outside the states remit could carry important political implications regarding the extent of political change in the Gulf. Like their counterparts in other Arab states, young Gulf activists tend to pursue political agendas that are more far-reaching than those of traditional opposition elements and older generations.<sup>267</sup>

In Kuwait for example, emerging youth organisations and longstanding opposition elements have quarrelled over the anticipated pace and extent of reform. With youth movements demanding more rapid change and have pushed harder for a full parliamentary system. This can be illustrated during the one-vote project and the 1<sup>st</sup> December elections of 2012. This was a decree passed by Kuwait's Emir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmed who had reduced the number of votes that could be cast from four to one. This decree sparked widespread protests, comprising mostly of factions from Kuwait's youth. The Kuwaiti Youth Movement, in large part responsible for the '2012 dignity protests', was aided by social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook.<sup>268</sup> The movement has previously stressed the importance of removing the distinction between societal groups by focusing on the civil state, which aims to accommodate all. This goes to show how Kuwait's youth via unconventional means in contrast to traditional opposition, may try to reshape the role of political opposition in Kuwait.<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>265</sup> Ibid.

<sup>266</sup> Swedenburg, Ted. "Youth of the Gulf, Youth of Palestine." Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP). Accessed December 15, 2014. <http://www.merip.org/youth-gulf-youth-palestine>.

<sup>267</sup> Boghardt, Lori Plotkin. "Youth Activism in the Small Gulf States." The Washington Institute. Accessed December 15, 2014. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/youth-activism-in-the-small-gulf-states>.

<sup>268</sup> Al-Gabra, Shafiq Nazem. "Kuwaiti Youth Shape Opposition Movement." Al-Monitor. November 9, 2012. Accessed December 15, 2014. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2012/11/kuwait-is-in-crisis-heading-into-elections.html#>.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid.

However, youth groups that emerged in the aftermath of the 2011 'Arab Spring' were principally backed by opposition members of parliament, with the latter often speaking for them at rallies and protests. This means that while Kuwaiti youth are becoming more involved in the national arena, their participation is rarely autonomous and this, again, often perpetuates the status quo.<sup>270</sup> For example, Islamist members of the *Majlis al-Umma* (national assembly) are heavily involved in the Kuwait national students' union, inculcating youth with patriarchal ideologies.<sup>271</sup>

Having noted these recent strides by becoming more vocal in the political sphere, youth movements in Kuwait are still few and far between and very much a recent phenomenon, for that sake, this research will focus solely on the role of Bahraini youth groups which are far more established and have been in operation not only following the Arab Spring revolutions but their activities were also documented long prior to 2011.

Within the Bahraini context, meanwhile, youth were a key driving force behind the 2011 uprisings that swept the country. Although Bahrain's youth movements like broader political societies consist of various political persuasions, an intriguing phenomenon which directly relates back to this research is the recent grassroots initiatives to reach across the sectarian divide. In 2012, a group of young Bahrainis held a rare public political debate, the 'Bahrain Debate', at the Alumni Club in Manama. The debate discussed the country's impending political crisis in an open forum that was streamed live online and comprised of key figures from across the political and denominational divide; the organisers said the 50 tickets for the event sold out in less than 10 minutes. The debate was praised by Bahrainis from across the political spectrum as a rare example of civil-society dialogue. Another youth civil-society initiative, the Bahrain Foundation for Reconciliation and Social Discourse, has organised 'dialogue dinners' aimed at increasing understanding between various social groups, and has also held talks on reconciliation with various individuals.<sup>272</sup>

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<sup>270</sup> Al-Nakib, Rania, *Education and Democratic Development in Kuwait: Citizens in Waiting*, Chatham House MENA Programme, (2015), p. 3.

<sup>271</sup> Lubna Al-Kazi, 'Women and Non-Governmental Organizations in Kuwait: A Platform for Human Resource Development and Social Change', *Il 14(2)* (2011), pp. 167–81.

<sup>272</sup> Kinninmont, Jane, and Omar Sirri. "Bahrain: Civil Society and Political Imagination." *Chatham House*, 2014, 18.

In light of these cross-sectarian initiatives, Bahrain's youth activists have proven to be flexible, shifting in response to current events and specific political goals rather than hewing to general ideological lines as in the case of traditional opposition groups. A pertinent example of this on the eve of the Arab uprisings were the various neighbourhood street demonstrators and cyber activists, many of whom planned the February 14, 2011, "Day of Rage" that first sparked the island's protest movement.<sup>273</sup> The online group responsible for orchestrating the event were *The Youth of the February 14th Revolution* who interestingly describe themselves as "unaffiliated with any political movement or organisation" and rejected any "religious, sectarian or ideological bases" for their demands.<sup>274</sup> Making this research concerning non-registered youth societies and their interaction with inter-communal dynamics all the more timely.

In the absence of substantive change on the ground, the strength and influence of youth campaigns in both countries will likely continue their upward trajectory. In Bahrain, the more revolutionary youth groups will likely grow stronger if the sluggish National Dialogue process continues to entangle al-Wefaq and other large, well-established Shiite opposition parties indefinitely -- assuming young protestors can abstain from violence. In contrast, an agreement on genuine political restructuring between the government and mainstream opposition would probably weaken the more extreme youth groups.<sup>275</sup>

Perhaps, what has in part contributed to this receptiveness towards political activism within youth societies is the difference in generational attitudes, and this is none more visible than on social media outlets. The ongoing social media debates following the 2011 protests have highlighted how activists from the younger generation have a less

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<sup>273</sup> Boghardt, Lori Plotkin. "Youth Activism in the Small Gulf States." The Washington Institute. Accessed December 15, 2014. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/youth-activism-in-the-small-gulf-states>.

<sup>274</sup> Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (PDF) (Report). Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry. 23 November 2011.

<sup>275</sup> Boghardt, Lori Plotkin. "Youth Activism in the Small Gulf States." The Washington Institute. Accessed December 15, 2014. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/youth-activism-in-the-small-gulf-states>.

hierarchical way of thinking than their elders.<sup>276</sup> They assume the right to criticise and disagree with opposition leaders, community elders and religious circles, some of whom now face routine humorous backchat on twitter. This illustrates a significant cultural change from a more deferential past.

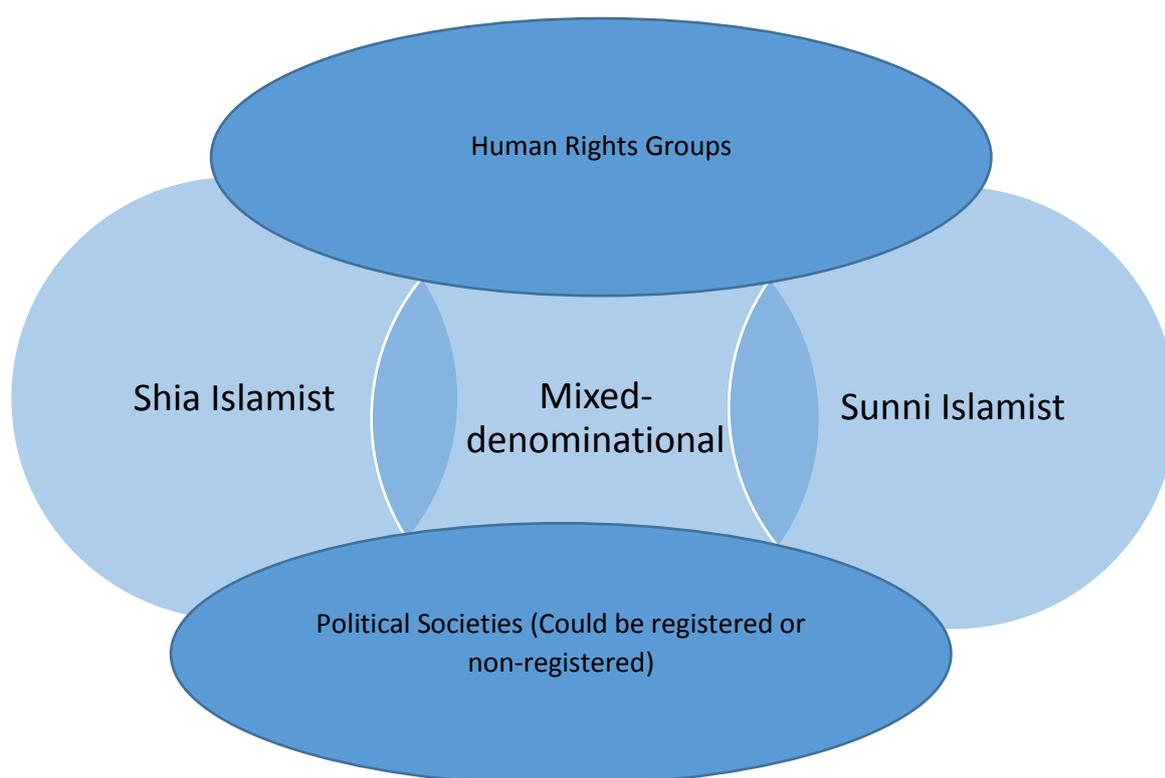
To elucidate on the points raised as to the background and nature of youth movements in Kuwait and Bahrain, below is a typology of the various organisations that exist today: Shia Islamist – These are often registered youth societies that within the Bahraini context are regarded as part of a wider opposition network, a prime example would be Bahrain Youth Centre which is affiliated with al-Wefaq. Sunni Islamist – Again registered youth groups with relevant social authorities, these often receive funding and donor support from government to host events and other activities. Mixed-denominational – These are groups that are often operating as a registered youth group; however, they are more prone to hosting cross-sectarian initiatives and facilitating dialogue between loyalists and opposition. Human Rights Groups – These youth societies are more informal, as they are often not registered with relevant authorities, operating clandestinely, and in some contexts, have been revoked of their license because of the abuses or violations they document. These groups tend to be the most popular youth networks and often have no headquarters or designated location, a prime example being Bahraini Youth Society for Human Rights.<sup>277</sup>

### **Diagram C: Types of Youth Movements**

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<sup>276</sup> Based on observations with several youth societies including BYSHR, Committee of Unemployed Graduates, Bahrain Youth Centre, Bahrain Democratic Youth Society and Insaaf.

<sup>277</sup> This typology based on observations across the various youth societies.



As illustrated in the diagram, those non-registered youth groups could comprise of members solely from one denomination or could be mixed-sect. As previously mentioned, those youth societies could have broader links to larger political societies which operate as an umbrella organisation. This in turn could potentially make them less informal as they could be operating at the behest of that political society – (which depending on whether that political society is a registered organisation or not), could impact whether that youth society can be designated as an informal space in its own right.

To summarise, although youth societies are relatively inexperienced and are still developing within the political sphere, both in Kuwait and Bahrain, they are starting to take the lead from traditional opposition networks through a host of activities and methods. Their online presence means they are better positioned to organise demonstrations and to disseminate their message to a wider audience. In addition, youth movements are generally seen to be more prone to grass-roots initiatives that cross ideological lines, this can be seen in the case of the Civil Democratic Movement in Kuwait, which emphasises a civil state for all Kuwaitis as oppose to favouring one

particular social group. Or in the case of the cyber activists that helped to orchestrate cross-denominational pro-democracy protests in Bahrain and popularised the February 14<sup>th</sup> movement.

#### **4.5 Conclusion**

To summarise, this chapter has explored the existing legal and extra-legal impediments facing formal CSOs in Kuwait and Bahrain via the longstanding corporatist model that has sought to co-opt civil society in the Gulf, and with it, suppress any transparent grassroots activism and cross-denominational alliances that could be a perceived threat to the state. The chapter has also shed light on the emergence of an informal civil society, its notable distinction from formal groupings, as well as dissecting the unique and distinguishing characteristics between the more traditional and contemporary upcoming spaces. In addition to this, providing concrete examples of how these groups are gaining momentum as an alternative civic space that can circumvent state auspices.

Just to reiterate the similarities and differences in those spaces, the diwaniyya and the majlis share several features, namely they both involve discussions pertaining to local politics. It could be mentioned that the Kuwaiti diwaniyya has historically been viewed as a more viable political space given that it is protected within Kuwaiti legislation itself, which the same cannot be said of in the case of the Bahraini majlis. However, that is not to necessarily reduce its influence in orchestrating civic activism in the form of organising demonstrations and protests. The same can be said of non-registered youth groups, which despite lack of government funding, will network, often online, to bring people together and discuss pressing issues within a casual setting e.g. an activists home or in a coffeehouse, which could not be possible in the case of registered organisations, and so have proven to become increasingly expedient in the wake of the 2011 Arab uprisings. What has not been addressed however, is their effect and interaction vis-à-vis sectarian relations and how that plays out at the communal level and to investigate whether informal spaces merely act as a reflection of wider state-societal relations or can they influence the trajectory of inter-communal relations on the whole, which is what this research has set out to achieve as a core objective.

## **5. Informal Spaces and the Framing of Sectarian Discourse**

Departing from regime mechanisms and the top-down narratives that have been disseminated in influencing the trajectory of sectarianism, this chapter seeks to offer a snapshot of the various ways in which informal civil society plays out and operates in its approach to sectarian relations in both Kuwait and Bahrain. The emerging themes that arose from the empirical data collated by the author are the location of such spaces, the activities research participants partake in and what those spaces represent to people who actively participate within them. Observing these themes can provide an understanding into the various ways in which informal spaces can potentially play both a positive and detrimental role in influencing the trajectory of inter-communal relations at the grass-roots level and the extent to which they have served to mitigate or exacerbate banal or “everyday” sectarianism (i.e. is there a repetition or dispelling of regime narratives on a communal level).

Furthermore, this chapter will seek to examine the topics or themes in question when it comes to observing inter-communal discourse and whether it can be harnessed in a way that brings about further rapprochement or reconciliation between denominations, particularly in times of heightened political instability, as is the ongoing case in Bahrain today or in Kuwait throughout the 1980s for example. It will become evident throughout the empirical chapters and as alluded to in previous chapters, that state-led or state-sponsored discourse, namely the sectarianized portrayal of both domestic and regional events, ought to be challenged and common misconceptions pertaining to current affairs be alleviated, to harmonise communal relations.

It can be suggested therefore that one potential outlet, be it the research in question i.e. the informal space, whether it can facilitate community building initiatives to bring about alternative narratives that do not seek to further polarise communities or whether they too likewise serve to exacerbate tensions and incur a greater trust deficit between religious communities, which again only panders or lends credence to state policies of securitizing certain segments of the population and to then perceive them as fifth columnists that behold external loyalties. It may be argued therefore, that the way in which the space or grouping is utilised and is channeled to further what end, this will in effect determine whether informal civil society can be regarded not only as a more

effective replacement of formal CSOs, but whether they can shape or determine perceptions of one another and in turn act as a potential platform for meaningful cross-communal mobilisation that could even resonate on a political level (e.g. cross-communal coalition group), which it could be argued has long impeded social reform movements both in the Kuwaiti and Bahraini context, as will be evidenced from participant responses in the following chapters.

The findings come to display an overall unclear picture as to each space, its context and the roles it carries out within its given capacity. What becomes evident is that informal spaces in some cases have been influential in the selection of their locality, particularly in the Bahraini context with the emergence of cultural workshops where the neutrality in location is integral to its influence (i.e. being situated in a public area as oppose to in a predominantly Sunni or Shi'i neighborhood). This has enabled and facilitated cross-communal dialogue and solidarity on a host of topics that the regime would in normative circumstances seek to dictate, albeit it must be noted that despite its well-received reception and popularity amongst locals across Bahrain, this is a space that is still looking to grow and gather momentum.

The observations also indicate that youth-led initiatives and activities have made in part gains and limitations as to their own scope of influence, particularly given the potential risks some members/individuals may face were they to ever come into conflict with the law, and by extension the state. That said, it may therefore warrant further investigation into observing majalis more closely and whether utilizing the more traditional informal spaces maybe more conducive to being an influential cross-communal platform, particularly given that they are far more established then some of the emerging spaces.

However, taking those findings into account, it can be suggested that despite its past and present political utility, (e.g. during election time or political lobbying in the case of diwaniyyat or majalis), when it comes to recognising its capacity to overcome banal (everyday) sectarianism, it must be acknowledged that as of present, given the current geo-political climate, informal spaces cannot be regarded as a practical means to overcoming sectarian tensions. Nevertheless, based on the understanding of several

research respondents, there is scope for cautious optimism that they could give rise to more tangible or sustainable cross-communal coalitions and initiatives should the external conditions (i.e. the broader political climate) become more favourable to an alternative civic space to flourish and prosper.

### **5.1 Location, Activities and Autonomy**

One common theme that was deduced from the empirical data was that the locality, positioning and activities of informal spaces are a key factor in determining their ability to pursue grass-roots activism and whether they can address the top-down utility of sectarian politics that is employed by those regimes in question, albeit to varying degrees and in different ways which shall be explored at further length in the following chapter on regime-societal relations. In order to understand the significance of location or locality in this context, it must be understood how location determines who comprises or makes up the attendees of any given space, secondly, how that then impacts on the types of discussions/dialogue that takes place, and thirdly, how discussions can then determine the activities and functions the space can cater towards.

To understand their emergence, it must be noted what the rationale was for participants and in what context they were first formed. According to one research participant who chairs a group and is in contact with several other informal workshops, the reasoning behind their formation was in light of events following 2011, however the idea itself did not commence from that time.

“These groups were formed with the intent to offer an alternative to established groups, but to also have an impact on members of registered groups and to engage with what was already present in civic society. It should be stated, that the idea of Bahrain Debate for example existed prior to 2011, the idea being to give youth a greater platform to discuss politics, however they eventually did the event in 2012, it was not a new concept but rather the result of existing environment and circumstances. There was now a pressing need more than ever to facilitate dialogue between communities and political societies but more

importantly is that it was not a coincidence these groups emerged because they wanted to be seen as independent.”<sup>278</sup>

This emphasis on autonomy was integral to the rationale for forming, firstly to be regarded as legitimate by all, which meant being perceived as politically neutral, and not affiliated to any group, as people coming from a registered organisation came with their own predisposed ideas but simultaneously to attract those people from a broad political spectrum to participate in their activities.

One case of location being integral to the purpose of the space is with the example of informal workshop groups, namely in the form of pop up art exhibitions or literary clubs. Particularly in Bahrain, where the positioning of the space is integral to bringing various communities together and to have a candid discussion as to the politics within the country, amongst a host of other topics, in some respects acting like the more traditional spaces of the majlis or diwaniyya.

“*Mawana* (one local workshop operating across the Bahraini coastline) does a very good job of bringing people together from many different communities, something that cannot be exactly said about many other initiatives. What *Mawana* does well is that it is in an area that many Bahrainis would not go to or have never been to in their entire lives, so they attract all these people from urban, rural and sectarian identities to come in and just listen and participate and interact with one another.”<sup>279</sup>

*Mawana*, which despite not exclusively catering for the youth, has a strong youth component where they organize various activities and workshops, all of which are centered around the idea of encouraging the use of public and urbanised space. This is then brought into context of people’s daily realities by attempting to understand the politics that has an impact on them. In this particular case, hosting an event near a privately-owned beach as a symbolic challenge to the political and economic elites

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<sup>278</sup> Outside Observer 2, Chairman of Tasa’ol, Independent Bahraini initiative that aims to raise questions on conflict and identity, 7<sup>th</sup> March 2017, Skype Discussion.

<sup>279</sup> Outside Observer 2, Chairman of Tasa’ol, Independent Bahraini initiative that aims to raise questions on conflict and identity, 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2015, Skype Discussion.

who have taken control of the coastline, with murals that say “the beach is a public right”. This is noteworthy because the group aims to bring people together on issues that resonate with young people across the sectarian divide. The significance of the location of such activities is once more highlighted in the fact that they host their activities in areas where the clear majority of Bahrainis would not tend to go or have never visited. This “neutral grounding” as it were, is instrumental in bringing people from urban or rural areas and more pertinently from different sectarian identities to come visit, participate and interact on timely issues.

However, where the emerging informal space is limited is in terms of established recognition, and with that popularity, which the more traditional spaces like the Bahraini majlis can more likely achieve. As one research respondent explains:

“Albeit the workshops or forums can be very cross-class, very cross-sectarian, cross-communal, as far as traditional groups go, they have a wider audience not just because of resources but because of the name and when it comes to these initiatives, the name is as important as the content. Sometimes when you are doing these initiatives and you are trying to encourage people to attend they often get shunned or they would be questioned, people are skeptical, they do not trust this new initiative, they have never heard of it before, they want to know the names of the organisers, they want to know who participates in these activities, and so there is always a kind of cynicism from certain elements of the public.”<sup>280</sup>

One issue the research respondent more recently noted are also some of the logistical obstacles facing the emerging workshops, in that their activities are sporadic or seasonal, as members cannot commit on a regular basis, unlike the registered/formal groups where they have sustained (albeit largely futile) activities by paid members who receive government funding.

“The big difference is that informal workshops do not have the ability to manage sustained activities, they are often project based with an expiration date. They

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<sup>280</sup> Ibid.

do not have financial support in most cases or the skills to sustain the work, and furthermore because the active members have multiple affiliations to other organisations/societies this can also in turn undermine their work due to other commitments.”<sup>281</sup>

Likewise, when it comes to specific numbers, this too raises questions regarding their potential scope to have a sustained influence on inter-communal relations. When probed as to the number of such initiatives, the research respondent admitted that,

“it is difficult to really pinpoint or quantify the number of informal workshops, because they are project based, they often emerge and dissolve frequently, and furthermore their disbandment can be attributed to other factors such as mismanagement and limited resources to sustain events.”<sup>282</sup>

However, the participant did concede that by working on a seasonal or project by project basis, some workshops such as Mawana could maintain hosting art exhibitions and even start working on publications.

“Their second cultural season is starting in Juffair for Summer 2017...again it is a workshop that is not explicitly political but touches on the pressing issues of the day from society to economy and political identity.”<sup>283</sup>

Another pertinent example more recently is the continuation of the Bahrain Debate, which has been successful not only in attracting state ministry funding whilst retaining its associational independence, but also operating on a broader scale as it hosts key political figures and societies in panel discussions and integrating youth networks into the fold. “For their upcoming event this year, they will be organizing an event with Bahrain Democratic Youth Society.”<sup>284</sup>

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<sup>281</sup> Outside Observer 2, Chairman of Tasa’ol, Independent Bahraini initiative that aims to raise questions on conflict and identity, 7<sup>th</sup> March 2017, Skype Discussion.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid.

Despite the Bahrain Debate being a recent example, it becomes evident therefore that one of the potential limitations for emerging informal groups to make a name for themselves is due to there being a trust deficit, often due to lack of awareness or publicity of the group itself or the organisers. However, given the recent mixed successes of startup groups/workshops throughout Bahrain, there have been spaces that solely use the buzzword of inclusivity to gain popularity and there are those that follow through on their claims of bridging communities, particularly groups that share a common interest in terms of activities.

Although having said this, the research respondent highlighted how;

“there is one art group called *Ul’affa* and they are very big on cross-communal conversation, expanding on community relations and peace and conflict and emphasizing a Bahraini identity through art. They have been very successful...their group’s success can be attributed to their diversity, one thing that brings them together is that they are all artists...they act independently but were also able to be granted outside funding from the U.S embassy in Bahrain for example but this did not undermine their work.”<sup>285</sup>

Furthermore, their utility can be illustrated in the fact that as an exhibition they are in a transient location, moving from one area to another to showcase their work as artists, even receiving invitations from neighboring states. As one research respondent recounts/asserts/states: “They have done a couple of art exhibitions and photo exhibitions in the UAE and were directly asked to come to the UAE to present their work.”<sup>286</sup>

It is important therefore to highlight some of the activities of these shared interest start-up groups as with the previous case it demonstrates how they can retain their independence, be successful in addressing inter-communal issues and bringing artists from various backgrounds together, and more interestingly were also simultaneously

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<sup>285</sup> Outside Observer 2, Chairman of Tasa’ol, Independent Bahraini initiative that aims to raise questions on conflict and identity, 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2015, Skype Discussion.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid.

able to receive funding from external sources which does not necessarily jeopardize or undermine their activities.

The research participant also explains how their unique ability to showcasing their work and talents, enables them to mitigate a potential trust deficit that other emerging groups may experience given that they are not a long-established group or do not affiliate with a particular society, such as Mawana.

“I am inclined to say that being independent can often be very effective, especially because once they manage to gain the trust of the public, that they do not have a hidden agenda, they have credibility, they started to become very successful and within a short amount of time they managed to gain a following from across Bahrain...their work is often of a political character, but why it was so successful is that being an art group it is not explicit in your face, so when people come to visit their workshops or one of the exhibitions they do not necessarily treat it as a political space, so they manage to attract people from many different affiliations...what made them really effective was their capacity to gain trust and credibility across Bahraini society in such a short space of time, within a year.”<sup>287</sup>

Again, another key factor to note was how the positioning/locality of the space as well as the activity itself were integral to the group’s success in bringing communities together and discussing contentious political topics in the country. Acquiring a transient, fluid location as opposed to having a set space or gallery (in this context) for their activities was influential in gaining popularity across Bahrain.

“They chose the location and the spaces very effectively in that they did not have a permanent space, so they would go to different galleries, public spaces, parks and try to create something there, in that sense many of their initiatives would attract a different crowd each time...once they went to an abandoned house in Juffair, an area where a lot of youth go, they held an exhibition there, they’ve also held more formal or informal events in higher class, lower class places as well, and within people’s homes, they operate in various locations.”<sup>288</sup>

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<sup>287</sup> Ibid.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid.

Furthermore, rather than discounting the potential benefits of more traditional informal spaces, the research respondent also highlighted how they too can be effective in the way they operate vis-à-vis inter-communal discourse compared to many registered groups where events or the dynamic of discussions may take a different course of action.

“I do think some registered and informal groups also have the potential and capacity to promote social cohesion, but I think because their activities differ, the results, and the impact and the character of the space differs also. With majalis, there is a greater potential for social cohesion there because people directly speak to each other, they get to know the person, their name, their face, where they live, their families, in that respect it is more interpersonal, but with registered groups for example, it will be more formal in that they bring in a lecturer/speaker, people might sit there, and listen to the lecture, and perhaps talk with a few of their colleagues...it is not necessarily interactive, whereas with the majalis and some of these emerging informal groups, you find they are geared or more tailored toward discussion and open debate, alongside the socialising aspect of people getting to know one another.”<sup>289</sup>

This observation made by the research participant both complements and stands in contrast to the assessment of some non-registered youth societies, particularly where they differ in strategies to appear politically neutral. In addition to this, some youth societies may depart from the workshops’ methods in that they want to have more autonomy over their own affairs as oppose to liaising with registered groups or societies as a means to overcoming both state-dominated discourse and the CSA (coercive state apparatus) in place.

According to one youth society that documents human rights violations, it was important for its members not only to operate independently, but not to “have any relations with political societies or parties.”<sup>290</sup> Indeed, the group felt that, despite it

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<sup>289</sup> Ibid.

<sup>290</sup> Youth Society 1, President and Former President of Bahrain Youth Society for Human Rights (BYSHR), Tuesday 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2014, Respondent A1.

being evident that some of its members showed solidarity with opposition groups' demands, it was important for them as human rights activists to document any abuse that is taking place in the country, be it by the state or opposition actors. The rationale being that it would hopefully put them in good standing across Bahrain's population, as a means to safeguard their own credibility.

However, the implications of them operating as an informal/independent group always entailed they were running legal risks operating without registration by the Ministry of Social Development. As one participant conceded that it could potentially jeopardise their line of work when documenting human rights violations when recalling one incident.

“We lost the case against the government (to get registered), so we decided to continue regardless. We believe it is a price worthy of paying, however it has come back to hurt us, as in 2007, when some of our members were arrested, for four to five months I was working alone, after they were released they continued to do their work. There were also other people who worked temporarily with us in that time, but they feared to work with us directly in fear of the same, so they were working for us anonymously.”<sup>291</sup>

This could therefore suggest that despite the commendable perseverance of some of these individual activists participating in non-registered youth groups, they are still being impeded by a coercive state that could arrest them at any point and disband their informal youth societies. In addition, this could offer further credence to the majlis as potentially more of an ideal platform for grassroots activism and mobilisation as its location, (although it is static unlike the emerging workshops), it does operate in most cases within the private remit of the home or community centre. Youth groups on the other hand, despite not being as transparent and as susceptible to government monitoring as a formal CSO, still find a recurring problem in that their effectively illegal activity always runs a risk for the participant's safety. Having said that, one telling strength of the independent youth group, is that their selected members have more organisational autonomy, which may not be the case for more formal organisations that look to co-opt their members. “I think our idea is to mobilise, because I see political

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<sup>291</sup> Ibid.

parties use the youth, they exploit them, and they do not give them real representation, and this is the one thing in our society, in our society we don't have a real hierarchy.”<sup>292</sup>

What is also interesting to observe was the protocol around membership within BYSHR, which is selective for specific reasons, mitigating the potential trust deficit by employing only those they know well and see fit for such a role.

“The powerful human rights organisations with government tried to spy on us, before we had two members who were in the government, so for membership therefore we are very careful or selective...because we don't want our organisation to be infiltrated.”<sup>293</sup>

However, what is most pertinent to the issue of sectarianism, is the measured way in which they managed the discussion around the topic. BYSHR felt it was imperative to shift Bahrain's political and socio-economic challenges into a civil rights discourse, and they attempt to evidence this in the diverse group of people they work with, in the hope of trying to universalize demands and common concerns in the name of human rights as opposed to framing issues in sectarian terms.

“We have no problem, anyone who works with us we do not care for their religion, we have to work for the human rights which are universal...we have people across the board, we do not have that problem in our society.”<sup>294</sup>

In addition to this, when the informal youth group were probed as to the role of majalis in recent times, they viewed them as a conducive platform that has the cross-communal capacity to wield influence in mobilising people and to actively counter government narratives on sectarianism.

“At the beginning of the 2011 revolution, the majalis were discussing how we can react to the government's actions...this was happening inside the majalis because this is one of few spaces that government cannot interfere in, you do not need to have permission or membership. It's more effective, like the Kuwaiti diwaniyyat, I have visited there is a space to talk openly, and likewise some of

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<sup>292</sup> Ibid.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid, A2.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid, A2.

the majalis the political elites attend, influential people of all walks can go, however these kind of more influential majalis may occur every now and then, they may not necessarily be an everyday occurrence compared to the more regular ones which are more casual in discussion.”<sup>295</sup>

Albeit a positive response when discussing the utility of politically influential majlis, one limitation the research participants did note is their infrequent timing which may possibly be detrimental in the long run, particularly when it comes to concerted efforts in consolidating cross-communal opposition ties for example. Likewise, the head of Bahrain’s Human Rights Observatory and General Federation of Bahrain, (an independent trade union) echoed these positive remarks regarding youth activities, in terms of orchestrating mobilisation but however argued that ultimately, they proved to be largely ineffective or futile in meeting their demands, which was to curb sectarian discrimination in the hope of attaining improved employment prospects.

“If you see any demonstrations, the core of it are youth, the blocking of the road is done by youth, the one’s on social media are youth.”<sup>296</sup> When probed about young people’s tactics using road blocks, the respondent noted that “it depends, some people understand, some people do not understand this measure...but all in all it is irrelevant because they (the state) bring in migrant workers to take over his position anyway.”<sup>297</sup>

It is evident therefore that many of the mobilisation strategies are orchestrated by youth groups, however judging from the participants’ remarks they have been proven only to be detrimental if not socially divisive in some quarters of Bahrain, and furthermore they have proven to be ineffective as the authorities can simply overlook these demands/activities through the use of the CSA in place.

This again could offer some indication that independent youth groups may need to revise some of their strategies, potentially looking towards, or emulating the

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<sup>295</sup> Ibid.

<sup>296</sup> Outside Observer 1, Head of General Federation of Bahrain Trade Union and Bahrain Human Rights Observatory, Friday 30<sup>th</sup> May 2014.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid.

exhibitions/workshop efforts, at bringing about more effective modes of rapprochement as opposed to by means of civil disruption. That being said, cross-communal partnership in human rights work for youth is abundantly clear and if anything, needs to be further harnessed.

Returning to the majlis, the research participant notes that the traditional outlet of the majlis has become an emerging space re-inventing itself depending on the socio-political conditions within the country. Likewise, given the relative freedom afforded to visitors who frequent such spaces, it seemed appropriate for platforms outside the official civil society remit to step in and make their mark in terms of mediating between people of various political persuasions, where in ordinary circumstances they may not have the opportunity to necessarily air their concerns, whilst also acquiring a new-found structure almost akin to the formal civil society organisations. “For a long time, the majlis in Bahrain were primarily a social space, but now for the past few years, there is a movement or a trend for majlis to operate more on a political basis, and even operate in some ways as formal civil society spaces, there is one majlis (*Majlis al-Mesh’aal*) in particular that runs political discussions and lectures and meetings every week with a variety of political affiliations, so sometimes they will invite opposition people, sometimes they invite MP’s, former ministers...”<sup>298</sup>

When probed further as to what the reasons are for the increasing politicization of the informal space collectively, the same research participant noted “that because along with that movement of primarily youth-led groups feeling like there is something missing in Bahrain, a lot of people felt like there is a lack of appropriate spaces or venues to discuss and debate so many of these people who most likely have been running their majlis for a very long time, possibly years, but more recently decided to formalize their majlis a little more, for example they may advertise their majlis with custom designed posters and highlight how this guest is coming and will speak about this particular topic for example.”<sup>299</sup>

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<sup>298</sup> Outside Observer 2, Chairman of Tasa’ol, Independent Bahraini initiative that aims to raise questions on conflict and identity, 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2015, Skype Discussion.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid.

When questioned about this gravitating towards a more formal, even institutionalized outlook of the informal space, the research participant still however highlighted its effectiveness and unique characteristics that would make headway in terms of empowering inter-communal relations, unlike official political spaces, and this is by and large due to the environment the majlis can potentially foster, emphasizing that there is relatively easier accessibility for people across the political spectrum to attend majlis as oppose to a CSO's headquarters for example.

“Being a majlis, people think of the space and treat it differently, so although a majlis for example invites an opposition speaker or someone from parliament or a former minister etc...people still think of it as a majlis i.e. a neutral space of sorts despite who maybe in attendance. The fact that people organize events at a majlis has actually helped get people from across the political divide to attend, because it is not viewed as x or y people's space, it is a majlis, open for anyone who wishes to attend...in that sense the environment of a majlis itself helps, for example it would be difficult for a loyalist person to attend a meeting at al-Wefaq headquarters, a person by themselves may feel somewhat uncomfortable walking in, simple due to the way they view themselves and the way they view others vice-versa, but with a majlis, they will more often than not feel comfortable to attend irrespective of who is or who is not present.”<sup>300</sup>

The research participant went on to claim rather emphatically how the re-invention of the majlis and the way it is perceived (often as a neutral space), and how it can make way for open discussion, has been a success in bringing communities together in Bahrain despite the evident societal divisions born out of the ramifications of the 2011 uprising, there is a gradual rapprochement taking place once again, and the majlis as one outlet serves to facilitate this, and in doing so, is also undermining top-down and regime elite narratives of how sectarianism came to being in the country.

When asked as to whether the majlis caters in bringing people together,

“I think they already have actually. Like there was one recent meeting at a majlis in Riffa’, which as you may know Riffa’ is a majority Sunni area and is renowned

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<sup>300</sup> Ibid.

for being explicitly loyalist and there have even been many examples of some anti-opposition or anti-Shi'i militant activities here, but recently, after elections were over I recall a majlis hosted by Dr Ali Fakhro, who was the former minister of education, had a very good reputation amongst many people in Bahrain but he was often perceived as an opposition figure because he criticized the government on occasions, but the fact he had a good reputation had allowed people from Riffa' to be willing to go listen to him despite the topic...I also think it being a majlis having a good reputation, even if they brought someone like Khalil Marzooq from al-Wefaq, people may have actually listened."<sup>301</sup>

When comparing the various informal outlets, the outside observer highlighted that there are marked differences between the ways in which emerging youth-based groups/workshops operate compared to the traditional space of the majlis, however both can be utilised to a positive effect in the political sphere in their own way depending on who they can attract and the different social networks utilizing these spaces.

“Neither of them are detrimental, but they operate in a different setting. It must be stated that in addition to sectarian, political and economic divisions in Bahrain, there is a big generational gap, so youth groups are not able to attract people from across generations, and likewise majalis are not usually able to attract many young people, because people who often frequent majalis and youth groups operate in different social networks. So how do you get to know about these venues – from your friends, your peers, your social media accounts, and because your social networks are already tailored to adhere to what you are interested in.”<sup>302</sup>

Lastly on location, the observer highlighted how the urban centres could be more prone to attracting a cross-sectarian audience as opposed to more isolated villages surrounding the cities. “Majalis in Manama, Muharraq, simply just based on their capacity to attract a wide cross-section of society, people are more likely to visit a

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<sup>301</sup> Ibid.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid.

majlis in these places than one in Sitra or Riffa”.<sup>303</sup> Albeit as noted previously, even the majlis in isolated areas of villages that tend to be denomination-only or sect-based can still offer a platform for alternative voices to come to the fore, and this can only bode well for harnessing stronger communal ties in the long term.

Comparing this once again with the locality, or rather the locations of independent workshops or informal initiatives, it becomes clear that locality is the central hallmark/determinant as to whether a group can foster stronger social ties both inside and outside the country and with that cross-communal rapprochement. The Bahrain Debate initiative, for example, sets out to facilitate debate amongst Bahraini civil society itself, and arranges panel discussions not only in Bahrain but outside the country in London for example, to publicise and shed light on the case for relevant state and non-state actors that play a key role in Bahraini politics on a transnational level.

“Having a session in London is used at this point to get messages across to outside partners or actors whether it is the British Government or political parties or even think tanks such as representatives from Chatham House, they will also attend for example but I think the goal right now is to pick it up in Bahrain, build a better grounding there and then have the more controversial sessions in London.”<sup>304</sup>

This point alludes to the suggestion that technically independent (i.e. non-registered) groups that do however operate on a more formally structured basis such as this initiative that takes the form of an open debate highlights a potential limitation in that some contentious political topics, sectarianism being one of them, is having to be discussed outside Bahrain, which also demonstrates that these emerging groups that do try to bring people from across sectarian and political divides may have to come up with alternatives in order to have what can be considered productive state-societal and inter-communal dialogue. Unlike the traditional informal spaces of the majlis that is

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<sup>303</sup> Ibid.

<sup>304</sup> Civil Society 1, Co-Founder of The Bahrain Debate Initiative, 20<sup>th</sup> June 2015, Skype Interview Discussion.

insulated from state interference. However plausible this assessment may be, it is a point that would still require further substantiation.

Linking back to the previous observer's comments about there being an evident gap when it comes to addressing unchecked sectarian discourse that was exacerbating tensions, the Bahrain debate was therefore also born out of events stemming from 2011 and the need for moderates across the political spectrum to try bridge the sectarian gap, this was to be another grass-roots initiative that sought to do precisely that. When asked as to whether members of the debate and participants come solely from a specific area of Bahrain, the respondent claimed that

“they tried to diversify as much as possible, we have members both Sunni and Shi'i and generally we have a Sunni Islamist, Sunni secular etc...across the political spectrum, people who have the connections to get us the people we need on the debate as well...because you have to create something that appears to be neutral, that is a neutral political space where people of different views are welcomed, we do still have some problems with members of political societies like al-Esalah or al-Minbar (Conservative Sunni Islamist groups), trying to get them to our events so there is still this gap...they cannot bear the fact that they would have to sit with someone like Khalil Marzooq (al-Wefaq) for instance.”<sup>305</sup>

Therefore, much as there is a demand for such initiatives and this is reflective in the group's diversity, having members and panel participants from different sects, all over Bahrain, you find there are still some deterrence from certain political societies despite its apparent impartiality, which may not necessarily be the case were such events or discussions located in a majlis which is not a political space per se.

The participant did, however, highlight that being a non-registered group still had tangible benefits in comparison to existing registered CSO's in Bahrain like other emerging workshops.

“Being informal gives you more space to do stuff without having to check with the government every now and then because that is how NGO's function, you

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<sup>305</sup> Ibid.

have to report back to the Ministry of Social Development every now and then to tell them we did x, y, z activities. So, it does offer you more space to think and have your own discussions that is not necessarily state-approved discourse. But working within state structures in a sense, I think the state turns a blind eye to what we do.”<sup>306</sup>

As noted before, however, there is still some resistance to such discussions on either side of the political spectrum in Bahrain that have sought to polarise communities further for their own gain. This has in part undermined inter-communal relations and is once again pandering to a state mechanism of securitizing and scaremongering its own communities to act as a safeguard or at least be perceived as legitimate rulers with segments of the Bahraini population.

“I think the Salafists from al-Esalah, they think this initiative is a very bad idea basically, every time we talk to them about it, they have been alarmed, I am not quite sure why to be honest, and on the other side of the spectrum, the gathering of National Unit, they have been alarmed to the point that a day before the event in London, they cancelled saying they will not attend the conference, they always had an issue or questions as to who was behind the Bahrain Debate...we get a lot of people thinking the initiative is very close to the Crown Prince or something even though it simply isn't. I don't even think the Crown Prince would want us to speak about such issues...they don't want to speak to each other anyway.”<sup>307</sup>

In some respect, and despite the efforts made by emerging groups, this demonstrates that there are still visible divisions particularly with either side of the political spectrum and that bridging the gap so to speak will be harder with such groups that seek to exacerbate tensions between communities, the government of course can then pick apart and utilise the political fringe elements in order to safeguard its rule, so there is still work to be done for such emerging groups if they are to be considered successful in the long run.

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<sup>306</sup> Ibid.

<sup>307</sup> Ibid.

However, the Co-Founder of the Bahrain Debate does go on to note that longstanding socio-economic inequalities in Bahrain have failed to be redressed which effects all communities albeit to a varying degree and it is this point that ought to be highlighted in discussions. If this is brought up and raised not only will it highlight a common cause for Bahrainis but will in turn bring Bahrainis together in solidarity to tackle these issues, which is what the government does not seem to want to focus on.

“The colonial legacy we are inheriting, even sort of the neo-imperialist phase we are dealing with in terms of British and U.S foreign policy today, that impacts of course but it is also locally at the state level, economically they have just stuck to rentier politics or socially stratifying society, creating inequalities. For example, if you are from a Shia background you cannot go to the military or police force, which automatically puts high school students who do not enter university at a disadvantage...what we are trying to do therefore, especially with our last session was to talk about sectarianism in Bahrain, but discuss it within the prism of political economy, we wanted to make it as factual as possible to assert that it is the state itself that is the main perpetrator of sectarianism.”<sup>308</sup>

This is particularly significant in the way of making inter-communal discourse more conducive in addressing issues as opposed to offering ideologically-charged narratives that could inadvertently exacerbate tensions or play on counter-productive generalisations to formulate an argument. Rather the discussion ought to be focusing on material conditions, and the evident disparity in wealth and how it has been afforded to various Bahraini communities, asking what the effects and ramifications of policies are such as naturalization, gerrymandering etc. For the Bahrain Debate and other such emerging groups, emphasizing these tangible issues as it were will go much further in bringing about inter-communal rapprochement.

However, having such discussions is not always an easy feat, particularly when a diverse panel reflecting the broad political spectrum of Bahraini society is required and again people are averse to such conversations given who may be in attendance on the panel for example. A problem that is not so prevalent in the traditional majlis which

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<sup>308</sup> Ibid.

could be another benefit compared to the relatively inexperienced emerging groups, that are often having to compromise on who should or should not attend.

“It’s called the Bahrain Debate for a reason, you have to have all of those parts, and we sort of fall into the trap of not doing that constantly to sort of accommodate for other people, we cannot for example bring someone like Ali Mushaima to one of our events because aspects of the other side just will not come, Hatam al-Hassan won’t come etc etc...it is frustrating because we want to have a free debate, people are there and we do not have any structural constraints on people like formal CSOs, we want to deal with the reality, the political reality of what is going on and a reality of state bureaucracy.”<sup>309</sup>

So it is evident that there are positives and evident limitations to the formally structured independent groups, however it can be asserted that other emerging workshops that are not explicitly politicized in the form of Mawana or Ul’Affa for example and moreover the increasing utilization of the traditional majlis showcases that in terms of their location and activities, these informal spaces may be more conducive in bringing about more productive discussions both at a state-societal and inter-communal level. Even the co-founder of the Bahrain debate acknowledged this;

“the majalis function very well on a communal level, spaces like majlis al-Dow’ee, they become a community hub of sorts, so you generally get elders and they discuss politics, it’s a very traditional space and it does serve a function but I think you must accommodate for both, in terms of old and new spaces...you must have a strong community outreach on all fronts for starters if you want to overcome the local divide.”<sup>310</sup>

In the Kuwaiti context, observations also indicate location to be an important theme albeit for different purposes to the Bahraini case. Rather, several observers have asserted how the state had engineered inter-communal discord over the years by manipulating or dividing the various residential areas that make up Kuwait. This division of Kuwaiti districts has historically speaking played an important role in impeding on the emergence of a strong cross-communal, cross-sectarian opposition

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<sup>309</sup> Ibid.

<sup>310</sup> Ibid.

in challenging the state's political incompetence, namely in the form of curbing pervasive corruption.

“Historically in Kuwait, the people used to live within one small city, I am talking about prior to independence, you found communities, and the neighborhood were very much interactive with one another. After independence, and the expansion of rural areas and politics came in at that point in order to divide Kuwaitis, for example now as a small country with around a million population, you can see that by and large Shia live alone, in their own neighborhood and residential areas, the Sunnis live in different parts of the country, and even among them you will find the upper class live in different neighborhoods and so this kind of division among different segments was intentionally made by the government, so everyone now has their own interests, and it has up until late been difficult to find cross-cultural, national political figures who can genuinely speak about national demands and national aspirations...however the new technology, non-profit organisations activities, demonstrations, the universities, these modes of grass-roots activism can help in bringing people together.”<sup>311</sup>

Changes in the dynamics of inter-communal discourse can be in part attributed to the re-shaping of the diwaniyya; like the majlis, it has reinvented itself in various ways, which has given rise to the emergence of youth diwaniyya. As stated;

“There is a diwaniyya on Wednesdays in al-Qadissiya, and you can observe how the people who frequent the space are typical Kuwaiti youth from different backgrounds, different cultures, and you see different views being exchanged but based on a mutual respect that the diwaniyya fosters, so they see their arguments are not based on point-scoring or being confrontational but actual dialogue on policies that are impeding Kuwaiti politics, so this is one example of how we are going in the positive direction...so we now have that are designated for youth, from certain political and social backgrounds, and they

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<sup>311</sup> Outside Observer 4, Professor of Political Sciences at Kuwait University and Former Independent MP, Monday 26<sup>th</sup> May 2014.

can be considered activists in their own right, and they try to participate in changing the Kuwaiti political landscape.”<sup>312</sup>

There is the argument therefore, that the evolution of traditional informal spaces such as the Kuwaiti diwaniyya that is cross-communal is making way in undermining the early government initiative of engineering the landscape of where communities reside, you find now, with the aid of social networking, people from different areas and backgrounds in Kuwait are coming to meet and discuss the political conditions that face them. However, as the outside observer concedes, that although there is more cross-communal interaction across informal platforms that does not necessarily suggest or signal cordial or polarizing sectarian relations. What is apparent however, is that in the Bahraini context it is local politics that has impeded on civic discourse, and in the Kuwaiti context it seems that it is how transnational events/movements then reverberate or play out within Kuwait political life that ultimately effects the relationship between religious denominations.

“I admit if you are talking about tolerance, if you talk about cohesion, the older generations were better. The 60s and 70s were better, in the 80s it was at its worst (given the Iran-Iraq War) but now it is far better than the 80s, but still if you compare it with the decades’ prior inter-communal relations were better...all our problems in this regard have been external.”<sup>313</sup>

Likewise, despite the emergence of social media and the proliferation of young people’s diwaniyya, Kuwaiti society collectively remains unable to overcome the existing barriers to forming an all-encompassing coalition against the state. Kuwaiti youth have been particularly hampered by a leadership deficit which has undermined their mobilization, unlike in the Bahraini context where cross-communal mobilisation across the generations has been relatively more successful than its Kuwaiti counterpart.

“I cannot say they are successful in achieving their own goals because of existing barriers and element of power still not in their hands, the youth usually have ambitions and a lot of energy and enthusiasm, but they are still unclear of

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<sup>312</sup> Ibid.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid.

their own goals and to what end, some beautiful ideas but not pragmatic, or they need leadership, the lack of leadership is pivotal at this stage, and this can be extended to the failings of the Arab Spring in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Yemen etc, the young people who initiated the revolutions, suddenly broke down barriers, but there was always someone to hijack the movement and use it to their own advantage.”<sup>314</sup>

This could also be alluding to the failures of Kuwait’s own Arab Spring movement in the form of the 2013 Orange movement where it effectively ran short of ideas and was soon dominated by established Islamist societies which in turn undermined the movement as it failed to appeal across the political spectrum.

However, the observer was optimistic that they collectively could play a conducive role in harmonizing sectarian relations as they have done during tumultuous periods within Kuwaiti history before.

“Due to the historical heritage of diwaniyyat, as a key factor in social, political life, they are very influential, but it depends on how it is utilised, you need a clear vision of how to invest in your diwaniyya and you may succeed in bringing your own ideas to fruition. During some very sensitive moments in Kuwait, whether it be in the 80s, 90s or more recently, we have faced a lot of dangerous times in Kuwait which caused sharp divisions between the people, but it was the role of diwaniyya that brought people together...the diwaniyya by default almost became like a neutral social space, where attendees must retain the peace if you will.”<sup>315</sup>

Again, like the Bahraini majlis, emphasizing this notion of neutrality that has enabled to repair or restore relations between communities during times of political crisis in Kuwait, but of course the priorities and motivations can change subject to the discussion (particularly if it focuses or digresses onto discussing external/transnational events) and this can also have implications on the discussions taking place within the diwaniyyat. They can therefore potentially play a positive role for inter-communal

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<sup>314</sup> Ibid.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid.

discourse when the issues are tangible and focused on policy change and reform that impact all Kuwaiti communities.

“It all depends on whether they are discussing major events inside the country, for example in the year 2006, the general topic of conversation was political reform, changing the electoral voting system, reducing the constituencies, making them smaller to get better representation, and so every diwaniyya I visited, they praised the initiative, they supported it, and whomever of the candidates believed in it received a lot of support. Fast forward to 2011, the same , their main issue is to solely discuss sectarianism, Sunnis attacking Shia and vice-versa...the same people, the same groups...I do not solely blame the government although it holds major responsibility, but I also blame the opposition leadership, who prior to 2011 were discussing the important issues that Kuwaiti people could rally around, corrupt parliament, corrupt MPs, bribery...however following 2011 some of the opposition leaders started to utilise sectarian discourse, so you had opposition MPs who started to attack Shia and conflate them with Iran, diverting from the real issues and in turn manipulated the entire meaning of political reform...and this had negative implications within the , as the majority of my constituency at the time were Shia, and by 2012, some of these who had supported me for 15 years, had distanced themselves from me because of what the opposition had become associated with, they would not blame my position, arguing that I am taking up a good stance in combatting corruption but that I went to the wrong people for solidarity.”<sup>316</sup>

This is a case example of how external events have played on the framing of sectarian discourse, undermining relations between communities and impeded on tackling cross-communal issues in this case corruption, and this would manifest within the diwaniyya as a reflection of current public opinion/sentiment. So, it is dependent on how the diwaniyya is utilised but the question remains as to whether it can be a positive influence when Kuwaiti society looks to be polarised by regional events. It has proved itself to be a success for local issues and domestic politics over the years but arguably

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<sup>316</sup> Ibid.

one of its limitations is that it may serve to exacerbate sectarian rhetoric when regional affairs come to the forefront.

## **5.2 Conclusion**

To summarise and after observing the various functions of informal civil society and the way in which it plays out within the public realm, there are several observations that can be made across the board, both in the Bahraini and Kuwaiti context. Informal spaces have undoubtedly been influential where there they are positioned within an impermanent, transient location such as the informal workshops that are not necessarily politicized per se but have been influential in bringing people from various backgrounds together, furthermore activities at these upcoming spaces like workshops, exhibitions for example, have been successful in fostering inter-communal discussion without having to take an explicitly political tone, in some cases through the medium of being a shared interest group.

Furthermore, the neutrality in location for the workshops (e.g. using a public space) helps to facilitate the cross-communal dimension; an essential component of the discussions and activities, especially if it is not to repeat the flaws in registered formal CSOs that can only cater to or attract one segment of society. It must be reiterated however that these emerging groups do have their limitations in retaining their independence, one of which is sustainability to manage and maintain these activities as well as a lack of resources and logistical support to orchestrate such events on a regular basis.

In order to gauge the expediency of these particular spaces, the observations from research participants need to put up against the multi-dimensional framework within the rights-based approach which are predicated on the four key variants of structure, environment, values and impact (as mentioned on p.130). In terms of structure, it would appear their transient, impermanent location has been favourable in fostering good interrelations, whilst simultaneously not having to be as resource-dependent as many registered CSOs who may require funding to carry out their activities. Where their limitations may lie is in the environment and impact variants, pop up groups with no support may hinder its broader appeal and in turn its ability to foster the state-civil

society dialogue as emphasised by the RBA that is required to achieve some form of state accountability or citizen empowerment.

This then links to the more traditional spaces of the majlis and the diwaniyyat which owes some of its success in harmonizing relations by its perception from many as being a neutral non-partisan space irrespective even of its increasing interaction with political discourse, which could not be said of the emerging groups that sought a more formal outlook, like the open panel discussion for example which at times has struggled to attract and engage with public figures across the political spectrum. The Majlis and the diwaniyya has a flexibility in operating in both an informal and semi-formal role,

“formal events such as guest lectures and Q&A often take place, however what makes it unique, is that unlike a registered CSO, it can bypass the state because it does not require official permission to host such events, it is ultimately at the host’s discretion, and so majalis have been and can again be a key platform for citizenship-building in the future.”<sup>317</sup>

However, the limitations of the traditional spaces, particularly in the Kuwait context, is that they are susceptible to external/transnational events (which shall be discussed further in the following chapter and how regime elites have utilised this to their advantage). This can somewhat undermine or bring into scrutiny the impact diwaniyyat can have when discussions within the space are not focused on cross-communal issues that the public can rally around, rather when public discourse is polarizing, the diwaniyyat serves to polarise communities. Serving as a broader reflection of public sentiment as oppose to counteracting it, whereas the Bahraini majlis seeks to actively counter the ISA and this can be evidenced in the more successful social mobilisation campaigns over time.

That is on the grassroots level, however, as mentioned in the introductory section, informal civil society has yet to be able to circumvent sectarian politics, as skeptics of the informal space can still pose questions as to what extent they can tangibly change

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<sup>317</sup> Outside Observer 2, Chairman of Tasa’ol, Independent Bahraini initiative that aims to raise questions on conflict and identity, 7<sup>th</sup> March 2017, Skype Discussion.

the situation on the ground, a national cross-communal campaign or coalition that actively seeks to defy the state, that, in some respect, is yet to be seen. Advocates for the informal space can however argue that it can potentially facilitate the conversation required to bring those initial steps into action. This point will be observed in more depth in the following chapter, which seeks to observe the dynamics of state-societal relations and the impact informal civil society can potentially make.

Once again, it also appears there to be both pros and cons for the more traditional settings likewise, however unlike the pop-up exhibitions which seemingly rank higher in terms of structure and values, the fluidity and broader scope of traditional spaces leaves greater room for values which may not necessarily be tolerant or working towards that “common good” as espoused by the RBA in a sense that it could polarise communities. However, in terms of impact, its popularity and prominent individuals from both government and opposition figures indicates that long term, it could have a greater lasting impact in terms of facilitating state-civil society dialogue.

## **6. Regimes, Informal Spaces and Sectarian Narratives**

The preceding chapter sought to focus on the operationalisation of the informal space with an emphasis on the locality and the specific activities partaken in the space. This chapter in turn will seek to examine the existing sectarian narratives that have been perpetuated at the state level and in wider society, and to examine how those regimes have sought to reinforce their own ISA's through several themes that emerged from the empirical data, those namely being external/regional events and the role that education and media have played in public discourse.

With that in mind, the chapter will explore how the traditional informal spaces of the Bahraini majlis and the Kuwaiti diwaniyya have responded to such ISA's employed by those states, and whether they have served as a platform to try circumventing sectarianism in both countries or merely act as a broader reflection of society and in turn perpetuate the problem of sectarian discord. The chapter thus seeks to understand the narratives propagated, the mechanisms and tools utilised by both regime and informal spaces, to observe where they align or not and whether there is a 'sectarian discourse differential' which can be used as a model template to harmonise sectarian relations which could in turn form the basis of an effective broad coalition network of opposition movements that seek to overcome state-sponsored rhetoric and policies.

The following sections will be centred on themes that tie into the theoretical framework developed in chapter four to gain an understanding of the evolving dynamic of sectarian relations within both countries and the variables that influence the relationship. Applying the notion of Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), the first section will seek to understand whether informal spaces within the Bahraini context are pandering to or looking to resist the regime's narrative on inter-communal relations. In chapter seven, these observations will be brought into further examination by situating informal spaces within the broader rubric of civil society, and by observing whether they repeat the same methods as formal CSOs, which have often been co-opted by the state or are employing alternative strategies to circumvent state sponsored discourse.

The second section will explore domestic, transnational and regional events that have had a consequential impact on sectarian relations within both countries and the broader MENA region. This became a recurring theme particularly in observations from Kuwaiti participants and how events external to the country play out within Kuwaiti politics and at the grassroots level, which concerns informal spaces. Finally, the last section shall be dedicated to another key instrument at the state's disposal, which is of course media outlets; how they are dictating the narrative and to what extent they are, if anything, undermining informal civil society's potential utility to foster inter-communal harmony, and how the proliferation of social media in recent years has made polarised opinions more salient and radical sentiment more accessible to a wider audience.

Based on several observations, it may be suggested that as in the preceding chapter, the various traditional and emerging spaces possess the capacity to play what can be normatively regarded as a "positive" role (e.g. foster greater social cohesion, tolerance and understanding, forming cross-communal civic coalitions and effective modes of social and political mobilisation) or a typically "detrimental" role (e.g. facilitating divisive or polarising rhetoric, playing into regime narratives making securitisation/marginalisation an accepted reality and more alarmingly incubating radicalised/extremist sentiment towards the other) – what determines the role an informal space has, is in large part a testament and due to the fluid, fluctuating nature of the informal space itself. The discourse varies from one place to another, and this consequently has an impact on the community-building capacity the space in question may possess.

In the Bahraini context, the empirics have offered a mixed picture, where successful inter-communal discourse is largely dependent on the individuals who frequent the space and the views those individuals harbour. What becomes evident from the empirical data, is that the self-identification or type of majlis can be considered a variable in quantifying its potential influence. This becomes telling as some majalis (albeit they are still few and far between which can be considered as another limitation) are more willing to engage and less apprehensive to discuss sensitive political matters,

such as sectarianism, and this again is primarily dependent on the types of discourse the majalis caters for and who attends that space.

Although few in number, given the traditional perception of the majlis as a pro-government/loyalist outpost (as evidenced in one observation), those majalis actively seeking inter-communal rapprochement are emerging and gaining traction, partially in response to the domestic crises ensuing since the Arab uprisings began in 2011, as they have been instrumental in the past as an effective mode for cross-communal social mobilisation. Although more recent observations may suggest that tangibly speaking, the majalis can only facilitate a conversation as oppose to bringing about anything constructive in the political sense.

In the Kuwaiti context on the other hand, the empirical data suggests a potentially even more divisive trajectory forming vis-à-vis inter-communal relations. Although research respondents highlighted the diwaniyya's features in trying to prove that it does have the capacity to establish more concerted efforts at harmonising communal relations, as was the case during more politically volatile times in Kuwait, namely throughout the 1980s when the Iran-Iraq War took place and likewise in the early 1990s when parliament was being frequently suspended. However, one charge that can be levelled at the diwaniyya is that its loose structural basis (some perceive to be a positive in being able to facilitate any type of discussion) coupled with the proliferation of social media has, at least in recent years, impeded diwaniyyat from taking a more socially constructive role in overcoming/counteracting state-sponsored narratives. In fact, it could even be suggested that the diwaniyyat, reflecting broader social sentiment, is acting as an echo chamber for such divisive narratives, amplifying and affording a platform to sectarian polemics.

### **6.1 Reinforcing or countering the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) – Bahrain**

As evidenced in the theory chapter, the ideological state apparatus promoted by the ruling regime is a key mechanism to its survival, particularly in the Bahraini context. Ideologically charged narratives that effectively demonise the indigenous Shi'i population, implying they are potential fifth columnists and ought to be securitised, is

perpetuated by the Bahraini monarchy.<sup>318</sup> This divisive narrative undoubtedly has an influence on the trajectory of inter-communal relations at the grass-roots level. Through the various mediums at its disposal, (education, media etc.) the rulers can purposely create a climate of social discord, this in turn affords the state a means by which it can justify utilising repressive, or in this context, ostensibly sectarian policies towards specific communities. This is often done via securitising one denomination and portraying itself as somehow safeguarding the other. With that in mind, this section of the chapter will be dedicated to unpacking the role in which informal spaces can serve as a potential platform to countering top-down narratives by presenting an alternative image of the social fabric of their respective countries (be it Kuwait or Bahrain) or whether the discourse prevalent in these networks are by and large a manifestation of what the state sets out to do, which is to amplify sectarian discord and divisive rhetoric.

As alluded to in the introductory section, one can be cautiously optimistic in that informal spaces, namely in the form of emerging cultural workshops or in the cross-communal politicised majalis, could signal a growing demand for greater inter-communal understanding, to counter-act the state narrative that religious communities are unable to politically reconcile with one another based on ideological grounds. Although, this visible demand for rapprochement and reconciliation may occur at a much more gradual pace, given that both these specific types of emerging and traditional spaces are still few and far between. Moreover, if such spaces were to gather considerable momentum over time, the more pressing question for sceptics of informal civil society will be as to how long these spaces can operate outside the state's orbit if they are increasingly influential and become a vehicle to posing a threat to regime survival, and whether they would fall into the same trappings as formal civil society.

With one prominent social majlis in the predominantly Shi'i district of Saar, Bahrain, the respondents saw both itself and other majalis as unable, at least at present, to foster further rapprochement between denominations, with research participants who

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<sup>318</sup> Gengler, Justin J, *Royal Factionalism, the Khawalid, and the Securitization of "the Shi'a Problem" in Bahrain*, *Journal of Arabian Studies*, Vol. 3, 2013, pp.53-79.

frequent the majlis stating that they are designed more for social occasions and the nature of the majlis actively attempts to remove itself from political discourse. The idea being that keeping conversations apolitical are a means to maintaining mutual interests and respect between communities. Even though from time to time you may get a pressing issue that does get discussed which would often otherwise be perceived to be contentious to raise, such as a march that took place or security forces and protestor clashes that resulted in fatalities.<sup>319</sup>

In that respect, for such spaces to remain apolitical would effectively serve to amplify the ISA at the grass-roots level by failing to counter or at least interact with state-sponsored rhetoric and narratives, enabling it to manifest without being challenged. Furthermore, respondents would concur that there was a major reluctance to discuss Sunni-Shia relations (even in a predominantly Shi'i space), as having no value going forward for the country, touting the idea that it was ultimately something out of their control and they had resigned to the notion that "the state will play out or rather set the tone for inter-communal relations depending on its domestic policies."<sup>320</sup>

One respondent went even further to suggest that the comments of some of his Sunni counterparts when visiting predominantly Sunni majalis, can be indirectly rather disparaging or can even pass derogatory remarks, claiming that if they are from a Shia background their opinion would be discarded because they are automatically perceived to have vested interests and agendas that are detrimental to Bahrain (again pandering to the Bahraini government's ISA, something that shall be noted more closely in the section on transnational/regional events).<sup>321</sup> Why this is important is because it indicates for at least some of the more social informal spaces that do not profess to have any political association or motives, that they are still promoting this idea of othering, which again is part and parcel of the social securitisation process and that some people's grievances should be of little or no concern due to their background. This in turn perpetuates the belief that gripes over state policies should go unheard depending on the identity of the person complaining (i.e. they are only

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<sup>319</sup> Bahrain Social Majlis 1, Saar District, Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> May 2014, Respondent 1A.

<sup>320</sup> Ibid.

<sup>321</sup> Ibid.

critical because of identity politics and not because of actual policies), which again, is convenient for the regime as a means of deflecting legitimate criticism.

Research participants who attended this majlis also viewed the politically-orientated spaces as having little effect in dealing with the increasing sectarian divisions that were particularly discernible in light of the 2011 Arab uprisings. One research participant noted that when parliamentary candidates visit various majalis, they will often only talk about the services they can provide and their specific policies for that local area or district. They would not, however, mention anything specifically related to improving the state of inter-communal relations in that area, meaning that the status quo of the majalis would still be playing into the hands of state-sponsored discourse.

However, the same respondent tried to highlight that the majlis as a meeting point and civic space can still be used to facilitate a more positive role at the grassroots, citing the communal-building capacity to serve as a potential platform, however it would require more initiatives and more concerted, individual efforts in order to make the informal space more productive in countering the state's narrative. As an example, one respondent mentioned how they had to persuade their Sunni friend to come to visit a market in Budaiya (a mixed but predominantly Sunni village around Manama) and he had to allay and dispel her fears that there were no stones, violent protests or Molotov cocktails being thrown in the streets so she eventually decided to come.<sup>322</sup> Why this is significant is that such narratives are to an extent a testament to how the ISA via state-controlled media have been able to effectively scaremonger parts of the Sunni population of visiting one particular area in fear of violence or reprisal attacks, again tacitly re-enforcing the notion that some areas are unstable or "no-go zones" and therefore the state ought to be that mediating force that restores social order.

The same research participant, highlighted how majalis have this potential of a communal-building capacity by mentioning that one of his friends, a former municipal council chairman, established a social network of friends and work colleagues and frequently visited various majalis in different parts of Bahrain, using it as a convenient

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<sup>322</sup> Ibid.

social space to foster further Sunni-Shi'i rapprochement which he felt was being eroded or undermined by the state.<sup>323</sup>

Research respondents from a politicised cross-sectarian majlis, hosted by a former MP, meanwhile presented a different account of the role majalis can play vis-à-vis sectarian relations, where the issue of sectarianism often dominates the discussions that take place.<sup>324</sup> This social space comprised attendees belonging to various political societies and persuasions in Bahrain and even included one participant who headed an organisation that was dedicated to enhancing religious and inter-faith tolerance called "*Ta'ayush*" (Co-existence).<sup>325</sup> In that respect, it is already notable just from some of the backgrounds of participants that they have sought to overcome the state's ISA by creating an environment to have frank and candid discussions as well as setting up initiatives that look to tackle existing barriers between faith communities.

Some of the research participants agreed that majalis acquire the means to play a constructive role in facilitating social cohesion, however, adding the disclaimer that it is dependent upon certain criteria. These pre-requisites will determine whether the space will operate successfully in bringing communities closer or serve to further polarise people as a result of the sentiment and discourse echoed within that space.

One respondent elaborated on the criteria in such criteria by arguing that rather than the majlis itself, it is the individual who frequents that space who is ultimately going to determine whether that space can play a positive or detrimental role. The participants mentioned that if the individual for example is more inclined towards harbouring sectarian views, then it is far more likely they will solely attend sect-based majalis. This was the example they cited of how majalis in some cases undermine initiatives toward social cohesion as the majalis then acts as a platform to bringing like-minded views together, by which they are amplifying divisive or sectarian sentiment that is then being reverberated in wider society. Again, it could be suggested how in such a scenario, how these spaces would inevitably pander to the state narrative, that is attempting to

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<sup>323</sup> Ibid.

<sup>324</sup> Bahrain Former MP (Wa'ad) Majlis 2, Muharraq region, Friday 30<sup>th</sup> May, All Respondents.

<sup>325</sup> Ibid, Respondent A2.

confine opposition groups/societies to sect, as opposed to being a national or cross-sect movement.<sup>326</sup>

Respondents at this majlis highlighted their diversity in the various political positions they upheld but shared some common ground in that they were all seeking to emphasise national unity. When probed further as to what shared interests exactly entailed, one respondent mentioned;

“Yes, we share interests with how to move the country forward, how to try combat sectarianism, how to bring people together, how to work through differences, these are some of the aims here at this majlis.”<sup>327</sup>

Furthermore, there was a clear distinction with regards to the point around contentious topics (pertaining to sectarianism) being too sensitive to discuss, which was the claim made by the previous majlis in Saar. Indeed, the host of this Majlis, stressed that “no issue is too sensitive to discuss here, there is no ceiling for any discussion, it is open for any subject.”<sup>328</sup>

One research participant also cited another politicised majlis where such discussions take place, showcasing that there are spaces (including their own) that are being used as a direct front to the ISA in Bahrain, however they did acknowledge that such open discussions would not be able to take place in many majalis, as traditionally speaking and this is still applicable to majalis on the whole (likewise with diwaniyyat in Kuwait) that they primarily serve as a space for social functions and networking, not political discussions per se, and those that do discuss politics are typically found to be sect-based. So, they recognised they could be by and large an exception to the rule in that regard, as alluded to by one participant.

“The majalis that are principally against sectarianism are rare and hard to come by, mostly the groups sit together, Shias sit together, Sunni sit together, and they talk against the other, for the most part.”<sup>329</sup>

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<sup>326</sup> Ibid, Respondent A1, A5.

<sup>327</sup> Ibid, Respondent A3.

<sup>328</sup> Ibid.

<sup>329</sup> Ibid, Respondent A1.

The host and former MP, however, slightly disagreed with this assertion by one of his guests, arguing that sectarianism was all politically instrumentalised to garner support during election time as opposed to there being an actual issue on a communal level in daily life.

“Just to be clear with you, there is no sectarianism between ordinary people. Shia can visit Sunni areas and vice-versa. There is no such conflict between people, politically motivated however there is sectarianism with those elites looking to dominate the political arena. They use sectarian rhetoric (i.e. rhetoric, sentiment) for political votes in elections.”<sup>330</sup>

After being questioned as to whether the 2011 uprisings exacerbated sectarianism in the political sense, the host admitted however that some reactions to the protest movements were testament to the efficacy of the regime’s ISA which proved successful in scaremongering segments of Bahrain’s Sunni population.

“What happened in Lu’lu (Pearl Roundabout) where protestors were raising the slogans of toppling the government and establishing republicanism, those slogans made some Sunnis wary that if the current government is abolished, the Shias will receive power, then they will be marginalised.”<sup>331</sup>

This had its impact even on the informal civic space, as the host mentioned how such trumped up fears exacerbated not banal but instrumentalised sectarianism where you once had progressive, mixed-sect majalis, but in light of the 2011 uprisings, some prominent political figures were now confining to their own groups, possibly signalling a growing trust deficit between communities, purposely orchestrated by the state. This was the case with one space called majlis al-Mash’aal which was once renowned for lively inter-communal political discourse and being open to all denominations but following events in 2011 it effectively became sect-based. This point will be expanded on further when observing regional/transnational events, and how the regime has played on paranoia over supposed threats of “Iranian expansionism” in the region and then conflated that with opposition groups. This was a convenient strategy by the Bahraini regime to deflect criticism from the state’s own sectarian policies that resulted

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<sup>330</sup> Ibid, Respondent A3.

<sup>331</sup> Ibid.

in an increasing economic disparity and the denial of basic civil rights, which, amongst other factors, instigated those protests in the first place.

Another interesting observation that directly relates to the issue of whether informal spaces are actively countering or playing into the state's hand is the issue of "*Wasta*" (internal favours, incentives). One participant noted that due to the current political climate, most of the majalis are in fact inclined to be pro-government, with some receiving financial benefits and opportunities because of their pro-government lobbying. This could potentially be regarded as a broader government strategy to try to permeate and influence those informal spaces where pro-government figures are in attendance, which in turn could again be influencing the discourse within such spaces and tailoring it to a pro-regime narrative. For certain respondents, this realisation highlights the need for more independent majalis to come to the fore, otherwise the informal arena will share a similar fate to the formal civil society sector which is to be dominated, co-opted and effectively made redundant by state interference.<sup>332</sup>

On a more optimistic note, respondents agreed that the majlis was still very much influential politically speaking particularly in its unique feature of being a key starting point for social mobilisation.

"All political activism started in majalis, before parties or political societies, it was the majlis that established the political environment in Bahrain, as majalis are important in that they reflect and can gauge what people's opinions are and the effects in society. Even protest movements from the 50s, 60s and 70s begun in majalis before TV etc."<sup>333</sup> The host corroborated that statement by offering a more contemporary example. "The 1990s Intifada started in majalis, the political movements against naturalisation policies started in majalis...all these important issues are discussed and raised here, and they are still significant today and they will be in the future."<sup>334</sup>

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<sup>332</sup> Ibid, Respondent A2.

<sup>333</sup> Ibid, Respondent A4.

<sup>334</sup> Ibid, Respondent A3.

Suffice to say, the majlis holds an important position both in the past and until the present day, and despite current issues that serve to undermine its social utility, the respondents were confident that should more independent majalis come to the fore this would be able to address some of Bahrain's longstanding issues, including the state mechanisms that are seeking to undermine inter-communal relations for its own gain.

“Access to free opinions, assessing the political situation in the country, what can be done going forward, if there is an election, who will look to participate or boycott and on what grounds, all these things and more are discussed here to prepare for the future.”<sup>335</sup> For the attendees of such majalis, this is what the traditional space outside the state's remit can still provide.

This sentiment was also reflected in another political majlis, where the host is a prominent religious scholar whose father had first established the space and, his brother (also an attendee at the majlis) is the chief editor of an important semi-independent Bahraini daily newspaper. He mentioned how particularly during the 1990s when the Intifada took place, “This majlis was a venue for many important gatherings and meetings at the time, it still is...”<sup>336</sup>

This, and previous comments showcase the majlis's illustrious history and tradition of being an important centre point for social mobilisation to take place. The majlis, in this regard, can therefore confront the state by orchestrating and co-ordinating protests and demonstrations, but to what extent that would necessarily translate into fostering inter-communal rapprochement in opposing the state narrative is again dependent on the space itself and the people in attendance. If it is a cross-sectarian independent majlis then it has this capacity, but the predominant sect-based only spaces in Bahrain may not have this ability and subsequent actions levelled at the state will only be reflective of the people it can attract.

One politicised majlis that was willing to partake in interviews was particularly interesting in that it predominantly comprised of Shi'i attendees, however the host

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<sup>335</sup> Ibid.

<sup>336</sup> Bahrain Former MP (Al-Wefaq) Majlis 4, Isa Town, Monday 9<sup>th</sup> June 2014, Respondent 1A.

made a point of emphasising how it was open to anyone and the majlis receives guests from various backgrounds every Monday, particularly during Ramadhan when newspapers would publish that majlis (and others) every day for people to attend.<sup>337</sup> This point is significant because, unlike the formal CSO sector, the majlis is a cherished traditional space in its own right which even state supporters as aforementioned, utilise to their advantage. It is known that irrespective of the political affiliations of the space, the majlis can receive open support in the form of advertising across Bahrain. With regards to the overriding question of ways to circumvent the ISA and promote an alternative image, this helps because it offers independent majalis a voice in that they can potentially attract attendees who perhaps would not normally attend or be aware of this particularly majlis. With that in mind, more accessibility to various majalis can only be a plus when it comes to fostering rapprochement and hearing an alternative message to state-sponsored narratives.

Another point with regards to attracting a broader range of potential attendees is that the majlis, because of its makeshift nature can operate on a more formal and informal level depending on the event (something that shall be covered more extensively in chapter seven) which can be one effective mode to bringing together both younger and older generations, as well as people from various backgrounds. As research respondent X stated;

“If we announce to have a speaker, then usually we attract a very good audience and the youth can even dominate the space at these times...when we have a guest speaker, we invite him to speak and announce him to the public, it will be a more formal setting, as in there will be someone to chair the meeting, perhaps an introduction to the speaker, he will deliver his speech, then we will allow people to comment or put forward their questions.”<sup>338</sup>

Another important point to consider is that even though some former MP's are hosting majalis, that is not to say that the venue itself cannot operate as a non-affiliated space, as it does not have any intrinsic ties to political societies which many formal civil society groups do have. This lack of membership or affiliation if you like, to any political

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<sup>337</sup> Ibid.

<sup>338</sup> Ibid.

society, is important in undermining the state by attracting people from various backgrounds to come and attend and in turn it enables the majlis itself to then operate as a platform for public debate and scrutiny from all sides.

“There is no such thing as an affiliation here, however you could say most attendees here belong to opposition of some sorts, they are supporters of opposition...but it is important to stress that we as a majlis do not have any explicit links to al-Wefaq or any other political society for example, in fact some of our guests have some negative views of my party, al-Wefaq, and in discussions they are welcome to express their views and do so.”<sup>339</sup>

Arguably, one of the most significant features of the politically-orientated majlis in bringing a diverse spectrum of people together resides in the fact that they can have an open discussion on various social and political issues that are of concern to the people attending. The majlis fosters inter-communal understanding and tolerance by stressing or highlighting common concerns that people across the political spectrum and across denominations are faced with. This is important because not only do they attract large numbers as evidenced when participating in focus groups within several majalis, but they are collectively undermining the state by highlighting government policies that are largely viewed as negative across the board.

“People prefer the majlis where current affairs and social events are part of the discussion, and people want to talk about their common concern, and having said that if we talk about subjects like housing, the general welfare of the people this is also a very important subject and it is shared by so many people, and they like it, therefore they attend and discuss.”<sup>340</sup>

Talking about topics that resonate with people across the board, this is one of the key mechanisms of the majlis that can foster unity and undermine the state by directly scrutinising policies that have impacted all. Pertinent examples would be as mentioned by the host of the majlis in Isa Town, the current housing crisis in Bahrain and the impact of naturalising migrant workers at the expense of the indigenous population that struggle to get on the employment and housing ladder; a direct result of instituting

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<sup>339</sup> Ibid.

<sup>340</sup> Ibid.

sectarian policies. “If we talk about unemployment and such matters, people find this very popular and they want to attend.”<sup>341</sup>

So, in that respect the politically-orientated majlis can act as a lobbying space, to air grievances and share common concerns and it can also gain media traction.

“We can gather support for certain issues, this is especially the case when we have a speaker and if we invite people to come for a speech from somebody then we usually have coverage from the press, usually it is from Al-Wasat newspaper...even before in 2001, during the referendum, that’s the time we voted for the National Charter, even Bahrain TV (state controlled media) used to interview the common people and they would even come to this majlis and others...at that time we had some sort of access to put our views forward to the government...but after voting for the National Charter then we became a Kingdom and things started to go on the decline, more draconian measures, more authoritarian tendencies.”<sup>342</sup>

When the host was asked about whether the majlis can serve as a platform to strengthen relations between communities, he was particularly adamant that they could perform this role, even when relations came to a head following the 2011 uprisings.

“If I talk about al-Wefaq, we have a program of visiting different majalis of different groups, those who are backing government, and those who are from different areas, and we are all well received there and in exchange they also visit us here and we receive them...after the events in 2011, this almost disappeared but recently it is re-emerging, we kick-started this initiative to visit those people and they were happy and some people from other majalis they called up and said they would also like to welcome us...so if we go back, in Bahrain there is a tradition of people actually being open with one another, the problems of what we saw in 2011, actually it was the press that played a major part in making people confront each other, they tried to attribute everything to

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<sup>341</sup> Ibid.

<sup>342</sup> Ibid.

being a sectarian issue, but if we go back to the pre-2011 setting, it was not like that between people.”<sup>343</sup>

The impact the media overall has had in undermining sectarian relations will be discussed in greater length, however what this goes to show is that even when tensions became visible and inter-communal relations were generally seen to be rather dire due to the toxic political climate in and outside the country, and the state utilising the sectarian card as a means for survival. The majlis however can serve as a platform to restore relations by again having the ability to have open and frank discussions, and to be able to generate empathy and understanding by highlighting shared concerns in the country.

“I am talking about most people, they are open and want to receive us, does not mean that this will have a permanent change about their views, but it is a start, we as Bahrainis like to receive one another.”<sup>344</sup>

However despite the social customs and mutual respect afforded within the majlis (as is the case in the diwaniyya) the question could be asked of whether they are bringing in people from more radical religious and political persuasions which is yet to be proven and could be a testament to one of the majalis limitations. In that case, it could be highlighted that promoting common concerns would still be the best approach for such spaces both in terms of fostering mutual understanding and cohesion, particularly of people who would be in most cases indifferent or even apprehensive of turning up to such spaces, and more importantly it deflects from the regime’s narrative which seeks to polarise opinions as a means to deflect criticism of its own policies.

What is furthermore important is that discussions are taking place between communities even despite some disagreements or having different takes on events and issues inside the country. “Even here, we have some Sunnis who come from time to time, they show their respect but sometimes they say a different opinion and we respect them, but others will also tell them how we look at the narrative.”<sup>345</sup> The host had

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<sup>343</sup> Ibid.

<sup>344</sup> Ibid.

<sup>345</sup> Ibid.

resigned to the fact that post-2011 relations did regress and this was telling in decreasing numbers of Sunnis attending his majlis, although he believes it will normalise once again.

“I must say particularly after 2011 until now, very few Sunnis came here and only rarely, but it occurs from time to time that some Sunni guests still attend, they want to share their opinions with us and sometimes they are completely opposite, but it is fine, they are given the opportunity to talk, whether we accept what they say or not.”<sup>346</sup>

It is important to note that opposing arguments are still entertained in the majlis, because as a traditional space, the place demands its own respect, and there is a social etiquette that to follow. Rooted in Islamic customs of hospitality, this entails that the host of the venue tries to accommodate to guests where possible, which includes an opportunity to voice their opinion. The host alluded to the fact that despite evident disagreements the opinion must still be tolerated and stand. In the grand scheme, this can contribute to countering the ISA as it still offers a medium by which participants could potentially find common ground or forge agreements, whereas when sensitive issues are not discussed it only makes way for the state to dominate the narrative as to how communities ought to be portrayed.

Based on the observations, it could be suggested therefore that several challenges lay ahead for informal Bahraini spaces to try circumventing the state’s narrative. Indeed, cross-communal politicised majalis are making headway in various parts of the country and are growing in popularity. However, it must also be stated that this has come at the expense of some majalis that once entertained inter-communal dialogue and are now feeling more apprehensive to partake in such discussions due to the political climate that ensued following the 2011 uprisings. Further cause for optimism, meanwhile, could be the development of sect-based spaces opening their doors to the participation of new visitors to denominational-only majalis from various communities. Acknowledging that wide-spread support to countering state propaganda requires an agenda that promotes common issues on a national scale as opposed to socio-political

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<sup>346</sup> Ibid.

issues being expressed via a sectarian discourse or rationale, which may explain where informal spaces in the past could potentially be lacking cross-communal appeal.

## **6.2 Local, Transnational and Regional Events – Kuwait**

In the Kuwaiti case, there are some notable similarities and differences with the Bahraini Majlis, with regards to whether the diwaniyya serves to mitigate or perpetuate the state narrative and moreover whether it helps or hinders inter-communal relations. It is important to note firstly, that the Kuwaiti ISA is somewhat different to the Bahraini context, where in Bahrain the sectarian card is explicitly used to actively try polarise communities by the state as a survival mechanism<sup>347</sup>, the Kuwaiti state on the other hand, portrays its communities somewhat differently in that it tries to play the role of a necessary mediator between different political and religious factions in society, so on the outset at least the state appears to accommodate more to its various communities where the monarchy is relatively speaking much more stable than in Bahrain.<sup>348</sup>

However, as key outside observers note, implicitly the Kuwaiti government has enabled radical, Salafist factions who often espouse sectarian viewpoints in order that the monarchy can maintain its authoritarian character and portray itself as a necessary force to safeguard society from extremism even though it simultaneously empowers it, again another survival mechanism which enables the state to cement its rule. With this in mind, it can thus be observed whether informal spaces in the Kuwaiti case are exacerbating sectarianism or whether it is rather other factors that are at play in determining the trajectory of inter-communal relations.

Based on observations from key diwaniyyat and informed outside observers<sup>349</sup> it could be suggested that the diwaniyya (like the Bahraini majlis) has the requisites, as a space for free and open discussion, to become an ideal platform for facilitating cross-communal dialogue on a host of political issues that impact both Sunni and Shia communities. However, the diwaniyya as an unregulated space does have its

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<sup>347</sup> Dajani, Omar M, *The Middle East's majority problems: minoritarian regimes and the threat of democracy*, Ethnic and Racial Studies, Vol 38, No 14, 2015, pp. 2516-2533.

<sup>348</sup> Cafiero, Giorgio & Bianco, Cinzio, *Regional Turmoil Threatens Kuwait's Calm*, Middle East Institute, published March 17, 2016, (accessed: Jan 20, 2017).

<sup>349</sup> Those observations are later evidenced in the chapter when dissecting the responses of research participants.

drawbacks which are compounded by the perception and reaction to regional events and the proliferation of traditional and social media outlets. These factors collectively have enabled some of these spaces to only impede if not exacerbate tensions by acting as an echo chamber for increasingly polarised opinions, particularly in terms of sectarian discourse as shall be evidenced below.

Expanding on this observation, one of the research participants from the diwaniyya of a prominent Kuwaiti journalist, offered a breakdown of some of the discussions that often take place within that setting. “Normally we talk about regional politics, local Kuwaiti politics, sometimes social events, in all diwaniyyat in Kuwait, this is the typical discussions.”<sup>350</sup> Like the majlis, the Kuwaiti diwaniyya plays an important role particularly during election time, but just like the majlis in order to measure its influence and in this regard its political clout, as one respondent mentions, “one is influential, the other may not necessarily be, it largely depends on who is the host of the diwaniyya.”<sup>351</sup>

When it came to discussing whether diwaniyyat can serve to facilitate social cohesion between communities, the responses from the participants all differed from one another, citing that they could because many diwaniyyat are mixed-sect, however as one respondent noted, “that politics in general can be talked about, but we do not talk about what Sunnis or Shias are thinking, they are trying to avoid such discussions.”<sup>352</sup> This was corroborated by another family member that they are “trying to avoid such discussions even in the cross-sectarian diwaniyyat just to maintain respect for one another...yes they do activities and sit down together, but the two communities by and large have huge differences moreover about the politics of the region, especially with what has happened in Syria now. You find many Sunnis in the region support rebels, the clear majority of Shia are supporting the government and another point of contention is over Bahrain.”<sup>353</sup>

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<sup>350</sup> Kuwait Family/Social Diwaniyya 1, Sulaibikhat, Friday 16<sup>th</sup> May 2014, Respondent B1.

<sup>351</sup> Ibid, Respondent B2.

<sup>352</sup> Ibid, Respondent B1.

<sup>353</sup> Ibid, Respondent B2.

Sensitivity surrounding sectarian discourse are important to note in this context, not only because in some cases, it illustrates the diwaniyyat' current incapability to hold such discussions. It could also be suggested that the tensions at the political and communal level in other parts of the region are spilling over and are overall having a detrimental impact on sectarian relations in Kuwait, and in this context, informal spaces such as the diwaniyya are enabling such divisive rhetoric to go unchallenged, as opposed to in the Bahraini context at least, where there are concerted efforts to try challenge some of the prevailing misconceptions regarding opposition movements and to create an conducive environment for open discussion. Furthermore, this also manifests at the government level particularly in the Kuwaiti parliament in recent years where public disputes namely between Shia and Ikhwani/Salafist political blocs have boiled over namely on the issue of the Syrian civil war.

However, it should be mentioned that like the cross-communal politically active majalis in Bahrain which are growing in popularity yet still relatively scarce, the observation regarding the impact of the diwaniyya would likewise still require further substantiating. Depending on how domestic and regional political affairs play out, if the political situation in Kuwait and moreover in the region appears to become increasingly bleak, then it would become even more difficult for the diwaniyyat to play an important role in fostering inter-sect solidarity and countering the regime narrative that the state is required as an integral mediator almost between religious factions, when it is only using such rhetoric to buttress its own rule. Respondents at this particular diwaniyya were also quick to point out that regional or transnational events cannot be disregarded when observing the trajectory of inter-communal relations inside Kuwait itself. "So many jihadists killed in Syria came from Kuwait, so it is evident they sympathise with the rebels, especially the Salafi radicals."<sup>354</sup>

Coming back to the diwaniyya itself, respondents did note, however, that the potential is there for the Kuwaiti diwaniyya to play a more socially constructive role in that there is a heightened degree of freedom of speech and unlike in other gulf states, the diwaniyya - as mentioned in the background chapter - is legally enshrined and safeguarded in the Kuwaiti Constitution itself.

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<sup>354</sup> Ibid, Respondent B3.

“With regards to discussions it is in fact, more open, especially after the Arab Spring, nowadays in Kuwait you can criticise whoever you want except the Emir, from the Crown Prince right through to the PM and other ministers, yes you can criticise them. I, myself am an economist, and many articles I have written have criticised political figures, even those direct to the royal family...I sometimes even refer to the Crown Prince but implicitly not direct.”<sup>355</sup>

Although this does offer some positives in terms of being able to critique government policies and showcases the performative functions the diwaniyya offers as a platform to air concerns or grievances over a host of political issues, it does not necessarily indicate that the space is being utilised to address issues pertaining to sectarian identity and national unity.

Although the diwaniyya has this capacity should individuals be more willing to open debates inside cross-sectarian settings to help bridge against the current propensity toward social division, however as mentioned once before the trajectory of sectarian relations in Kuwait are much more determined by external events, as oppose to in Bahrain where it is local, domestic politics that is having a direct impact.

“It really deteriorated around a year ago (approximately 2013) when the Syrian civil war reached its climax, at that time it deteriorated the most, Syria had a massive impact...the tensions became apparent, clashes in parliament, through twitter (social media exacerbating tensions), through newspaper articles, even the Minister of Justice was one of the key supporters and had publicly financed Syrian rebels, and he only resigned just last week...there were several MP’s from Kuwait, both Sunni and Shia that went to Syria personally to offer their support on either side.”<sup>356</sup> For these participants, the diwaniyya was therefore a reactive as oppose to a pro-active space in trying to mitigate sectarian tensions, “The diwaniyya is merely the response or a reflection of the media discourse as oppose to anything participants actually discuss.”<sup>357</sup>

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<sup>355</sup> Ibid, Respondent B2.

<sup>356</sup> Ibid.

<sup>357</sup> Ibid.

In this regard, there is a discernible distinction therefore between the traditional informal spaces in Kuwait and Bahrain, whereas in Bahrain you do at least have some concerted efforts to try counter the ISA, the Kuwaiti state trying to portray itself as neutral has in turn made the diwaniyya largely ineffective when it comes to addressing the issue of sectarian relations, as in the cases known, it appears to have become a sort of echo chamber for what has been mentioned before across transnational media outlets that have their own vested interests, which shall be discussed at further length in the following section.

Respondents had also noted that despite over last few decades that sectarian relations have been by and large cordial since Shias showcased their loyalty to the Kuwaiti state in fighting for the resistance against former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussain, it is evident that with ongoing regional events and influences it is regressing once more. “Anytime there is something Sunni-Shia related anywhere, even in Pakistan, it has an effect here. It was so influential following the invasion of Iraq from 2003 onwards.”<sup>358</sup> Alluding to when sectarian relations were arguably at their worst in Iraq from 2006-07 with the proliferation of suicide bombings and reprisal attacks that were taking place.

As a result, journalists such as Lindsay Stephenson have observed an ahistorical sectarianism becoming increasingly prominent within Kuwait itself, with media outlets in part acting as a catalyst for provoking sectarian sentiment, and the social implications coming to fruition, sowing inter-communal discord and creating a sense of mistrust between communities.

“The open Kuwaiti media has proven itself to be an incessant instigator of sectarianism and a forum for outlandish comments that were previously only said in private and often written off as nonsense...Kuwaiti Sunnis and Shia alike have commented that once the TV is on, there is no escaping sectarian discussions...the state of Kuwaiti newspapers is similar.... There are two issues for which talking heads have raised unfounded questions; namely Shia origins

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<sup>358</sup> Ibid.

and loyalty. Polemical comments about "weird things Shia do" have played into deliberate othering tactics in efforts to drive a wedge between Sunni and Shiite communities and have unfortunately been picked up by the masses. Setting aside the historical fact that many Kuwaitis of Arab origin are Shia and Kuwaitis of Persian origin are Sunnis, many programs are propagating an idea that Shia have Iranian origins and are thus an alien presence. This has seeped into common rhetoric and fostered suspicion amongst some Sunnis that they don't really know who their neighbours are anymore."<sup>359</sup>

Furthermore, one outside observer, a columnist for several Kuwaiti dailies, mentioned how failed previous initiatives towards rapprochement were indicative of the relationship between the communities worsening in the country, and the diwaniyya was ineffective in this regard at harmonising relations.

"Some of the ideas or initiatives would often come from relatively liberal voices, but whenever they started a project, it would soon come to fail in practice. We had set up a journalist diwaniyya dedicated to addressing sectarian relations and after a few meetings it had broken down, what was ironic is that many of those journalists who participated in that diwaniyya were in fact the most sectarian voices in the media. The meetings were aimed at discussing how we can overcome the sectarian problem, and some ideas would go around, but those who used to discuss it, when it came to practice, they would be the ones who would enflame it. They would say nice, accommodating words in public to us during face to face discussions in the diwaniyya, but the initiative ultimately broke down because they were (referring to some of the other journalists who attended) still passing derogatory or sectarian remarks in their publications to cater to their own readership, so others, including myself, naturally started to realise that their supposed efforts to try reconcile were by and large disingenuous."<sup>360</sup>

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<sup>359</sup> Stephenson, Lindsay, Ahistorical Kuwaiti sectarianism, Foreign Policy, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/04/29/ahistorical-kuwaiti-sectarianism/>. (accessed: May 17, 2016)

<sup>360</sup> Kuwait Outside Observer 2, Political Columnist for Al-Talee'ah, Al-Qabis, and Al-Rai Newspapers and Assistant Professor in Management Information Systems at The Public Authority for Applied Education and Training, Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> May 2014.

The diwaniyya, therefore, acting as a platform for the initiative, would therefore only be pandering to the state narrative of aiding token efforts at national unity, as the government still wanted to exploit the existing sectarian cleavages to safeguard its own survival but would need such initiatives in order to counter-balance sectarianism potentially spiralling out of control to the point of violence particularly with events in Iraq just on the border. Even though this initiative was held within a private capacity between colleagues from the same profession and was in no way a state-sponsored scheme, despite this, the diwaniyya was inadvertently doing the work of the government at the grassroots level.

As this one journalist had noted that “even for the individuals (in this case journalists) predisposed or inclined towards sectarianism in Kuwait, it is still not in their interests for sectarianism to actualise into active modes of violence, and for it to regress into a national security issue like it has done in Iraq, rather they would entertain such initiatives just for PR more than anything else, the rationale being that they still want the social and economic advantages of sectarianism, however they do not want to see the community have to pay a price for it in the form of violence.”<sup>361</sup>

Expanding on the Kuwaiti ISA, distinct from Bahrain’s assertive or ostensibly sectarian approach, the observer noted how the political system although on face value can condemn sectarianism, it is de facto enabling it and one way is through legislation, or the lack thereof.

“There are no laws which aim to circumvent sectarianism, except one that came out lately on curbing extremist financing but even that is not all encompassing and is not even enforced...also, if the government started to have a genuine initiative toward re-educating people about sectarianism, if they start to have a real agenda in the schools, get rid of the prevailing misconceptions about Shia and address the real issue effecting the country, this would be go a long way in harmonising relations, until now, this has not happened.”<sup>362</sup>

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<sup>361</sup> Ibid.

<sup>362</sup> Ibid.

The observer highlighted how the state has implicitly aided and abetted sectarian sentiment over years by enabling Salafist factions to dominate key government ministries, particularly the Ministries of Education and Religious Affairs.

“See, in public schools, until today they teach that Shias are apostates for example...because the education ministry from the 60s and 70s was given to Wahhabis, who were the ones who put out the schoolbooks, they could monopolise religious education in schools, and the government was fully aware and to this day has not done anything about it for a long time.”<sup>363</sup>

The state enabling Salafist factions to hold key ministries has undoubtedly had its adverse impact on sectarian relations and brings into question the sincerity with which the Kuwaiti state wants to effectively counter sectarian sentiment and in turn counter extremism. However, this observer was somewhat reluctant that any significant changes would occur unless there was significant pressure levelled from Western powers.

“I do not think it will change unless the official message or rather the official agenda actually changes, and I do not think the official state agenda will change unless there were significant pressure from outside forces (i.e. from Western powers).”<sup>364</sup>

Again, this reemphasises the idea that traditional informal spaces (in this context the diwaniyya) are unable at least at present to counteract the disingenuous state narrative that openly acts as a mediator between denominations and political factions but on the ground, it serves to exacerbate sectarian division to maintain its rule by eliminating the prospects of a cross-sect national opposition coming to fruition. Part of the failures surrounding the Arab Spring uprisings that took place in Kuwait was in large part down to its inability to attract a broad coalition of supporters given that it was dominated by the Sunni Islamist blocs, despite the movement itself calling out the popular slogans of wanting an end to the pervasive corruption and government incompetence at the heart of Kuwaiti politics.

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<sup>363</sup> Ibid.

<sup>364</sup> Ibid.

Although a similar observation can be made in the Bahraini context at least in terms of reasons for mobilising and orchestrating protests, there are some key discrepancies when observing state-opposition discourse, as the ISA to sow social discord is more palpable in Bahrain, and in some cases therefore the informal space can respond accordingly, hosting inter-faith dialogues, creating initiatives toward social mobilisation that are directly challenging the state narrative.

### **6.3 Local and Transnational Media in Kuwait and Bahrain**

As alluded to in previous sections of this chapter and as demonstrated when focusing on how the ISA principally manifests in both countries, it is crucial to observe the prominent role that media outlets across the board have played in perpetuating sectarian rhetoric on a communal level. Moreover, it is important to recognise that as an instrument of the ISA, the role of media is the focal point of the theoretical framework when it comes to understanding the positioning and role informal spaces possess when it comes to ongoing sectarian debates, and where the two (both informal spaces and media platforms) intersect at the discursive level, serving as platforms for political discussions.

One theme that would re-emerge time and time again from the interviews and has already been noted as a key instrument of the state's ideological state apparatus is of course the media at its disposal, and this is applicable in both the Kuwaiti and Bahraini contexts. What was remarkable is that it was almost unanimous across the board, that media (in its various forms) was by and large having a significantly detrimental impact on the trajectory of inter-communal relations, furthermore, they are even seen to be one of the key obstacles to informal spaces in being able to challenge the dominant narratives that circulate various media outlets.

This also extends to alternative media that operates outside the state's remit. One Kuwaiti journalist had noted, that online media, and in this regard social media (Twitter, Facebook etc.) has exacerbated tensions. Not only was disinformation being propagated with relative ease and then being widely disseminated, but in addition, because of the degree of anonymity that social media affords, sectarian abuse and slanderous remarks have become increasingly discernible where they were not

previously a common phenomenon, either in daily interactions between communities or even by the traditional wing of state media outlets. The participant also shared his fears of how impressionable youth were particularly prone to online radicalisation material that they may not usually be exposed to.

“Of course, it is easy to access them, without this media, their parents may not allow for them to go see such people, it would be much harder to meet for example, but now it is easier to gain access to them.”<sup>365</sup>

Another external observer (a political science professor at Kuwait University who ran as an independent candidate in previous parliamentary elections) had also resigned to the idea that external and regional events, compounded by the emergence of state-controlled and new medias has put an increasing strain on inter-communal relations more recently, citing that relations were much more harmonious in earlier generations, despite the rapid growth of diwaniyyat including youth diwaniyyat, which could be testament to their ineffectiveness in this regard. There is however, no substantial evidence to suggest that the recent emergence of youth diwaniyyat will come to fill the void where their older counterparts failed in dealing with the increasingly pressing issue of sectarianism and the salience of sectarian identities that can be witnessed today; if anything, they could be worse.

“I have to admit that socially speaking, if you are to talk about tolerance, if you are to talk about cohesion, then no doubt the older generations were far better than today.”<sup>366</sup>

He also goes on to mention how traditional and moreover new media platforms have gone through a process of sectarianisation themselves, and this feeds into the sentiment/attitudes that people carry into the informal space when having discussions.

“Everybody watches his own so to speak, whatever he is closer to culturally, ideologically, religiously, this is still going on, it may be true that people are not too interested or not as engaged with watching TV channels, the effect is now

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<sup>365</sup> Ibid.

<sup>366</sup> Kuwait Outside Observer 4, Former Independent MP and Professor of Political Sciences at Kuwait University, Monday 26<sup>th</sup> May 2014.

via instant media like WhatsApp, articles being sent to one another...and yes the information is still also by and large based on whether I am Shi'i so I circulate my links to fellow Shias and vice-versa, and that is now becoming true with segments of the youth who are the most frequent users of new I.C.T's."<sup>367</sup> Combining the elements of external/regional events and highly polarising use of traditional and new media, this has consequently had its impact on the diwaniyya. As observers cited how four Salafi candidates in 2011 were elected into parliament as they used the diwaniyyat and media together (i.e. uploading videos from diwaniyyat) as a rallying point to get them elected. "You may only see fifty people inside but outside in the online sphere there maybe 50,000 audience who listen to the lecture and hear them expressing their religious and political beliefs."<sup>368</sup>

You also find the similar issues were raised in the Bahraini context as to how media was serving the ISA and attempting to undermine the initiatives and efforts of informal civil society.

"If you go back in Bahrain's history you find people are open with each other, but what we saw in 2011 was actually the press playing a major part in making people confront one another and they tried to attribute everything in the country and outside to being a sectarian issue."<sup>369</sup>

The former MP also noted how at the height of the protests in 2011, the Bahraini government were effective in its implantation of the ISA by effectively scaremongering the indigenous Sunni population with the sectarian card and again utilising external or regional events to its advantage by claiming that Iran was an existential threat to Bahrain, and in turn many offered their loyalties, despite them having shared concerns with their fellow Shi'i countryman, particularly with regards to housing and employment. "Many believed the press, they read the propaganda that those people are backed by Iran and have some foreign agenda."<sup>370</sup>

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<sup>367</sup> Ibid.

<sup>368</sup> Ibid.

<sup>369</sup> Bahrain Former MP (Al-Wefaq) Majlis 4, Isa Town, Monday 9<sup>th</sup> June 2014, Respondent 1A.

<sup>370</sup> Ibid.

Again, utilising regional events to its advantage, the Bahraini state went a step further by trying to highlight how Bahrain would become another post-2003 Iraq were the protestors to be successful.

“They bought into the government’s notion that there is some sort of influence and often they try to relate events here in Bahrain with what happened in Iraq, they try to depict a picture of regime change that will entail Sunnis losing everything and so the government is only trying to protect you by reminding them that they will find themselves out of government offices and jobs.”<sup>371</sup>

This was a pertinent example of how the state utilised both regional events (i.e. post-intervention Iraq and Iran as a convenient scapegoat), its own media wing and the media outlets of its GCC allies at its disposal (Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabiya, Al-Hadath, Sky News Arabia etc.) in order to retain control of the country, alongside the CSA or coercive state apparatus of inviting GCC allies Saudi Arabia and the UAE to directly intervene by sending troops into the gulf kingdom to suppress protest movements. However as mentioned previously, the informal spaces of majalis, albeit few but increasing, have been able to gradually improve inter-communal relations and is still widely regarded as a convenient platform for cross-sectarian dialogue and social mobilisation. Whereas the Kuwait diwaniyya may be particularly influential during election time, however when it comes specifically to the state of sectarian relations, the use of media and regional events have trumped the informal space making it by and large redundant or if worse, contributing to polarise communities further. As the example of the journalist diwaniyya or radical Islamist factions using the space as a lobbying post to gain more political influence would signal.

## **6.4 Conclusion**

To conclude, there are several claims that can be posited considering the following observations. In the Bahraini context, the majalis can play both a positive or detrimental role dependant on several variables, one being the individual that frequents the space, what views do they harbour and what can they bring to table with regards to discussions. Then, it is also important to note that the type of majlis is also a key determinant, as the non-politicised social majalis have proven to be apprehensive

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<sup>371</sup> Ibid.

when it comes to discussing sectarianism however the politicised cross-sectarian and some sect-based majalis place emphasis on such discussions and see it as imperative to establishing national unity. One objection to the Bahraini majlis is that it can be part of the problem in that many majalis traditionally gravitated towards the government, benefiting from financial incentives the government may afford to them for voicing their loyalty in their respective spaces. With that in mind, it is only the few but emerging independent political majalis that can make a breakthrough in directly confronting the state narrative. Furthermore, those independent majalis have historically been instrumental as a starting point for effective cross-communal social mobilisation. This majalis does not subscribe to any political affiliation and may also be advertised which can attract attendees from various backgrounds.

Bringing the RBA and multi-dimensional framework into account, it would appear the majalis rank high in terms of impact, at least from the perspective of empowering citizens, but as alluded to, it is primarily dependent on the type of majlis as to whether it would serve a beneficial or detrimental means. Furthermore, due to its loose structure, like the dewanniya, there are no guarantees or safeguards that these spaces shall foster better interrelations. However, as noted in the observations, they have proven to be effective in that regard historically. All in all, the jury is still out there as to their future role in Bahraini social and political formations.

Again, the Kuwaiti diwaniyya has also proven to display mixed results, on the one hand it has been by and large ineffective with regards to creating a platform for cross-communal dialogue and in some cases, has in fact preserved or has been used to facilitate state-sponsored rhetoric or policies. However, it must also be stated that the diwaniyya with its long tradition of being a house for free speech, its makeshift nature and legal protection from the state (a feature which the Bahraini majlis does not have), does allow for individuals in the future to create more concerted efforts in bringing the country closer together, and still offers the potential capacity to forge a broad network of opposition movements by having discussions on how to take the country forward and bring communities closer together, something that the Bahraini majlis has done once before and is continuing to preserve as a viable tradition and an effective mode of civic, grassroots activism.

## **7. Formal vs. Informal Civil Society and the Sectarian Narrative**

Having discussed the positioning and activities of the informal space as well their influence on state-societal and consequently inter-communal relations, this chapter seeks to explore traditional and emerging informal spaces under the broader rubric of civil society within Kuwait and Bahrain and where informal spaces can be positioned within this broader framework. In addition, this chapter will set out to examine at what juncture informal spaces could be influencing sectarian discourse, and what active steps are being taken at the grassroots more broadly in addressing the increasingly pertinent issue of sectarianism in both countries.

Based on the observations, the chapter will also seek to highlight the transient and fluid nature of the informal space and where its lack of institutionalisation has served it well and at times been a disservice when it comes to addressing the broader picture of sectarian relations. As alluded in previously, this chapter will also observe where traditional informal spaces have sought to reinvent themselves with a more formal outlook, yet still providing the case for why they are more conducive for inter-communal discourse in comparison to the registered/formal CSO.

The chapter will then finally proceed with a comparison of both formal and informal civil society, highlighting their potential strengths and limitations and will come to advocate for a case by case analysis of each individual informal space as oppose to making generic claims about any one particular group, the informal space's scope for success vis-à-vis sectarian relations is contingent upon several variables which is discussed in the following sections. As demonstrated in the previous data chapters, success or a positive role can be quantified by the way in which that space facilitates social cohesion, forms cross-communal coalition initiatives emphasising citizenship-building, and looking to defy or challenge state-sponsored narratives in a bid to reform some of the countries prolonged socio-economic and political issues that have long been impeded by a discernible lack of or ineffective co-operation across populations and to challenge the sectarian polarisation that has manifest in the formation of political groupings.

## 7.1 Informal Civil Society in Context

In order to put informal civil society into perspective within the broader remit of civil society in both case studies, it is important to acknowledge, as alluded to in the background chapter, what the specific hallmarks of informal spaces are in relation to formal NGOs, where they differ from one another in terms of functions and how this subsequently has an impact on inter-communal relations and sectarian discourse.

One common theme that did arise from the data when partaking in discussions with participants from informal youth groups is their ability to forge networks, ties, contacts and liaise with similar groups. Particularly in the case of the cultural workshops, so one respondent noted how;

“we often work together when it comes to the projects that we run, myself as chair of Tasa’oul, as well as the members of Mawana and the Bahrain Debate for example, all co-operate and co-ordinate on programs and offer our skills and assistance wherever possible, again I feel this is more accessible because it has such a strong youth component, in that it is easier to communicate with one another, and because of our shared interests, it is already cross-communal because of the members shared interests, whereas with the older generation getting a cross-communal coalition of civil society networks maybe more difficult.”<sup>372</sup>

A distinctive marker for some of the emerging informal spaces, is therefore this ability to forge these networks and co-operate with other like-minded groups, which could be telling of a positive sign that these groups do have a capacity where registered or more formally organised groups (as popular as they may be) struggle to attract a broader, more diverse grouping of people to attend their activities, and if they do, people are still aware of their predisposed biases, be it that they are evidently a government loyalist group or siding with opposition circles.

Another key distinction from formal societies for the non-registered youth societies in the human rights sector, was their emphasis on working independently (as oppose to in a coalition of networks as is the case with the pop-up workshops) and more

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<sup>372</sup> Outside Observer 2, Chairman of Tasa’ol, Independent Bahraini initiative that aims to raise questions on conflict and identity, 7<sup>th</sup> March 2017, Skype Discussion.

importantly in the sense that they were not acting as a subsidiary for a political organisation or doing the states' bidding. As one such research respondent noted "We do not have any relations with political societies/parties".<sup>373</sup> There are several potential benefits of this independence from formal civil society for informal groups. Firstly, the group or space is able to retain its independence in terms of strategies it employs to carry out its work effectively, by this what is meant is that the group is not beholden to any other organisation's demands or objectives or by the state itself, nor is it doing the bidding of any other group under the auspices or guise that it is just another CSO. Were it to be co-opted by the state or a formal CSO, it would only ultimately serve to perpetuate state-sponsored rhetoric by repeating a similar mantra and to be monitored closely, inhibiting the work and activities it needs to carry out as an effective human rights organisation, in this particular regard. Moreover, as demonstrated in the previous chapter on regime-societal relations, in the Bahraini context, it has been a pivotal catalyst for social mobilisation against the state as highlighted by one Bahraini research respondent:

"Our idea is to mobilise and to give young people motivation rather than just using them, I see political parties use the youth, they exploit them and do not give them real representation...and this is the one thing in our society, we do not have a real hierarchy, we do not have an office, as you can see we're sitting in this coffee shop, we're discussing how we can do x or y, and anyone who is new we try to get them involved, we do not just designate roles to people."<sup>374</sup>

What is suggested here is that there appears to be a tangible benefit to informal groups' lack of any form of institutionalisation. Indeed, the non-associational feature affords the group a fluctuation by which they can both forge relations with groups/networks of their choosing and dissociate themselves from any political parties/societies (in this case state-sponsored) that would in typical circumstances be looking to co-opt such groups. In this regard, their ability to operate clandestinely with no formal record (i.e. membership to a state ministry) acts as a useful deterrent from

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<sup>373</sup> Bahrain: Youth Society 1, Bahrain Youth Society for Human Rights (BYSHR), Former President (A1) and Vice-President (A2), Tuesday 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2014.

<sup>374</sup> Ibid, A1.

state interference and in turn enables the groups' activism to produce an alternative narrative to the regime, which actively seeks to exacerbate inter-communal divisions.

With that in mind, having no formalised affiliations to state-sponsored groups or societies offers informal groups an outlet to criticise the authorities or any other group, either via publications or through various forms of civic activism, in turn reinforcing their own narrative and influencing sectarian discourse on a communal level which does not have a predisposed bias to the state or opposition forces but can be influenced either way. Again, as one respondent asserted

“First of all we have no office, so the government cannot close us down, we are not in the Ministry of Social Development, we do not have funding from any governments or organisations, we are not subservient to anyone, so basically our hands are not tied, we can criticise any government, any organisations, anyone because they are not involved in our work, we are totally independent and we are not funded.”<sup>375</sup>

This observation links onto another important common trademark that can be evidenced across both traditional and emerging informal spaces in Bahrain and Kuwait, which is funding. State funding of these organisations would entail some sort of service in return by offering material and logistical support, and so for independent groups who do not want to be doing any state bidding, so they often search for volunteers who they themselves target as viable or ideal contributors to the group. As one respondent from Bahrain notes:

“We'd rather we didn't receive funding, we are participants with people on the ground, helping on the ground, having speeches on the ground, that's an activist. We work with everyday people, most of the international human rights organisations (reference to formal CSOs) are office-based, whereas we are on the front lines... They have their phones and their e-mails calling people just to make a statement, we are not sitting in an office telling people to come to us, we go to the people, ask them, what they want, what

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<sup>375</sup> Ibid, A1.

they need how we can help them, we tried to provide lawyers, we started a project to train and teach people about human rights and using non-violent techniques.”<sup>376</sup>

Expanding on this, a key trait of the informal youth groups in Bahrain, concerns their selectivity when it comes to potential contributors/activists. According to one of the ‘Bahraini activists, for instance;

“we know many of the youth in the villages so if we want some members we just talk to specific people, we do not publish a vacancy or something of the sort...because we do not want our society to be infiltrated, nor do we want any members using the society for their own gains, some of the youth may do it to raise their own status or publicity or use our society to get money or donations out of it, we are strict on this. (...) We do not want to give anyone a chance so I use my twitter account every time I announce that anyone coming to try collect money on our behalf is not our member.”<sup>377</sup>

Once again, all these mechanisms, including when it comes to recruitment of potential members, does not go through a bureaucratic process as it would in normative circumstances were it a registered CSO, again diluting or minimalizing the potential for institutionalisation of the group. What you find instead are rather carefully selected handpicked personnel. This helps in mitigating the potential trust deficit, in that existing members are choosing from people they know within a personal capacity, as oppose to a random person that could later turn out to be working for the government and using their position as an opportunity to subvert or to gather intelligence on the group. It also helps in not being compelled to be transparent in its dealings, thus being susceptible to government monitoring, were it a formal group, it would have to disclose its activities to the relevant state ministry that it is registered or assigned to.

Another interesting case example was an upcoming Bahraini youth group that sought to directly address sectarianism whilst retaining its independence as a non-registered group and its diverse political and denominational make-up of active members.

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<sup>376</sup> Ibid, A1.

<sup>377</sup> Ibid, A1.

“We are humanitarian in principle, we are not thinking about religion, but we still want to highlight and bring to attention the issue of sectarianism...we have connections to other human rights organisations but no links to any political societies...we are mixed and consider ourselves as neutral intermediaries between all political positions, we are operating independently to look at addressing the sectarian issue. We are not following the agenda of either the government or formal opposition movements, we have no external influence on us.”<sup>378</sup>

Moreover, what was particularly striking is how they would look to use traditional platforms such as majalis as a means to obtaining information as a form of grassroots activism when it came around to publishing their reports. “We go to visit some majalis, anywhere we can find people who want to be heard, any resource we shall use to shed light to try solve the issue.”<sup>379</sup> This could be a potential avenue that could be explored further whereby emerging and traditional informal platforms are directly co-operating in one form or another at the expense of formal societies, especially when it comes to addressing the issue of sectarianism which this research participant felt requires much more clarity for the general public. Explaining the in-part failings of formal political societies, the participant claimed that;

“political societies can only express opinions, we need to have exact numbers and statistics that is much more effective for people to hear and also for other organisations who can use our statistics as a point of reference. Political societies do not also express a clear picture, they can demonstrate the sheer scale of the problem in Bahrain, what we can do is specialise and pinpoint where.”<sup>380</sup>

Even in this regard, the president of the group felt that in terms of future scope, more grassroots activism needs to be invested in addressing the ramifications of sectarian policies within various sectors.

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<sup>378</sup> Bahrain: Youth Society 2, President of Insaaf, Budaiya Highway, Tuesday 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2014.

<sup>379</sup> Ibid.

<sup>380</sup> Ibid.

“If there is an issue over unemployment, or with parliament, or cases of dissidents being tortured, it would be more productive if we had an organisation specialising in each sector. In each of these cases for example you will see an underlying issue of sectarianism, so we want to act as an organisation that collates vital information from other activists and human rights groups.”<sup>381</sup>

Not only does this highlight the pressing demand by emerging groups to take an extensive look at alleviating some of the core issues driving sectarianism by the regime, but once again, illustrates the scope for further collaboration or co-operation between informal groupings and spaces that again, operating outside the state’s remit, could be more effective in collating information that could provide a more coherent case. Unlike formal societies which at best, have proven to express concerns in the rhetorical sense, without substantiating on claims and how sectarian policymaking has impacted Bahrain in several sectors.

Expanding on this pressing desire to address sectarianism in a more tangible sense, was another informal youth group comprising of unemployed university graduates. They came together online in 2010 trying to highlight the problem but it soon became evident to one another that unemployment needed to be addressed under the broader rubric of sectarianism.

“This committee was formed to solely address unemployment, and remains open to anyone struggling to find work, we did not form this group looking to address how disparity in job prospects is dependent on sect, but it turned out the vast majority of members and people who show interest in our group come from a Shia background, naturally it ends up looking like we comprise of one background despite our motives being otherwise. It is telling however that even in the very formation of this group, only Sunnis in most cases can get graduate occupations.”<sup>382</sup>

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<sup>381</sup> Ibid.

<sup>382</sup> Bahrain: Youth Society 6, Members of Committee of Unemployed Graduates, Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> June 2014. Respondent A1.

It is interesting to note the obstacles still facing emerging youth groups that are seeking to specialise in addressing specific issues are often being influenced by sectarianism at the top. Again, this could be potentially impeding cross-communal efforts to disclose the issue given that active members/participants almost inevitable come from one denominational background. Furthermore, what was interesting from observations was how government officials acknowledged the unemployment issue (as alluded to in the next quote) being directly attributed to sectarianism but were somewhat indifferent in their response. What also becomes evident is how such informal groups were the cornerstone of political mobilisation long prior to the 2011 uprisings even gaining traction.

“Well we used to protest and before that we also used to send letters to ministries, ministry of labour for example, for a whole year in 2010, and we ultimately started protesting because the written pleas were falling on deaf ears. We met with Sunni MP’s, and some in a private capacity accepted our assessment but they still did nothing...We have no links to political societies but during February 14<sup>th</sup> Marches they arrested three of our members. We started protesting in the road, asking for jobs, we conducted a silent protest simply holding slogans saying we are unemployed, but the police came and arrested us, this actually took place on the 13<sup>th</sup> February 2011, a day before it all commenced.”<sup>383</sup>

They also went on to address how the impact of naturalisation is having an adverse effect in terms of prospects for employment in several sectors including within education, once again playing out in sectarian terms.

“Even in the education sector, you find that the government recently hired 800 teachers from Egypt yet there are 6,000 Bahraini graduates in educational studies who cannot find work.”<sup>384</sup>

What also became apparent from the observations is the discrepancy in the scale of autonomy between Bahraini youth groups. One Bahraini youth group affiliated to the

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<sup>383</sup> Ibid.

<sup>384</sup> Ibid.

political society Al-Wefaq acknowledged that although they themselves are not registered, they still considered those emerging spaces that are completely independent to be more effective in some regards.

“Yes I would consider those independent to be effective as we cannot go everywhere in Bahrain, if I want to do a big event, I need to obtain permission from Al-Wefaq, and sometimes Al-Wefaq want us to do an event and the government oppose, so the government then try to put limitations, the government did not grant us permission to be registered despite being affiliated to al-Wefaq, even Wa’ad who used to regularly hold events are finding it increasingly more difficult for them given their own position.”<sup>385</sup>

With this in mind, it is therefore imperative to view informality on a scale as oppose to a binary of having either formal or informal groups – such observations have proven to show that these groups are much more fluid in the ways they operate which in turn has an impact on their effectiveness at facilitating cross-sectarian coalitions and rapprochement. Groups that are beholden to broader political societies may see themselves being by and large futile in this regard, being made to replicate the broader agenda of the political society.

One research respondent who is a co-chair of the Bahrain Debate also echoed similar comments as to the utility of operating in an informal manner, at least in comparison to the formal CSOs. However, the respondent does acknowledge that there may be limits for any group irrespective of how formal or informal it is if the state perceives it to be receiving too much attention or influence, however the state will often turn a blind eye if it does not feel the group in question is a perceived threat, which if anything could potentially be indicative of informal civil society’s weakness, that in some respects, the state does not recognise it to be a tangible threat.

“I think just being informal gives you more space to do activities without having to check with government every now and then because that is how NGOs function, you have to report back to the Ministry every now and then and tell them we did x, y and z. So, in that sense, it does give you more of an opportunity

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<sup>385</sup> Bahrain: Youth Society 5, President of Bahrain Youth Centre (Al-Wefaq Affiliate), Saturday 7<sup>th</sup> June, 2014.

to think and have your own discourse that is removed from state-approved narratives, but even working both within or outside the state structures, I do believe the state by and large turns a blind eye to what we do, and if at some point we made too much trouble, even informal groups like ourselves or other more radical groups let us say, the state will eventually be on their case.”<sup>386</sup>

In the Kuwaiti context, it is also important to recognise the distinction in terms of the scope of institutionalisation between formal CSOs and the traditional informal space of the diwaniyya, in order to point out where a lack of organisational structure can simultaneously acquire a detrimental impact on inter-communal relations. Whereas in the Bahraini case, emerging and traditional spaces such as some majalis have sought to dispel or at least challenge the top-down narrative of sectarian relations; it appears the freedoms, loose structure, and lack of self or imposed regulation (given its ability to have an open public discussion, invite any speaker as it is at the host’s discretion and is safeguarded and legally enshrined by the Kuwaiti constitution) attributed to the diwaniyya can in some cases have a detrimental effect on communal building initiatives which in turn undermines sectarian relations. As the current regional climate and the salience of increasingly polarising viewpoints via social and traditional mass media has only enabled the diwaniyya to be used precisely as a platform for such sentiment as opposed to actively campaigning against it, as evidenced in the previous chapter with the election of Salafi MP’s via diwaniyyat and the failures of reconciliation via a journalists’ diwaniyya.

One key trait within many diwaniyyat is that they operate in a public domain. “Friends, colleagues, political officials, you can call it any of these names and these people all participate...everyone is welcome”<sup>387</sup>. In this regard, like informal civil society in Bahrain they do not possess any form of membership. However, another charge that has been levelled at the diwaniyya, is that much as it has its benefits particularly in the past as a substitute for parliament, but it could also be operating as an echo chamber, not only in reproducing sectarian rhetoric/prejudices that is already pervasive in wider

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<sup>386</sup> Civil Society 1, Co-Founder of The Bahrain Debate Initiative, 20<sup>th</sup> June 2015, Skype Interview Discussion.

<sup>387</sup> Kuwait: MP Diwaniyya 5, Mixed-Sect, Tuesday 27<sup>th</sup> May 2014.

society but reproducing the same results as the institutions is had meant to replace when parliament was suspended.

“Diwaniyyat unfortunately have become a tool for corruption, because how this works you come here, you know this person, you go to the government tomorrow and he sorts me out this job, it has become a place for collections or *Wasta*’ – which can be loosely translated as favours.”<sup>388</sup>

Pressing issues such as corruption and political incompetence can be indirectly impeding more cordial sectarian relations as the Orange Movement of 2013 showcased the failure to bring about a comprehensive cross-sectarian coalition that could mount a significant challenge to the government and the way it handles its checks and balances. One outside observer went as far as saying that the Orange movement or Dignity March although was not addressing any explicitly sectarian issues per se, the movements reception with different segments of Kuwaiti society was a testament to how pervasive sectarian sentiment had become.

“There was almost a perceived sectarian element to the demonstrations, that is why Shias became cautious of this movement, paranoid about what type of Sunni was involved, as a large contingent of the protestors were supports of a parliamentary bloc that consisted of 35 MPs, 16 of whom were Ikhwani or Salafist...so Shias having assessed the situation, felt it was best to just get closer to the government, for the Shias it was not the protests they had issue with but rather who was protesting?”<sup>389</sup>

Relating the issue of corruption and political ineptitude back to informal civil society, it could be suggested that the diwaniyya could inadvertently be serving to exacerbate such problems as the non-institutional, unregulated mode of networking enables political cronyism to manifest. The detrimental impact corruption is having and its intrinsic link to the diwaniyya was also noted in observations from research participants where certain MP’s may be refused an invitation.

“Sometimes in exceptional circumstances when there is an election and they do not like the candidate they may request he does not come to a specific

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<sup>388</sup> Ibid, A1.

<sup>389</sup> Kuwait: Outside Observer 1, Former Political Columnist for Al-Watan Newspaper, Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> May 2014.

diwaniyya, it happened one time before when they accused some MPs of bribery...in the 2009 elections for example.”<sup>390</sup>

However, what is particularly discernible with the politicised diwaniyya in Kuwait is that there is a degree of formality concerning the rules of engagement. The host of the diwaniyya can often play a key role in the discourse that plays out, he can control the topics that are being discussed and often acts as a mediator between guests. In some cases, even having the authority to call out people if they voice opinions that he regards as particularly sensitive or controversial and can even request they do not contribute to further discussions.<sup>391</sup> This unspoken rule that is customary at many diwaniyyat, is important when observing informal spaces more broadly as it demonstrates how the host can in part control or influence the discussions taking place. This directly harps back to whether diwaniyyat are inhibiting or promoting sectarianism as it demonstrates how the host has the means to determine the conversation and depending on his attendees or the type of diwaniyya (political, non-political, social, religious-orientated), that could all have a definitive influence on the ways in which sectarianism is being discussed. I.e. is the language antagonistic and hostile or more accommodating or appeasing of the other etc.

Furthermore, what is particularly intriguing with regards to such spaces being unchecked or unregulated was that the proliferation of Kuwaiti diwaniyyat in recent years has brought about potential problems vis-à-vis sectarian relations on a communal level. Like the role played by social media, it has offered a platform to once marginalised, and potentially radical, voices that could seek to antagonise and play on communal divisions. As one Kuwaiti respondent asserted;

“The majority of diwaniyyat do bring people together...but some diwaniyyat and increasingly it is known they are causing problems, causing sectarianism and tribalism, because the expansion of the diwaniyyat is out of control...it has become a space to spread disinformation and rumours.”<sup>392</sup>

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<sup>390</sup> Kuwait: MP Diwaniyya 5, Mixed-Sect, Tuesday 27<sup>th</sup> May 2014, A2.

<sup>391</sup> Ibid.

<sup>392</sup> Ibid.

Furthermore the fact that the diwaniyya is safeguarded by Kuwaiti law and insulated from state interference, unlike social media platforms which are closely monitored, could only offer further incentive for more radical and/or divisive voices to use such venues to propagate their views and this has already been evidenced with ultra-conservative MPs using the diwaniyya as a lobbying post to get ahead during election campaigning. A prime example of how the diwaniyya has served to further sectarian goals, was with the activities of the four Salafi MPs who were elected to the Kuwaiti parliament in 2011.

“Diwaniyyat played a big part in their success, they had so many gatherings in their diwaniyyat for Al-Falluja, for Ramadi and they were collecting money for jihadists in Syria, and they would appear on channels to ask for donations to give to the rebels in Syria...that is why when it comes to the sectarian issue, the diwaniyya has more cons than pros.”<sup>393</sup>

However, this was not the depiction of diwaniyyat in its entirety, as for one mixed-sect diwaniyya in a relatively new district of Kuwait, the observations from some of the participants offered a slightly alternative perspective with respect to the diwaniyya essentially being a social gathering. Most diwaniyyat operating informally as a meeting place would demonstrate that in most cases at least on the surface the diwaniyya does serve to bring communities together, even for people within politics. “Last Sunday, we had many Sunni visitors and neighbours, there was a gathering for a municipality member and it was mixed between Sunni and Shia.”<sup>394</sup> Although interestingly when the issue of Sunni-Shia relations was raised the responses amongst participants somewhat varied. Some guests attributed sectarian tensions in Kuwait to the 1970s and 1980s when many Saudi residents were being granted citizenship which dramatically altered Kuwait’s sectarian demographics, an observation that has similarly been made once before by an outside observer.<sup>395</sup> Whereas another guest conceded that there was still “an implicit tension between communities.”<sup>396</sup>

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<sup>393</sup> Kuwait: Outside Observer 1, Former Political Columnist for Al-Watan Newspaper, Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> May 2014.

<sup>394</sup> Diwaniyya 3, Jabal Ahmad (Mixed-Sect Area), Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> May 2014, A2.

<sup>395</sup> Ibid, A1 and A2.

<sup>396</sup> Ibid, A3.

So on the contrary to previous observations of the diwaniyya potentially operating as an open platform for those looking to disseminate their own views which could in turn be perceived as counter-intuitive in terms of sectarian relations, it could be suggested from this perspective that in most cases, the diwaniyya acting as a social gathering place could if anything be seen to be restraining or at least preventing tensions coming to the fore.

Whether this is considered to be a positive or negative development regarding inter-communal relations remains to be seen, but what is apparent is that many participants appear to be apprehensive to have quite frank, candid conversations about sectarian politics within a mixed-sect environment in order to not potentially cause offence, which may offer credence to the latter suggestion that there are some implicit tensions that go undiscussed. Again, this could raise questions as to whether the diwaniyya has any utility in deconstructing sectarian discourse and whether sectarianism as an impediment to more conducive governance and an ISA tool can be overcome when it comes to the broader picture for Kuwait's domestic and foreign policies.<sup>397</sup>

When probed as to whether the participants thought sectarian sentiment and attitudes between communities had increased/sharpened/risen, the research respondents seem to agree that it is apparent on the institutional level, but it is restrained within an informal remit such as the diwaniyya.

“It is especially in the public eye in the parliament and during election time you see such tensions.”<sup>398</sup> “They (prospective MP's) use sectarian language, to get more votes and popularity...because he is touching on a sensitive subject and again because of the implicit tensions and the reality that regional events have a major impact on Kuwaiti society.”<sup>399</sup>

This, alluding to the idea that the transnational impact of sectarianism is becoming increasingly pervasive across denominational communities. This observation could, if anything, be demonstrating how the informal space of the diwaniyya is becoming

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<sup>397</sup> Ibid, A4.

<sup>398</sup> Ibid, A2.

<sup>399</sup> Ibid, A1.

increasingly redundant as a grassroots mechanism to countering such narratives at least on a communal level. The participants also noted how prospective politicians (across religious denominations) therefore utilise regional events and the sect-based only diwaniyyat as a platform to propel their own political careers by playing on sectarian rhetoric in the process. Just as Salafi MP's used the case of the Syrian civil war to whip up votes, one participant cited Shia politicians such as Abdul Hamid Dashti, who is no stranger to courting controversy not least for the Kuwaiti authorities who have found his comments on the Saudi and Bahraini governments to raise alarm. One participant had mentioned for example, "I think he got his seat by evoking the Bahraini revolution".<sup>400</sup>

This of course would knowingly resonate with potential Shia constituents he was looking to garner votes from and is further testament to how regional politics and the utilisation of sectarian sensitivities has enabled candidates to enter the political frame, which just goes to show how sectarianism is being instrumentalised to further certain political goals.

To further substantiate such claims, one diwaniyya host demonstrated how sectarian sentiment has permeated even within Bidoon communities and demonstrates the futility of diwaniyyat in that are not being used productively to try mitigate this increasingly pressing problem, which again is seen to be a by-product of broader regional conflicts and events that are making their way in Kuwaiti public discourse and serving to polarise communities; again facilitated by open media platforms (e.g. proliferation of religious satellite channels and social media) that have made traditionally fringe opinions more pronounced and accessible than in previous generations. "The hate is palpable...in their eyes, even if people do not mention, there is tension in the atmosphere, the books that were once printed in Saudi and other countries, now anybody, even the religious illiterate or uneducated can hear such rhetoric on their tv or phone, it does not require a cleric to say anything, people will believe anyone with a platform...with my neighbour for example who is from Saudi

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<sup>400</sup> Ibid, A1.

Arabia, he has been my neighbour for 30 years, I do not recall a single time he attended my public diwaniyya.”<sup>401</sup>

To summarise, in the Bahraini context, it is evident there are several reasons behind the perceived disparity between formal and informal CSO's and it is telling in their hallmarks. A key point of departure for the emerging informal space from the registered CSO is in the way it can retain its autonomy, possess the ability to forge networks and coalitions with like-minded groups with no leverage and their considered selection when it comes to recruiting members. For the more traditional group of the majlis, as mentioned in the previous chapter, it possesses a flexibility in that it can occupy a dual role of both hosting informal discussions as well as taking on a more formal role by hosting lectures, Q&A sessions that do not require official permission. It must be stated however that though these groups possess a potential to harmonising inter-communal relations they are still relatively few and it only becomes harder given the existing geo-political climate.

Taking the individuals and their responses into context, what becomes evident however, is that although there appears on face value to be marked differences in the organisational features of formal and informal civil society, the very make-up of such spaces is in large part credit to the recognised associations as many participants who host or frequent such spaces belong to existing CSOs and specifically political societies themselves. The participants and their capacity for cross-communal mobilisation therefore, is in large part not down to solely formal or informal civic spaces, but rather the mutual dependency and cross-fertilisation between platforms and its members to network, discuss and organise.

It appears in the Kuwaiti context the diwaniyya possesses several traits almost akin to the majlis, however the proliferation of social media coupled with the sectarianisation of localised politics has only served to exacerbate tensions and the diwaniyya had become one outlet, just like media, to channel such sentiment, particularly during election time.

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<sup>401</sup> Kuwait: Outside Observer 3, Bedoon Diwaniyya Host, Sulaibiya, Sulaibikhat, Thursday 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2014.

## **7.2 The Limitations of Informal Civil Society: How is it influencing the Sectarian Narrative?**

As the thesis is primarily concerned with informal civil society, it is important to highlight the potential limitations of such spaces and how those deficiencies may be having an influence on sectarian discourse. This is particularly significant as it enables us to pinpoint the gaps that informal spaces could be filling in terms of determining inter-communal relations and bringing contentious issues to the forefront of political debate, be it with the aim of political rapprochement or to foment further divisions.

It should be noted that the more formal, institutionalised modes of activism, including recognised political blocs and CSOs, have only served to exacerbate tensions in the way they operate and how they in turn could be inadvertently reinforcing the perception of the state as being a mediator between communities, as oppose to an implicit instigator. Again, this was none more evident than in the way the dignity marches of 2013 played out as mentioned before, and in the fact that registered civil society groups are often dominated, co-opted, monitored and interfered by the state, as has been noted in existing literature on the civil society in the Middle East and in the background chapter where a historical commentary on civil society in Kuwait and Bahrain is documented.

Likewise, in the Bahraini context, which has one of the longest standing relationships with civil society actors, it becomes evident that the co-opting of registered civil society organisations by the regime has ultimately played out in sectarian terms, none more so than in the form of transnational events and placing emphasis on charitable causes. As one Bahraini respondent asserted:

“They [CSOs] tend to attract support from public officials, people from municipal councils, people from parliament, because many of them in particular people belonging to Sunni Islamist groups tend to organise events that are centred around humanitarian relief towards Syria or Palestine...in this respect, they have adopted a transnational Sunni identity, because they feel a sense of connection to what they always call their brethren in Syria, Palestine...there is one person, Ahmad Al-Ansari,

who is a municipal representative from Bahair, which is in Riffa' district, and he does a lot of work with the registered youth groups, particularly youth from Al-Assala or from Al-Minbar Al-Islami and their respective youth groups."<sup>402</sup>

This could potentially suggest that recognised groups and their respective youth wings are only reinforcing the sectarian narrative perpetuated by the state, and where lack of resources may be indispensable to many informal societies who look to retain their independence, you find on the other hand and in this case it is pivotal for formal CSOs to attract funding from state donors to sponsor their activities which of course does not come without its conditions and underlying political motives.

In terms of structure, one outside observer noted how informal spaces are better catered to more interactive, open and conducive dialogue on a host of issues including sectarian politics and how the state has sought to polarise communities, as opposed to the formal organisations where there is a set routine in terms of activities and speeches one may encounter.

“So with majalis you could say there is a greater potential or scope for social cohesion there because people directly speak to one another, they get to know the person, their name, their face, where they live etc...whereas with registered groups for example they may bring in a speaker and people will sit there and listen, they might talk briefly with a few other members and so they are not necessarily interactive, however the majlis and some of these emerging informal groups, you find they are more tailored for discussion, for debate and for people to get to know one another.”<sup>403</sup>

This is a testament to the fact that the emergence of informal youth groups/workshops/exhibitions and the reinventing of the traditional spaces can be partly attributed to an existing gap that registered and formal CSOs have previously failed to offer as an outlet, a place to openly discuss that does not result in pandering

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<sup>402</sup> Outside Observer 2, Chairman of Tasa'ol, Independent Bahraini initiative that aims to raise questions on conflict and identity, 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2015, Skype Discussion.

<sup>403</sup> Ibid.

to or regurgitate the state's polarising narratives on denomination. When asked as to whether the majlis has been used as an outlet to bring political discourse into life and with it the existing discourse on sectarianism, the outside observer noted that;

“along with that movement of primarily youth-led groups feeling like there is something missing in Bahrain, a lot of people feel like there is a lack of appropriate spaces or venues to discuss and debate so many of these people who most likely have been running their majalis for a long time, but more recently have decided to reinvent their majlis, for example, advertising their majlis with a custom-designed poster, inform people of which guests are coming and what topics will be discussed/on the agenda.”<sup>404</sup>

That was the initial cause of optimism, and granted the informal space still has this potential to facilitate greater cross-communal dialogue and mobilisation, however to locate that potential it must be identified what its limitations are. With that in mind, there is a growing fear that the majlis could fall into the same trappings as formal civil society, in that it is gradually incorporating more of a formal, institutional role in the way it has sought to reinvent itself as an effective lobbying and networking space.

“More and more recently, particularly after 2002, they have become more of an institutionalised aspect or feature of election campaigning, many candidates use majalis and now they are organising majalis in a non-traditional set up, putting out chairs they often use at party conferences/meetings, bringing microphones, having guest speakers with presentations...”<sup>405</sup>

However, the outside observer contends that despite the remake they will still be effective, and it is largely due to public perception of the space and what it represents.

“Being a majlis, people think of the space differently, and the way people think or perceive something is important, so although one particular majlis invites an opposition speaker or someone from parliament or a former minister, people still think of it is a majlis, meaning that they do not think of it as a political

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<sup>404</sup> Ibid.

<sup>405</sup> Ibid.

meeting, in some respects, the fact that people organise events at a majlis has actually assisted in people from across the political divide to come and discuss, because in everyone's view it is not seen as x or y groups space. It is a majlis."<sup>406</sup>

The point of emphasising the strength of the informal space being first and foremost a communal space for anyone who frequents it, as oppose to a CSO conference meeting which is confined to those who subscribe to the organisation itself, which would be an indication of the formal CSO having popular but not necessarily the same cross-communal appeal when it comes to discussions on Bahraini politics and the wider region. It could therefore be tentatively assumed, that one of the potential flaws in formal CSOs is not acquiring greater cross-communal accessibility and how it is easier and presumably more effective for people across the political divide to just attend a majlis as oppose to just listening to a lecture at a society's headquarters.

But the question in more recent times is whether cross-communal mobilisation in of itself is effective when it comes to bringing about real, practical measures on the ground. As the majalis could too be falling into the same trappings as formal CSOs if recent developments are anything to go by.

"The majalis that were once active have not touched on politics lately, however after Al-Wefaq was suspended in June 2016, a few months later there was a lot of activity to try to bring political opinions closer, to shorten the polarisation, so you had proposals where many majalis were inviting people from the other side of the political and religious spectrum to ask what can they do to reverse this decision. There were the likes of Ali Saleh (MP for Wa'ad society) who went around various majalis talking and emphasising national solidarity and national society, but practically speaking nothing manifested from it, and on the contrary, the Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs (who are responsible for all political societies) had moved to dissolve Wa'ad and it is still going though court now."<sup>407</sup>

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<sup>406</sup> Ibid.

<sup>407</sup> Outside Observer 2, Chairman of Tasa'ol, Independent Bahraini initiative that aims to raise questions on conflict and identity, 7<sup>th</sup> March 2017, Skype Discussion.

This is evidence that even the relatively successful informal spaces still have long to go before they can even consider bringing about some practical political changes on the ground and alter communal perceptions on sectarianism. It also throws into question the extent to which the informal space is as immune from state authorities as once perceived and moreover whether it can legitimately respond to state policies or is inter-communal discourse simply the limit for these groups. This remains to be seen.

### **7.3 The Strength/Limitations of Informal Spaces: How is it influencing Sectarian Discourse?**

As aforementioned, it appears that several of the existing flaws within formal civil society do point to a need to explore alternative modes of civic activism – in this case informal spaces. It has also become apparent, meanwhile that, the extent to which they are having a positive impact on inter-communal relations is all dependent on the context of the space itself and what are its performative functions.

Furthermore, as previously evidenced there are the mixed-sect majalis and the workshop in Bahrain which appears to be leading the way both in terms of opening up sectarian discourse and striving to mitigate tensions perpetuated by the state, “we talk about shared interests, how to move the country forward, how to fight against sectarianism, how to bring people together, to put aside their differences, this is one of the aims here.”<sup>408</sup> Albeit growing in number, the multi-sect majlis that focuses on emphasising national interests is still a minority voice, given the ever increasing salience of sectarian identities across the region. The question to what extent are there aims reflective of broader Bahraini opinion remains to be answered, and this could be a potential shortfall if it fails to meet its aims, likewise with more recent developments and how the dissolution of Al-Wefaq played out, the majlis had proven to be ineffective this time out.

However, one potential positive coming out of the commentary on majalis is its new-found ability to attract participants across generations. This could potentially make the way for traditional and emerging informal networks to co-operate together around similar aims and objectives. One majlis highlighted how their typical age range now

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<sup>408</sup> Bahrain Former MP (Wa’ad) Majlis 2, Muharraq region, Friday 30<sup>th</sup> May, A2.

varies, “it is a mix, if we decide to announce that we have a speaker then usually we attract a very good audience and then the youth will be dominant usually.”<sup>409</sup> This is a significant development in the long term as cross-associational co-operation between informal groups and spaces can potentially help forge stronger opposition ties and networks becoming an ever more effective mode in countering top down sectarian narratives. With one outlet serving as the ideal platform to discuss and exchange ideas whilst the youth group looking to retain its independence can showcase this by being able to effectively mobilise and orchestrate demonstrations.

We also come to find the majlis can act as a facilitator, bridging communities together once again in the aftermath of a key turning point;

“We have a program of visiting different majalis of different groups, those who are backing government, those from different areas, and we are all well received there...after 2011, this almost disappeared but recently, it is a re-emerging trend.”<sup>410</sup>

This could also suggest that genuine long-lasting rapprochement between communities is feasible despite ISA tools such as media outlets stipulating otherwise and with it the realisation that top-down regime narratives of sectarianism are unsustainable when people have the means to reach out on a cross communal level, and the majlis in most cases can provide that.

In the Kuwaiti context, a slightly alternative picture emerges based on the observations, you find transnational events moreover are playing a key role if not dictating the dynamic of sectarian relations within the country and this is none more reflective than how the diwaniyya is being utilised by certain individuals to further their own motive, which in many cases seeks to polarise and cause friction between communities. The four Salafi MPs who were voted in 2011 for example. It could be suggested in this case how the diwaniyya serves to have a detrimental impact, an unregulated sphere which in some respects could demonstrate how its lack of any institutional hallmarks is rather problematic when thinking in terms of how the space

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<sup>409</sup> Bahrain Former MP (Al-Wefaq) Majlis 4, Isa Town, Monday 9<sup>th</sup> June 2014, Respondent 1A.

<sup>410</sup> Ibid.

could be utilised, empowering radical fringe circles that seek to undermine any prospect of cordial relations between religious denominations. Which could suggest that at least in some part and as demonstrated above, the diwaniyya is not wholly influential in facilitating social cohesion, but rather acts as an echo chamber and as a broader reflection of Kuwaiti society itself, rather than being more of an active agent for political mobilisation or change like in the Bahraini context with the majlis.

However, it could be noted that one of the evident issues facing informal civil society across the board is that it is reactionary and not pro-active in mobilisation against the state. A more conducive way therefore to analysing the diwaniyya and other informal spaces moreover is to take them on a case by case basis and to look at the variables that influence the discourse. I.e. who frequents the space and their loaded opinions which they may or may not divulge is equally as important as the space's functions in which they can relay their viewpoint. It was assumed that these four MPs would never have had any real chance at entering politics were it not for having political whips and the diwaniyya acting as a lobbying post, coupled with an audience they had access to that did not necessarily have a strong political understanding... "in that respect when it comes to the sectarian issue the diwaniyya has more cons than pros."<sup>411</sup>

#### **7.4 Conclusion**

As mentioned in the previous sections, given no coherent results have emerged from the empirics to analyse informal civil society it would be most conducive to observe on a case by case example of each space and what factors can be of benefit or a disservice when addressing them in relation to the increasingly pressing issue of sectarianism within both countries, albeit to varying degrees in terms of how it manifests on a social and political level.

Based on the analysis, it becomes evident that informal spaces' strengths are contingent upon their versatility, so their ability to network and/or create close ties whilst retaining their own autonomy. Extending on this premise, they therefore have no compelled affiliations and can therefore not be influenced or manipulated by state

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<sup>411</sup> Ibid.

instruments of power, this is specifically pertinent to emerging informal groups such as non-registered cultural societies, youth societies and human rights groups.

Furthermore, the apparent lack of funding or material resources appears to be a strength more than anything in that they are not in some way or form doing the state's bidding, again retaining their autonomy. However, on the other hand, depending on how it is utilised the informal space can reproduce the same results as institutions themselves e.g. how the diwaniyya became a tool for corruption and its subsequent links to communal divisions. Again, an important factor for the traditional spaces is that they are first and foremost social gatherings, in that respect they can bring people together via shared interests but then the question arises as to what extent they are restraining the types of discussions they have i.e. sectarian discourse for guests/participants to save face and to ask whether this is beneficial going forward.

Finally, it becomes evident that throughout the empirical chapters the mixed-sect national majlis seeks an open dialogue on sectarianism and are gradually expanding albeit they are still a few in number and can potentially commit the same blunders as a registered group. All of this, is indicative of the fact that Bahrain and Kuwait still have some significant challenges on a domestic and regional level before they can overcome sectarian politics within both countries, whether the informal space can play a pivotal role in facilitating cross-communal understanding will be largely dependent on external forces and factors outside the remit of the informal space itself.

## **8. Conclusion**

To summarise, there are several core propositions that can be drawn out from the empirical data, which link back to the overriding thesis of a diverging trajectory gaining traction in sectarian relations in both Bahrain and Kuwait. Top-down instrumentalising in the case of Bahrain which in some cases is actively being challenged and scrutinised at the grassroots via informal civil society, whereas a bottom-up pressure that has appropriated an imported sectarian discourse from other regional countries and previous generations in Kuwait has made for an increasingly polarising outlook in the dynamic of inter-communal relations in the country. Informal civic spaces, effective or otherwise futile in their aims and objectives, do however offer an important template

by which to gauge and serve as a broader reflection of public sentiment when it comes to some of the most contentious issues about the nature and role of sectarian politics and how banal sectarianism has come to effect communities in various ways.

Rapprochement, or the apparent lack thereof, can be indicative in these spaces' ability to try attempt to facilitate cross-communal dialogue, form sustainable political coalitions and actively mobilise against state policies and state-sponsored discourse on Sunni and Shia communities respectively. The results, as evidenced throughout this thesis have demonstrably proven that informal spaces can at least initially perceived to be a mixed success and in some cases, can also serve to perpetuate regime narratives, depending on several variables, namely the type of space itself, its scope for autonomy, and in what context is it positioned on i.e. Bahrain or Kuwait. Again, when it comes to thinking about further areas of exploration, these variables are certainly areas that warrant further investigation for future fieldwork into the role of informal civil society in the Gulf states.

Where informal civic spaces have showcased their potential is where their locality is taken into consideration. Emerging youth groups such as the cultural workshops/exhibitions have been influential in bringing communities together with their focus on hosting events in impermanent, transient and moreover sect-neutral locations. However, such potential or optimism must be measured when factoring in the logistical challenges these pop-up initiatives face, which is often a lack of resources to orchestrate such events on a regular basis. Given that they are not like their formal counterparts that receive state sponsorships. On the other hand, more traditional spaces such as the Kuwaiti diwaniyya have demonstrated their susceptibility in repeating a similar mantra to governments response to regional events and conflicts, like some of the formal CSOs, acting as an echo chamber for those respective governments if nothing else. On a more optimistic note, it should be stated that diwaniyyat as proven in earlier periods in Kuwaiti history do however possess the capacity to be utilised for more effective means when approaching the issue of sectarianism at the communal level.

Like the diwaniyya therefore, the majlis in Bahrain can likewise play a positive or detrimental role depending on several variables, namely the individuals who frequent the space and the views they harbour, furthermore the type of majlis is just as paramount in deciphering, whereby politically mobile cross-sectarian and some sect-based majlis are an essential requisite to establishing unity and fostering inter-communal solidarity in the face of government reprisals. E.g. Addressing issues that impact and resonate with both Sunni and Shia communities. However, one potential limitation to acknowledge is that the majlis can fall into the trappings of formal CSOs in that they may be prone to co-optation by the Bahraini state should they be able to influence them in some manner.

Once again, incorporating the theoretical instruments to analyse the findings, those being the RBA and its multi-dimensional framework as well as the potential impact ISA tools have on communal discourse, it would appear the findings display mixed results on several fronts and depending on the type of space, as well as the timing and context in which it functions. All these spaces, both traditional and more contemporary informal spaces share a common feature in that they have a dual capacity to pander or counter state-led discourse and subsequently can mitigate or exacerbate sectarian tensions. The cross-fertilisation of key individuals who operate in both formal and informal civil society settings is a testament to the fact that formal CSO's retain some form of utility in both societies. This is further evident, in the informal spaces' deficiencies as signified by the multi-dimensional framework, be it the lack of popularity to gain huge numbers in some cases or its inability to facilitate both state-civil society and inter-communal dialogue in some respect. Suffice to say, in both the Kuwaiti and Bahraini contexts, formal and informal avenues of grassroots activism and associational life are fundamental pre-requisites to acquire any sense of leverage on state authorities, be it in the form of opposition groups mobilising or Sunni and Shi'i communities and/or groups coming together in countering the state ISA.

Having said all this, one must be constantly reflexive, and despite the thesis maintaining that up until 2015 when the interviews were conducted, the findings did indicate the potential capacity for informal spaces to go either way in the trajectory of sectarian relations. The political situation since 2017 has looked increasingly bleaker

in Bahrain and relations between Sunni and Shi'i communities are increasingly resembling the ruptures of 2011, which would signal one of two possibilities, either informal spaces' inability at this moment in time to harmonise communal relations, or worse, having an adverse impact on relations altogether. That is not to say or to totally dismiss their potential to assist down the line, as they had done historically.

More broadly, it also becomes evident that there is an intentional disparity between the formal and more informal CSOs and this is reflective in their functions. A common observation can be made across the spectrum of informal civic spaces is their retaining of more autonomy (relative to the formal counterparts and to varying degrees, whether that space is affiliated to another broader political society or not is another determinant that can influence its scope of autonomy).

Taking all the aforementioned into account and going forward within this line of research, it could be suggested that informal civil society ought to be observed more meticulously, whereby the focus is on the typology of spaces and the key variables that set them apart. Given the cross-fertilisation between civic spaces, one way could be a theoretical apparatus that could gauge the spectrum of formality and informality, something akin to the multi-dimensional framework but it be even more perceptive in trying to pinpoint at what stage informal civic spaces are positively or negatively impacting sectarian discourse and the trajectory of sectarian relations in both countries.

It is arguably from below, in the relation between the informal spaces and its interaction and engagement with the more open, formal avenues of political formation that sectarian relations could take a different trajectory and enable cross-sectarian coalitions to pose a significant challenge to top-down narratives that are used to buttress the state's authoritarian reach. This change is yet to come, but there is likely to be a continuous pressure from below, be that of amplifying or challenging sectarian tensions and narratives. Departing from the scholarly debates of instrumentalists who primarily focus on the utility of sectarianism for regime elites and how it subsequently plays out at the societal level, this paper has re-introduced the discussion on sectarianism in the two cases specified. By highlighting the agency of informal civic

spaces, this not only elucidates on the non-official modes of participatory politics in those countries but with respect to the sectarian dynamic, these spaces have showcased their capacity to challenge state-led discourse via the soft-power mechanisms (ISA) that are at the state's disposal. As is the case more recently however, informal spaces serve a dual function in that they do not necessarily confront or challenge state narratives. In sum, such spaces can influence and mobilise people across sectarian backgrounds but can also be regarded at certain points to be obsolete and ineffective depending on several other factors being played out, including the policies and laws the state has implemented and the international environment.

This thesis has therefore proven the comparative merit in observing both Bahrain and Kuwait in relation to informal civil society and sectarianism; in terms of further scope for research, this could manifest in several ways.

As alluded to, a more discerning approach to observing typology of spaces would be particularly conducive given the more recent events in both countries when considering field research. How will impressions have changed vis-à-vis sectarianism for research participants in the last couple of years? Which links to another avenue for exploration which is to broaden the case selection to the wider Gulf region, as mentioned in the introduction, it was acknowledged there is an informal civil society of sorts that operates in several other countries and it would be interesting to observe what comparisons can be drawn out in relation to their Bahraini and Kuwaiti counterparts. What is their scope for influencing communal trajectories and must those respective regimes take them into consideration when projecting their own discourse, orchestrated through their ISA's? It has yet to be touched upon, but the theoretical broadening of the spectrum of civil society in the Gulf and its relationship to sectarian politics, particularly given the current geo-political climate and the salience of sectarian identity in several sectors, certainly warrants it further investigation in that regard.

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## **List of Research Participants**

Bahrain Former MP (Al-Wefaq) Majlis 4, Isa Town, Monday 9th June 2014, Respondent 1A.

Bahrain Former MP (Wa'ad) Majlis 2, Muharraq region, Friday 30th May, All Respondents.

Bahrain Social Majlis 1, Saar District, Thursday 29th May 2014, Respondent 1A.

Bahrain: Youth Society 5, President of Bahrain Youth Centre (Al-Wefaq Affiliate), Saturday 7th June, 2014.

Civil Society 1, Co-Founder of The Bahrain Debate Initiative, 20th June 2015, Skype Interview Discussion.

Diwaniyya 3, Jabal Ahmad (Mixed-Sect Area), Sunday 25th May 2014, Respondent A2.

Host - Youth Diwaniyya (Private and Inter-communal), Kuwait City, May 17, 2014.

Kuwait Family/Social Diwaniyya 1, Sulaibikhat, Friday 16th May 2014, Respondent B1.

Kuwait Outside Observer 2, Political Columnist for Al-Talee'ah, Al-Qabis, and Al-Rai Newspapers and Assistant Professor in Management Information Systems at The Public Authority for Applied Education and Training, Sunday 18th May 2014.

Kuwait Outside Observer 4, Former Independent MP and Professor of Political Sciences at Kuwait University, Monday 26th May 2014.

Kuwait: MP Diwaniyya 5, Mixed-Sect, Tuesday 27th May 2014.

Kuwait: Outside Observer 1, Former Political Columnist for Al-Watan Newspaper, Sunday 18th May 2014

Kuwait: Outside Observer 3, Bedoon Diwaniyya Host, Sulaibiya, Sulaibikhat, Thursday 22nd May 2014.

Outside Observer 1, Head of General Federation of Bahrain Trade Union and Bahrain Human Rights Observatory, Friday 30th May 2014.

Outside Observer 2, Chairman of Tasa'ol, Independent Bahraini initiative that aims to raise questions on conflict and identity, 7th March 2017, Skype Discussion.

Outside Observer 2, Chairman of Tasa'ol, Independent Bahraini initiative that aims to raise questions on conflict and identity, 2nd February 2015, Skype Discussion.

Outside Observer 4, Professor of Political Sciences at Kuwait University and Former Independent MP, Monday 26th May 2014.

Youth Society 1, President and Former President of Bahrain Youth Society for Human Rights (BYSHR), Tuesday 3rd June 2014, Respondent A1.

Youth Society 2, President of Insaaf, Budaiya Highway, Tuesday 3rd May 2014.

Youth Society 6, Members of Committee of Unemployed Graduates, Sunday 8th June 2014. Respondent A1.

## Appendices

### Appendix A: Sample Interview Questionnaire – Informal Gatherings (Diwaniyyat/Majalis)

1. What is the common basis of this diwaniyya/gathering? I.e. On what grounds do you come together on a regular basis? (e.g. familial/work ties)
2. What is the typical age range of this diwaniyya, does it consist of both youth and older folk?
3. How would you compare/describe your diwaniyya to other diwaniyyat in Kuwait/Bahrain?
  - Examine language used to describe the diwaniyya – where does this fit on spectrum of diwaniyyat (when asking outside observers about the various types of diwaniyyat)
4. How formal or informal is your diwaniyyat – are their basic membership criteria?
  - If there is a membership service – ask how it works, and on what grounds can people become members.
5. Does your diwaniyyat have any political associations? If so, can you give me a concrete example of any political affiliations you have?
  - If there are MP's who sit in on particular diwaniyya – ask does this give it more political clout/importance? Examples – how does political links make your diwaniyya more influential in Kuwaiti society/politics?
  - If it doesn't have any explicit political associations – ask what role your diwaniyya plays and if they think there are other more politicised diwaniyyat that have a greater impact – and what are the reasons for this?

#### Questions pertaining to inter-communal relations

1. I wanted to begin by asking, do you think diwaniyyat have a role to play in facilitating/bringing about 'societal cohesion' and if so why and how?
  - If not effective, why not? Are there specific obstacles/impediments in the way that is restricting this?
2. How do you (members of this diwaniyyat/gathering) see the nature of inter-communal relations in Kuwait/Bahrain?
  - If good/favourable – ask for examples that would demonstrate this and has your diwaniyyat had an impact on this outlook?
  - If deteriorating/complex – ask for examples where has this deterioration/ill-feeling originated from and see whether these relations affect the way their diwaniyyat is managed/orchestrated (perhaps it's denominational only because of past incidents?)

3. Moving onto discussions within diwaniyyat, have you ever touched upon issue of inter-communal relations within your diwaniyyat?

- If yes – what are the basis of those discussions – why do you address inter-communal relations? What is the purpose for this – by them addressing issue how does this have an effect on the diwaniyyat and vice-versa?
- If no/not really – Probe with example of post 1990 Kuwait invasion – do they think inter-communal relations are harmonious as Shia rights to practice their religious beliefs had expanded as result of their active participation in Kuwaiti resistance or have they deteriorated in recent years – how does this effect inter-communal relations within Kuwaiti society if at all?
- Do they think that more politicised diwaniyyat would be addressing inter-communal relations or not necessarily? – Ask for examples for either response or why they think this is?

4. Do you see diwaniyyat as key agents/factors in determining the relationship between religious communities in Kuwait/Bahrain?

- If are influential – how, examples where they displayed their effectiveness/efficacy.
- If not necessarily – probe with example of Saudi Arabia, but I read from 2006 onwards intellectuals across communities had adopted more informal strategy to building cross-sectarian ties. With ultimate goal of creating ‘a space for the moderate middle’ and to diminish radicals within all religious communities. One of the key foundations of this initiative was by modelling it on weekly ‘diwaniyyat’ here in Kuwait – Is it a different case here in Kuwait/Bahrain to Saudi diwaniyyat? Do you see them as effective at all in Kuwait/Bahrain in building ties between communities and how is this achieved?

5. Would you agree with the claim that different attitudes between communities have become more prevalent/more visible within your country?

- How does your diwaniyyat go about portraying your community’s identity/interests (e.g. if large Shia or cross-sectarian contingent do they host Shia-orientated events in their diwaniyyat i.e. Majalis for commemorating Imams) if they don’t – why? Mutual respect, preserving impartial outlook on diwaniyyat etc?
- Ask for examples – have there been past instances of animosity/hostility between communities within your neighbourhood/area or does your diwaniyyat try to downplay any contentious issues by focusing on shared interests?

6. Whenever you come to discussing political issues or matters pertaining to politics, can you think of any examples or activities where you reached out across local communities, also known as processes of ‘*taqarub*’ or rapprochement? (e.g. set up inter-faith dialogue meetings or cross-sectarian political forums)

- If they have and offer examples – ask them why this was important for their diwaniyyat to partake in such activities?
- If they have not – ask them why, is there any particular reason you do not reach out to other communities, have there been instances in the past and now it is

### Questions regarding relationship with other informal societies

1. From your experiences, do younger generations take part and get involved in diwaniyyat/Majalis or are they often concerned with other matters?
  - If they do – do younger people regard diwaniyyat important to them, for what reasons do they see their important?
2. What do you think of the emerging groups like youth societies, do you think they are leading the way in coming up with ways to tackling issues regarding inter-communal relations?
  - If they don't see them as effective – what do they think are their limitations; can you provide examples to illustrate this?
3. Have you ever co-operated or are actively engaged in other informal associations, particularly youth societies, and if so, what are the main differences between activities within diwaniyyat circles and activities between youth groups?
  - Are there any co-operative activities you do that impact the way inter-communal relations function?
4. Are there any other organisations/groups in Kuwait/Bahrain that are addressing issue of inter-communal relations other than diwaniyyat?
  - If none, ask why they think no other groups may not be, ask them what separates diwaniyyat from other social spaces? And ask how could this differentiation affect the dynamics of inter-communal relations?
5. Finally, what are the ultimate goals for your diwaniyyat? If anything, what do you aim to achieve by establishing these meetings?
  - Is there anything in particular they aim to achieve with regards to inter-communal relations or with other informal societies or both – follow up on it why they think there is a need for this goal/activity?

## **Appendix B: Sample Interview Questionnaire – Youth Groups/Societies**

1. What are main purposes of this youth organisation/group and how does it function?  
(I.e. Online or a via a group of dedicated members)
2. What were the background reasons to setting up this youth organisation was it aimed at vocalising youth demands or was it a reaction to other events taking place within the country?
  - If it was youth demands – what were they in particular – do they feed into issue of inter-communal relations?
  - If reaction to other events – What were they again – do they have any link to inter-communal relations and how did they go about tackling this issue?
3. Which area of Bahrain/Kuwait would you say many of your members come from, would you say they are from specific areas or are they based across the country?
4. In terms of membership, do people have to become members of your society and are there any common denominators that existing members of your group already share? (I.e. from same location, ethnicity, gender, or sect).
  - If members from particular sect – ask why, is there a particular reason for this?
  - If cross-communal, do you emphasise that you're a cross-sectarian/communal group – what are the reasons for this as a youth group?
5. Is this youth group linked or affiliated to a larger organisation or society?
  - If so, do you comply with their views or do you have a degree of independence/autonomy in terms of your proposals and the way in which you operate distinct from the broader group? (Depending on the response)
  - Ask for examples that highlight your independence/dependability on other organisations?
  - If they are affiliated to larger organisations – does this affect the way you approach inter-communal relations in terms of membership etc or not necessarily?
  - If not affiliated, ask what separates them as independent youth movement – i.e. do you have more ability to voice minority rights for instance as oppose to other youth groups?

### Questions pertaining to inter-communal relations

1. At present, are there any issues your particular group is addressing that relates to inter-sect/communal relations and what steps/measures does it take? (e.g. publicise the issue/case online, orchestrate quick demonstrations)

- If doesn't address issue of inter-communal relations at present - why not, does it not need to be given precedence at the moment? Is this suggesting that relations are harmonious? Probe further
  - If they are – what are those specific cases, why do they think they are becoming more of a prevalent issue in Kuwait/Bahrain?
- 2. Would you say your youth group is a cross-communal initiative i.e. does it encompass all sectors of Bahraini society?
  - If not, why not, need particular reasons, as to why they have been exclusive in the issues they address? Why not encompass as many sectors of society?
  - If they do, why is it important for them to be a cross-communal group?
- 3. How have the identities of different communities in Bahrain affected the way your youth group operates, is it relatively easy to get sympathisers/supporters of your cause from across denominations and across different sectors of society?
  - If relations are strained and have been difficult etc - Ask for examples where differences in opinion between local communities have impeded/restricted on the goals you set out to achieve as a youth organisation.
  - Ask why is this becoming an increasing issue?
- 4. Do you see your youth society/organisation personally affected by internal strife, because of different views between communities or do people from across Bahraini society co-operate effectively by and large within your organisation?
  - If it isn't a cross-communal youth group, can they see any problems in other youth groups that take in members from all religious communities?
  - If they are cross-communal, can you offer examples that would suggest relations are harmonious or have deteriorated because of inter-communal relations?

#### Questions regarding relationship with other informal societies

1. Do any members of your youth society partake in diwanniya/majalis discussions? How regularly would you say?
  - If they do – what are the reasons for your participation in diwaniyyat – as a member of a youth group do you feel they hold any political significance or is it more for trivial issues?
2. How do you see the influence of diwaniyyat and other traditional gathering places in Kuwaiti and Bahraini society?
  - Do they think they carry importance in the political sense or do they carry less influence/importance compared to other groups like you? Ask for reasons why.
  - Ask whether they hold any influence on inter-communal relations – do you feel Youth societies are better equipped at tackling issues between religious communities or are the politicised diwaniyyat and why so?

3. Have you ever co-operated or are actively engaged in other informal associations, particularly diwaniyyat, and if so, what are the main differences between activities within diwaniyyat circles and activities between youth groups?
4. Are there any other organisations/groups in Kuwait/Bahrain that are addressing issue of inter-communal relations other than youth societies?
  - If none, ask why they think no other groups may not be, ask them what separates youth groups from other social spaces? And ask how could this differentiation affect the dynamics of inter-communal relations?
5. Finally, what are the ultimate goals for your particular group/association? Where do you see the future for yourselves and other youth groups in the country?
  - Ask whether their future proposals have any effect on inter-communal relations – if they do, probe further, why do you need to highlight this issue in particular?

## **Appendix C: Sample Interview Questionnaire – Outside Observer**

### Questions relating to youth societies

1. I wanted to begin by asking, do you think youth societies/ group have a role to play in facilitating/bringing about 'societal cohesion' and if so why and how?
  - If not effective, why not? Are there specific obstacles/impediments in the way that is restricting this?
2. Are there any youth groups you are aware of that specifically cater for particular religious communities or are the ones you know all cross-communal?
  - If they are denominational only- ask reasons as to why these have emerged?
  - If not- does this highlight strength in communal diversity of emerging youth groups today?
3. What do you think of emerging youth groups in Bahrain do you view them favourably or do you see them to be having a detrimental impact in terms of relations between religious communities?
4. What do you think of the relations between youth societies and diwaniyyat?
  - If harmonious/good – ask for reasons why, do they co-operate on certain initiatives? Any relating to inter-communal relations? Need Examples.
  - If not visible – ask why perhaps there is not a strong bond between youth societies and diwaniyyat – are traditional forms of participation out of touch with the youth?
5. Generally, do you think the ways youth groups operate (either online or in public) are effective in achieving their goals?
  - Ask for examples as to how effective youth groups are in either bridging gap between communities or a having a divisive effect on Bahraini society? Do you think they are too weak to gather support throughout society, or are they fragmented amongst themselves etc?

### Questions relating to diwaniyyat/Majalis

1. Same question again as before, do you think diwaniyyat have a role to play in facilitating/bringing about 'societal cohesion' and if so why and how?
  - If not effective, why not? Are there specific obstacles/impediments in the way that is restricting this?
2. What types of diwaniyyat/majalis are there in Kuwaiti/Bahraini society?
  - How do they differentiate from one another?

- Are there any diwaniyyat that specifically focus on inter-communal relations – i.e. the more political diwaniyyat? If so – why do you think there are diwaniyyat that specifically deal with such issues?
  3. Have you ever taken part in a diwaniyya discussion? How regularly? What type of diwaniyya was it?
- What was reasoning/reasons behind participating in diwaniyyat?
  4. How effective in your opinion are diwaniyyat in Kuwaiti society with regard to inter-communal relations? Need examples of their effectiveness or limitations.
  5. Are the diwaniyyat more effective modes of political participation compared to other informal groups like youth societies?
    - Reasons as to why they are more or less effective in Kuwait/Bahrain?