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ARTICLE

Spatial profanation of lebanese sectarianism: al-nūr square and the 17 October 2019 protests

Hiba Ghanem

Department of Sociology, Istanbul Gelisim University, Istanbul, Turkey

ABSTRACT

The ongoing 17 October 2019 Lebanese protests mark a critical moment that historicises the struggle of a people, from different sectarian and religious backgrounds, against political corruption. Tripoli, a conservative Sunni-majority city in Northern Lebanon, has caught the attention of researchers as its protests took the form of a 'rave party' held in its main public square, known as al-Nur Square. This article investigates the Tripolitan protests through the lens of Agamben's *Profanations* to highlight the dynamics of the al-Nur Square protests that seem to conflate the religious and the political. The article specifically argues that the protestors reconfigure the space around the square in an attempt at profaning the sectarian apparatus that takes the 'Allah' icon as its centre. In their spatial attempt at profanation, however, the protestors seem to preserve the religious intact, thus giving credibility to their de-sectarianising act. Such an analytical reading of the protest sheds light on the spatial dynamics inherent in any Lebanese attempt at reform, including the 17 October 2019 protests. These protests become historical records that trace the protestors' continuous negotiation of the religious and the political that embeds the attempt at de-sectarianisation within every demand they have for political reform.

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Introduction

> Profanation, however, neutralizes what it profanes. Once profaned, that which was unavailable and separate loses its aura and is returned to use. [. . . .] [Profanation] deactivates the apparatuses of power and returns to common use the spaces that power had seized (Agamben, 2007a, p.77).

Ever since its independence from French colonisation in 1943, Lebanon has been a multi-sect state that has relatively preserved its stability despite the many storms that have overtaken the Middle East. As a 'cultural phenomenon', the Lebanese sectarian political system deploys 'religious heritage as a primary marker of modern political identity' (Makdisi, 2000, p.7). This conflation of the religious and the sectarian has translated itself through the apparatus, in the form of infrastructure and institutions, which the state employs to maintain its hold over the public. However, the recent 17 October 2019

CONTACT Hiba Ghanem hghanem@gelisim.edu.tr Istanbul Gelişim University Cihangir Mahallesi Şehit Jandarma Komando, Avcılar, Turkey

Lebanese protests have presented a challenge to this cultural 'process' (Nucho, 2016, p. 4) as protestors, across Lebanon, flooded the streets to 'name and shame the country's sectarian political system' (Haugbolle, 2019). Amidst this wave of protests, Tripoli, a city in Northern Lebanon, caught the attention of international and local media channels in its celebratory attempt at de-sectarianisation. Previously described as 'Lebanese Kandahar' on account of it being a Sunni-majority city that suffers from the highest rate of unemployment, violent insurgency, poverty and marginalisation ('Tripoli: From "Lebanese Kandahar"', 2019),[1] Tripoli famously assumed a new title as it became known as the 'the Bride of the Revolution' (El Husseini, 2019). In their 'rave parties', Tripolitans gathered in its main public square, al-Nur Square, 'around a huge silver sculpture of the word "Allah"', exchanging sweets, chanting slogans and dancing 'to popular anthems' ('Tripoli: From "Lebanese Kandahar"', 2019). In their celebratory practice of de-sectarianisation, Tripolitans seemed to challenge this conflation of the religious and sectarian that the apparatus of state power reinforces. They created a space of celebration, of dancing and chanting, that is juxtaposed with the religious spatial significance of the icon, thus presenting a stark spatial dynamic of profaning the sectarian that this article is interested in investigating.

This investigation into the Tripolitan spatial attempt at de-sectarianisation will be guided by the following set of questions: how does this act of celebration around a religious symbol redefine the conflation of the sectarian and the religious within the Tripolitan identity? What role does space play within the governmental sectarian apparatus, specifically in Tripoli? How have the Tripolitan protestors reconfigured space to carry out their attempt at de-sectarianisation? What is the significance of the Tripolitan celebrations in the Lebanese overall attempt at political reform? Why have Tripolitans chosen dancing around a religious icon to protest against corruption? Can the act of celebration around a religious icon even be considered an act of profanation? And, finally, what are the implications for reading the protests in Tripoli as acts of spatial profanation?

Through the exploration of these questions, this paper argues that the 17 October 2019 Lebanese protests, and specifically the celebration in al-Nur Square, mark a dynamic force of spatial profanation that deactivates the sectarian apparatus of power.[2] To make this argument, I will begin by briefly examining the historical role that space has taken in defining the Lebanese sectarian political identity. Whether in the form of infrastructure (Nucho, 2016, p. 28) or institutions, space has been a marker of the apparatus of the state that seeks to define the Lebanese political identity in sectarian terms. In Tripoli, this spatial sectarian significance is concentrated in its famous public square, known as al-Nur Square, which is distinguished by the Allah sculpture icon. By investing in the religious tradition, sectarianism or *ṭa'ifiyya* has long manipulated the representation of the Tripolitan public. However, the significance of the square and the sculpture does not lie solely in a perceived religious value. The religious sculpture faces an abandoned, unfinished building, known as al-Ghandur building, which overlooks the square and thus bears witness to the history of marginalisation from which Tripoli has suffered. This configuration and design of space, this article will show, presents an illustration of the strong hold of sectarianism on the Lebanese identity.

In their attempt at de-sectarianisation, Tripolitan protestors thus invest in this spatial configuration in order to profane the sectarian apparatus. By profanation, Agamben (2007a) refers to the process of the 'deactivation of the apparatus of power' (p. 77). The

protestors, in other words, deactivate the apparatus of power in spatial terms. While preserving the religious significance of the sculpture in the centre of the al-Nur Square, the protestors seem to employ their 'rave party to set in motion a spatial juxtaposition that sectarianism builds upon. This juxtaposition is between the notion of the sacred, defined by Agamben (2007a) as the removal 'from the free use and commerce of man', and that of the profane (p. 73). The protestors turn the space of the square into a profane space of non-sectarian celebration where Tripolitans are joined by protestors from other Lebanese sects. Alongside this spatial dynamic of profanation, the protestors appropriate the abandoned al-Ghandur building and turn it into an 'icon of the revolution' by painting the Lebanese flag and three banners, including a Quranic verse, on the building's deteriorating façade. The building's significance as a marker of sectarian marginalisation is profaned by opening it up to aesthetic contemplation. By incorporating a religious verse within the aesthetic medium, the protestors further give these attempts at aesthetic profanation religious validation.

As the religious becomes a site to renegotiate and profane sectarianism, the protestors render the square a space that reformulates the dichotomy of the 'profane' and the 'sacred'. While the square acquires characteristics of Agamben's (2007a) 'threshold' which 'divides the two spheres' of the profane and sacred (p. 84), the Quranic verse qualifies this threshold as a '*qanṭara*' or the bridge between heaven and hell (Ibn Kathir, 2003, p. 2633). As such, the square comes to indicate this space of the threshold-*qanṭara* in which the protestors perform rituals of crossing over by challenging 'the hegemony of the sectarian forms of subjectification' (Salloukh et al., 2015, p. 4). Within this threshold space, the protestors perform rituals of crossing over whereby mobility, historically defined in sectarian terms, acquires an aesthetic purpose defined by celebrating the social unity of agents who can re-build a country from scratch. In order to achieve that, they build tents to counteract and profane sectarian institutions; they further employ these tents as negative spaces from which a non-sectarian country can be born. By profaning the sectarian apparatus, the protestors were thus able to liberate and reinvent themselves at the threshold of paradise or heaven where they might live peacefully. It is only through the activation of these spatial dynamics of profanation aimed at creating negative spaces, this article argues, that the Lebanese can ever realise their hope to overcome Lebanese *ṭā'ifiyya*, a *ṭā'ifiyya* that needs to preserve the religious heritage, by first spatially untangling it from its sectarian use.

The spatial apparatus of *ṭā'ifiyya*

The 17 October 2019 protests highlight how space has always been a fundamental aspect of the Lebanese version of sectarianism within the Middle East. As a system, sectarianism is defined as 'the deployment of religious heritage as a primary marker of modern political identity' (Makdissi, 2000, p.7). As a marker of modern political identity, sectarianism is cotreminous with the rise of the national project in Lebanon. Sectarianism and nationalism have 'often worked hand-in-glove to produce particular forms of Lebanese nationhood and more or less stable states of belonging' (Weiss, 2009, p.148). Lebanese nationhood, in this sense, has invested in sectarian spaces, in the form of institutions, infrastructure and 'urban geography' (Deeb & Harb, 2013, p.221) to assert itself and define belongingness. Cities around Lebanon, including Tripoli, have maintained and preserved

'markers of territory' in the form of 'flags, posters, shrines and graffiti [that] adorn most streets and neighbourhoods' (Genberg, 2002, pp. 83-84). Whether taking the form of territorial markers or actual institutions, space plays a dynamic role in reflecting as well as constructing the Lebanese political identity.

Historically speaking, sectarianism or *ṭā'ifiyya* has continuously played a fundamental role in the Lebanese national project. Lebanon's independence from French colonisation in 1943 was marked by 'a Muslim-Christian understanding regarding the overall nature and the character of the Lebanese state' (Kamrava, 2013, p.314). Known as the National Pact (Al-Mithāq al-Watanī), this understanding 'reaffirmed Lebanon's independence from France, its separateness from Syria, and its Arab identity' as well as 'an institutional arrangement for power sharing among the various sects' (Kamrava, 2013, p.314). This power-sharing system was distinguished by a leadership system, also known as the 'Zuʿamā' system', where each sect was a political group run by a leader or a *za'īm* (Kamrava, 2013, p.248) . This system was later militarised during the civil war (1975–1990), a war that created its 'own order that was a monstrous mutation of its prewar political and economic system [as] the autonomy of the sects mutated into armed control concerned with "sectarian cleansing"' (Traboulsi, 2007, p.231). The war eventually ended with yet another agreement, known as the 1989 *Ṭā'if* Accord, named after the city in Saudi Arabia where the accord was signed. This accord retained the sectarian framework as it 'restored power sharing while restating non-sectarianism as a long-term goal but without providing a road map to this end' (Fakhoury, 2014, p. 240). Nevertheless, this long-term goal remained a goal as Lebanese politics in the 1990s continued to be shaped by the 'existing patronage networks and the political weight of local *zu'ama*' (Kamrava, 2013, p.356). This sectarian basis upon which Lebanese politics rests resurfaced more recently after the 2005 popular demonstrations following the assassination of the Prime Minister Rafīq Ḥarīrī. The demonstrations led to the rise of two political alliances, the 14th of March and the 8th of March, that differ in their vision of the ties with neighbouring Syria and Ḥizbullah's military arsenal. However, despite their differing regional affiliations, both alliances 'capitalize upon sectarianism as a divisive tool so as to consolidate their power on the domestic and regional scenes' (Fakhoury, 2014, p.242). As a 'result of the operation of an ensemble of institutional, clientelist, and discursive practices', Lebanese sectarianism has maintained its hold on Lebanese political identity (Salloukh et al., 2015, p.4). Sectarianism can thus be said to constitute the political backbone of modern Lebanon, a backbone that re-emerged during the recent 17 October 2019 protests.

Among the many means through which sectarianism has sought to consolidate its control, space has played an especially critical role. Semantically, sectarianism 'does not occur at the period of spread and proselytization, but at the stage of drawing boundaries and setting down distinctions between "us" and "others"' (Bishara, 2018, p. 65). Sectarianism is thus a fundamentally spatial concept that builds on constructing boundaries and marginalising the 'other'. As an inherently spatial concept, sectarianism manifests itself through the apparatus that is used by power. By apparatus, I refer here to Agamben's (2009) definition of the apparatus as 'anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings' (p.14). By that, he includes '[n]ot only, therefore, prisons, madhouses, the panopticon, schools, confession, factories, disciplines, juridical measures, and so forth (whose connection with power is in a certain sense

evident), but also the pen, writing, literature, philosophy, agriculture, cigarettes, navigation, computers, cellular telephones and – why not – language itself' (Agamben, 2009, p.14). In the case of Lebanon, the sectarian apparatus includes not only the religious confessions but also other subtle features, specifically the configuration of space in which sects operate. Sectarianism thus invests heavily in territorial or geographic means to carry out the institutional and clientelist practices upon which it builds. Institutions and infrastructure, as well as the design of space and architecture, constitute the apparatus of sectarianism that the Lebanese government invests in to consolidate its hold over the public.

As an apparatus of sectarian power, spatial design has seen its rudimentary form during Lebanon's 15-year civil war (1975–1990). Beirut, the capital, was divided along what was called, the Green line, which separated the Eastern Christian half of the capital from the western Sunni Muslim half. In Tripoli, this sectarian configuration of space features in the set-up of al-Nur Square. The square is known for the huge 'silver sculpture of the word 'Allah" with the inscription 'Tripoli, the Fortress of Muslims Welcomes You' written underneath (Rabil, 2014, p. 245). This square and the sculpture highlight the spatial dynamics of the sectarian apparatus that rendered Tripoli a Muslim Sunni community:

> Originally the square was named after proindependence political figure Abdul Hamid Karame (1890–1950), whose statue stood in its centre until it was blown up during the civil war in 1975. The name was changed to Nour Square by the Islamic Unity Movement in the early 1980s, when they replaced Karame's statue with the sculpture. Underneath it an inscription reads "Tripoli the Fortress of Muslims Welcomes You." Significantly, two black Salafi flags flutter behind the sculpture. This square has become some sort of a vocal outlet of Salafists, where they usually gather after Friday prayers to air their grievances. Neither the city nor political leaders have been able to restore Karame's statue or the square's original name, or even remove the flags, despite repeated requests by many in the city. The square has thus typified the power of Salafists, which emblematically rested on the Islamic Unity Movement's symbolic projection of *tawhid Allah* in the fortress of Muslims. (Rabil, 2014, p. 245)

Al-Nur Square, then, stands today as a spatial indication of Tripoli's identity where the pro-independence movement statue of Abdul Hamid Karame, the Muslim Sunni 'mufti and leader of Tripoli' and head of government in 1945 (Traboulsi, 2007, p.99), was replaced by the sculpture of the word 'Allah' and the flags of the then-Muslim Sunni movement, known as the Islamic Unity Movement. From a celebration of the person to a celebration of a deity, through the linguistic medium of the word 'Allah', sectarianism acquired a new spatial form. Aware of this fundamental role that the spatial form plays in the representation of their city, Tripoli's citizens have recently removed the black Salafi flags in order to rid Tripoli of any possible association with ISIS which also takes a black flag as its emblem (Mouzahem, 2013). Despite these attempts, the square's significance continues to lie in the sectarian echoes that the change in icons holds. Today, the sculpture features as the main symbol of the city's sectarianised religious identity through a linguistic and artistic medium, the calligraphic design of the name of Allah.

During the 1975–1990 civil war, the spatial dynamic of sectarianism also acquired an economic character. In the 1970s, 'Tripoli was promised a bright future as it had a large seaport, an airport, a train station, an oil refinery and even an international fairground designed by legendary Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer' (Domat, 2019). All its spatial

features promised the city a great future. However, the war, followed by Syrian occupation, rendered the city a breeding ground for poverty, marginalisation and the highest rate of unemployment in Lebanon. As a Sunni-majority city, Tripoli suffered from 'the marginalisation of the Sunni community [that was] a hallmark of the post-1983 period'. Although marginalisation is attributed to 'a combination of factors, … [including] the disappearance of the prestigious leaders,' this marginalisation affected all Sunni-majority cities, but Tripoli in particular (Traboulsi, 2007, p. 229). This marginalisation translates itself today into economic and social forms. According to the International Labour Organization report, 'the economic and social situation in Tripoli is very different from other Lebanese regions, and is characterized by high poverty rates and deskilling of the labour market' (ILO, 2017, p. 49). Described as 'once [being] the crown jewel of the Mamluk empire in the 13th century' (Wilson & Cohen-Fournier, n.d.), Tripoli is characterised by extreme poverty with an 'unemployment range of 55–60 percent in some of its neighbourhoods, according to the UN Habitat and UNICEF Neighbourhoods study of 2018' (Khalaf, 2019). Because of economic marginalisation and 'lack of opportunities for upward mobility', Tripoli has become a 'hotbed' of insurgents and Islamic activism. Marginalisation and poverty today characterise the city through the 'belt of misery where neighborhoods on the margin of the city have grown so much in density and space, with the result of transforming Tripoli into a virtual rural city' (Rabil, 2014, pp. 137, 245). In this sense, economic marginalisation has taken on the spatial features of the contrast between the city and the belt of misery that surrounds it. These spatialised symptoms of marginalisation have been a direct consequence of the sectarian apparatus.

Within al-Nur Square, this spatial-economic contrast features in the spatial guise of the al-Ghandur building. A deserted and abandoned building, the al-Ghandur building overlooks the square and stands as a historical chronicle of the marginalisation that Tripoli has been suffering from for years. Built in the 1960s, the building was supposed to be used for the refrigeration of agricultural products, but construction was halted due to a building violation. Several attempts to resume work on the building, including turning it into a hotel, have failed for economic reasons (Hamid, 2019). In its abandoned state, the building was occupied by the Syrian-Arab Deterrent Forces for approximately fifteen years (Hamid, 2019). Since then, it has provided shelter for the homeless (Antar, 2019). In its current state, the al-Ghandur building presents a contrast within the square as it brings the marginalisation that characterises the city's outskirts and places it on the margins of the city's main public space. As an emblem of the economic deprivation of the Sunni-majority community, the building reflects the negligence and decay that the city continues to experience today.

In the space of al-Nur Square, then, the al-Ghandur building and the 'Allah icon' acquire spatial significance that goes beyond their role in embodying or highlighting religious sectarianism. The configuration of al-Nur Square is less a static apparatus for sectarianism than a dynamic symbol of the city's sectarian, religious, political and economic identity. Hitherto, sectarianism has defined that identity in terms of marginalisation that translates itself through the apparatus of imbalance and contrast. This apparatus of contrast manifests itself in the preservation of the abandoned state of the al-Ghandur building within the radial design of the square that takes the 'Allah icon' as its centre. This disruption within the dynamics of the square's design has thus historically characterised and framed the city's political identity that for decades has struggled with marginalisation

and sectarianism. That is why it has taken a protest, specifically the 17 October 2019 uprising, for these spatial dynamics to be revisited and its political identity redefined.

The spatial dynamics of profaning the *ṭā'ifiyya* apparatus: the role of the religious

In line with their historical significance, al-Nur Square and al-Ghandur building played a pivotal historical role during the 17 October 2019 revolution. Protestors from Tripoli attempted to overcome the city's long history of marginalisation and deprivation as they danced and cheered the revolution within the square. Gathering together around the sculpture of the word Allah in the centre of the public square, they danced and sang to patriotic songs issuing from the al-Ghandur building. Their rave party acquired significance by reconfiguring the spatial features within the square such that the building, and not the icon, became the centre for coordinating the protest. In their act of non-sectarian celebration, the protestors seemed to carry out what Agamben calls the act of 'profanation' of the sectarian apparatus. For Agamben (2007a), 'profanation' is the 'deactivation of the apparatuses of power and the return to common use the spaces that power has seized' (p. 77). By singing around a religious icon and taking the deserted space of the building as their centre, protestors profane the Lebanese spatial apparatus of sectarianism by reconfiguring the public space of the square. In their reconfiguration of the public square, the protestors further preserved elements from the religious as they decorated their revolutionary icon with a verse from the Quran. The protestors thus gave religion a unique spatial role in their profanation of the sectarian apparatus.

The first sign of profanation that this article is interested in is that of the rave party itself that took place in al-Nur Square. In spatial terms, the people organised this party by juxtaposing the dichotomy of the sacred and the profane upon which sectarianism builds. The significance of this party lies in challenging the stereotype that has characterised Tripoli as a 'hotbed of insurgents' and a 'relatively conservative Sunni Muslim heartland' ('Tripoli: From "Lebanese Kandahar", 2019). By 'gathering around a huge silver sculpture of the word "God,"' ('Tripoli: From "Lebanese Kandahar", Tripolitans reconfigured the space of the square by preserving the religious significance of the sculpture but redefining the sacredness of its perimeters. By 'sacred', Agamben (2007a) refers to 'the things that in some way belonged to the gods' and that 'were removed from the free use and commerce of men; they could be neither sold nor held in lien, neither given for usufruct nor burdened by servitude' (p.73). By dancing and chanting in the space of that roundabout, Tripolitans re-appropriated the roundabout for their free, profane use as they turned the streets surrounding the sculpture into a place of celebration where protestors from different parts of Lebanon, of different sectarian belonging, joined and cheered. In this sense, they profaned the sectarian, but not the religious, representation of the sculpture. An indication of this conflation of the sectarian and the religious is the resulting social media contention between supporters and opponents of this celebratory event. While some saw the event as a challenge to the city's religious identity, others saw in it an indication of tolerance as Lebanese citizens continued to flow into the square to join the Tripolitan protestors in their demonstrations. The contention, in this sense, reflects the Tripolitan attempt to differentiate the sectarian from the religious by taking the spatial juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane as its stage.

Orchestrating the rave party from the first floor of the al-Ghandur building was the DJ Mahdi Karima, a 29-year old Tripolitan. Claiming that the party gave the protests a 'civilised character', little did Karima know that this party was rewriting the spatial dynamics of profanation in aesthetic terms. Instead of the roundabout with its central sculpture, attention shifted to the neighbouring deserted al-Ghandur building where Karima played his tracks ('Tripoli: From "Lebanese Kandahar"', 2019) . The building also became known as the 'icon of the revolution' when Mohamad Abrash, a young local architecture student, painted the Lebanese flag over the building's deteriorating facade (Naji, 2019). By investing in the national, non-sectarian significance of the flag, Tripolitans countered the sectarian features of 'Flags, murals, graffiti, and banners- [that] mark out political turf and territorialize neighborhoods as belonging to particular political parties'. The political party flags and portraits of the Lebanese politicians that usually hang from 'balconies, pillars and street walls' have historically reinforced the sectarian apparatus by 'visually inscrib[ing] relations of kinlike loyalty between members of a sectarian community' and their *za'im* or leader (Monroe, 2016, p. 60). However, during the 17 October 2019 revolution, the people 'tore down posters of their parliamentary representatives and chanted the popular refrain of the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011: "The people demand the fall of the regime"'('Tripoli: From "Lebanese Kandahar"', 2019). Instead of the usual flags and posters, the Lebanese flag painted over the al-Ghandur building reflected a spatial dynamic of profaning the sectarian apparatus. The deserted building, formerly a token of sectarian and economic marginalisation, came to embody Agamben's state of 'pure means' which the protestors marked with the Lebanese flag. The building 'has joyously forgotten its goal and can now show itself as such, as a means without an end' (Agamben, 2007a, p. 86). Although the building has always been deserted, its state as a pure means gains value only when it is accentuated aesthetically by the use of colour. The building is now a spatial feature that acquired aesthetic significance as an artistic icon of the revolution. As an icon, it lacks an end or a purpose, whether sectarian or architectural. It is now open to artistic contemplation as an exhibit of the revolution.

Funded by Tripolitans who paid to supply the paint and materials needed to complete the work, Abrash also painted three banners over the flag. One bore the words 'Tripoli, the city of peace'; the second reads 'Tripoli, Lebanon's Paradise' while the third said, 'Enter it in peace and security', in reference to verse 46 of the Quranic chapter, Surat Al-Hijr. These banners appear to respond to the banner underneath the sculpture of the Allah icon at the centre of the square that reads 'The Fortress of Muslims, Tripoli, Welcomes you'. The unequal distribution of the banners gives more weight to the banners on the building, overshadowing the one underneath the icon. However, it is important to state that just as the sculpture was preserved in the spatial dynamic of profaning the sectarian apparatus, the banners served the same purpose by 'playing' with the separation of the sacred and the profane. To profane, Agamben (2007a)claims, 'means not simply to abolish and erase separations but to learn to put them to a new use, to play with them' (p. 86). In their attempt at profaning the spatial apparatuses of sectarianism, Tripolitans subjected the preservation of religious expression to the aesthetic effect of the building's pure means through the messages communicated. As such, the banners serve an ideological purpose that the building aesthetizes. The first two banners present a descriptive account of the city while the third carries out a performative act of inviting others, including sectarian others, to enter the city in safety. Safety is not for one sect but for anyone who enters. In

this sense, the banners under the sculpture and the banners on the building serve the same purpose of highlighting the religious identity of the city. However, the former accentuates the sectarian divisiveness through the word 'fortress' while the latter profanes those sectarian undertones by rendering the 'fortress' a 'city of peace' and a 'paradise'. Moreover, by using verses from the holy book to accentuate that message, the protestors seemed to give a religious authority to the profane non-sectarian messages painted on the building. Most importantly, the layout upon which this linguistic play takes place also opens religious expression to the common use of the people. The asymmetrical distribution of the banners shifts the viewer's attention away from the 'Allah' sculpture to the building and creates a sense of tension between the banner underneath the sculpture, on one hand, and the three on the building, on the other. In this spatial reconfiguration, the distribution of the banners around the square serves an aesthetic purpose as pieces of calligraphy or decorative writing fit for aesthetic admiration. This sense of pleasure results not only from the visual elements but also from the ideological message of non-sectarian peace that this visual display communicates.

Profanation within al- nur square: the space of the threshold-*qanṭara*

By preserving the religious as a site for the profanation of the sectarian apparatus, the protestors in Al-Nur Square seemed to perform a crossing over of the space of the 'caesura' or the threshold, which Agamben (2007a) claims, 'divides the two spheres' of the profane and the sacred (p.74). They performed this crossing over by rendering the religious a site for profaning the sacred use of the religious that sectarianism deems necessary. As a site evoked by the Quranic verse, 'Enter it in peace and security', the religious indicates the space of entry to the safety of paradise reserved for believers on the Day of Judgement. Verse 46 refers to an address to believers who are 'detained on the bridge between Paradise and Hell' and who can only enter the safety of Paradise after they become 'brothers' whose hearts are cleansed from 'deep feelings of bitterness' (Ibn Kathir, 2003, p.2633). This bridge that constitutes the entry point to Paradise is also known as *qanṭara*. By preserving the religious while profaning the sectarian use of the religious, the protestors set up the space of the square to be a threshold- *qanṭara* or crossing point to a new form of togetherness that they seek to construct. Within this space, the threshold to paradise seems to lie at the threshold to the fortress.

At this threshold-*qanṭara*, Tripolitans performed this crossing over through employing a spatial dynamic that sectarianism has long manipulated, mobility. While mobility between 'political-sectarian' cities and spaces has historically had 'moral' dimensions that defined 'where one can and cannot go'(Deeb & Harb, 2013, p. 23), the Lebanese now feel free to express solidarity by transgressing the private spaces that each city has reserved for itself. As protestors from different Lebanese cities joined the Tripolitans at al-Nur Square to express solidarity and unity, they seemed to be carrying out an act of profaning the spatially divisive apparatus that sectarianism employs to differentiate the private and public spheres for each sect. In their revolutionary gatherings and parties, the protestors famously chanted for 'solidarity with fellow Lebanese from those southern cities also unfairly reputed as hubs of Shia extremism'(Hall, 2019). This was seen by many as 'one of the most powerful expressions of Lebanese society taking a stand against sectarian divisions' (Hall, 2019). In this sense, the rave party in al-Nur Square presents

a revision of the moral dimensions of mobility that correspond to their profanation of the sectarian apparatus. Sunni, Shiite and Christian protestors deactivated sectarian divisiveness through their party-oriented mobility and chants. Instead of defining mobility by the moral code that defines where one 'can and cannot go', they gave mobility an aesthetic aim defined by partying within a public non-sectarian sphere that they reconfigured themselves. Social gathering needs the empty space within the square and the position of the square as an access point into Tripoli to allow mobility and access from different regions within Lebanon. By employing mobility to cross over the threshold-*qanṭara* of the sacred/profane within sectarianism, the protestors seemed to rewrite the moral in an aesthetic of celebratory social union.

To carry out their aesthetic crossing-over of this threshold-*qanṭara*, the protestors invested in and shed light on the dynamic role that celebration plays in challenging power and realising this transition. Their celebrations came to indicate Agamben's (2007b) sense of 'acclamation' for power or the 'ceremonial aspect of power' that manifests the fundamental role that consensus plays as a foundation for power. He defines acclamation as 'an exclamation of praise, of triumph ("*Io triumphe*!"), of laudation or of disapproval (*acclamatio adversa*) yelled by a crowd in determinate circumstances'. As an expression of praise, acclamation features today in the 'honor that is bestowed upon profane powers' or political figures (pp. 168-169, 200). Taking political figures as its focal point, acclamation seems to have been a fundamental practice for establishing the hold of sectarianism over the Lebanese citizens. In its 'subjective' form, acclamation in Lebanon has historically figured in the glorification of its sectarian political figures (Agamben, 2007b, 200). Sectarianism, then, has deemed the act of glorifying political figures a sacred aspect of its apparatus. Spatially, this glorification has invested in markers such as the photos of politicians as a means of directing and manifesting itself. During the 17 October protests, the protestors seemed to maintain this tradition of acclamation, albeit aesthetically. In the space of the threshold-*qanṭara* at the al-Nur Square, the Tripolitan protestors carried out their acclamation as they chanted and danced for a political cause, the fall of the regime. To address political power, the protestors employed the famous slogan, 'All means All' to demand the resignation of politicians. Whereas acclamation had previously been used to praise the political figures of the sectarian regime, the protestors maintained the guise of acclamation as a gathering, while deflecting its form, i.e. chanting, as well as its object. They profaned the sacredness of this act by rendering acclamation an event for unified artistic expression directed at glorifying themselves. This explains why Tripoli is the only Lebanese city where 'All of them means all of them' has acquired the new formulation, 'No, all of *us* means all of *us*' (Said, 2019). By 'us', the protestors sought not only to celebrate their unity, but also to deactivate the apparatus of sectarianism that relies upon spatial divisions (them/us) spatially. The 'us' denotes the public that flooded the square from different 'sectarian' belongings and regions and changed daily in an aesthetic form of mobility aimed at celebrating social gathering and a paradisiacal sense of brotherhood. In this sense, the 'us' indicates a spatial attempt at grouping individuals that share similar aims and at uniting them in the same spatial region, al-Nur Square, to profane the sectarian apparatus. The sectarian sacred divisiveness (them/us) thus becomes a profane aesthetic attempt at grouping kindred elements, i.e. protestors with similar de-sectarianising aims, in proximity to each other within the square even if not physically and continuously present. By

maintaining the guise of glory as the sacred foundation of power yet playing with – deflecting – its subject and form, the protestors laid bare the threshold between the sacred and profane that they sought to negotiate in their protests.

In their celebratory act of acclaiming themselves and profaning the sectarian apparatus, the protestors reconfigured the space of al-Nur Square as a threshold-*qanṭara* to reflect their changing spatial dynamics. The Tripolitan protestors turned the square into a site in which they could display their attempt at constructing a new form of togetherness, the paradise, at which they aimed. Their attempt at constructing from scratch took the most rudimentary form of human-known construction, i.e. tents. Within the square, the tents served as a field hospital (El Wazir, 2019), a field school, and even a kitchen, called the 'kitchen of the revolution' (Wedeman, 2019). These tents offered the services for which sectarian institutions would otherwise be responsible. Tents, in this sense, served to counteract the construction of institutions, an important spatial apparatus that the sectarian Lebanese political system adopts to distribute power. Since the civil war, this sectarian dynamic has in fact characterised all Lebanese cities, including Beirut, where the 'very materiality of the city, its urban infrastructures and spaces, clinics and schools, [have] produce[d] and reproduce[d] sectarian publics' (Nucho, 2016, p. 7). This is why the protestors chose the spatial construction of the tents to counteract sectarian spatial institutionalisation. If institutionalisation had hitherto been a sacred spatial apparatus restricting services to members of the sect, the tents deactivated this institutionalisation by making the services freely available to all, regardless of sectarian belonging or economic status. In other words, a raw and primitive spatial construction, tents sought to profane the elaborate sectarian construction of institutions. In addition to the field hospital and the school, the profaning protestors also set up 'library tents' (Bajec, 2019) and 'debate tents' (Dhayby, 2019) that allowed them to meet, debate and exchange knowledge about laws and economic matters. Although this type of space for profaning the sectarian institutionalisation of education and speech is not unique to Tripoli, it underscores the profane character of this spatial measure. Even the seating arrangement within these spaces reflected this profane spatial dynamic. The arrangement has been described as spontaneous where '[m]en and women of all ages sit on the floor, huddle on benches or stand arms crossed, listening to the latest speaker' while nearby 'protesters revel to the sound of patriotic tunes and techno beats' ('Protest-Hit Lebanon', 2019). Within the space of these tents, 'University professors, activists or even economists' as well as students, who would otherwise constitute the sectarian public, met in an honest attempt at 'rebuild[ing] their country' ('Protest- Hit Lebanon', 2019). In other words, the profane spaces of the tents became spaces for the reinvention and reconstruction of the whole country. Within the space of the threshold-*qanṭara* at al-Nur Square, the tents functioned as negative spaces where the protestors could debate, test, and modify the construction of a yearned-for non-sectarian country.

Conclusion

To return to the question of the implications of reading the spatial dynamics at al-Nur Square protests as profanations of the sectarian apparatus, I would argue that spatial profanation represents the Tripolitan rewriting of the conflation of the religious and political on which sectarianism relies. The uniqueness of the Tripoli protests is that

elements of space and movement, formerly monopolised by sectarian means, were set in motion and juxtaposed to reflect the actual change in the citizens' perception of the role of the sectarian political apparatus. In addition to mirroring, these spatial dynamics constituted a force that displaced sectarian conflict from the political field onto the aesthetic field. Within that field, the protestors continue to create and reconfigure spaces to imagine other forms of togetherness that challenge the current historical sectarian narrative.

Here, it could be argued that the protestors' attempt at profanation risks relocating the sacred to the sphere of the protestors' agency. The protestors seem to reinscribe the sacred by resacralising themselves as agents of change. However, this article holds that this instance of rescaralisation is integral to any process of profanation whereby the protestors engage, renegotiate and redefine both the notion of the sacred and that of the profane. This space of profanation-in-making entertains, welcomes and is hospitable to the risk of reinscribing sacralisation in other forms as long as it maintains the profanation of sectarianism as its aim. In this space of the threshold-*qantara*, the focus is on the protestors' engagement with and negotiation of the mechanisms of sacralisation, whether sectarian or otherwise, in order to reach their goal of de-sectarianisation.

The al-Ghandur building, the Quranic verse, and the tents have since been supplemented with further icons of the revolution, such as the sculpture of the bride and the pan tree. These continue to stand as symbols of the revolution as al-Nur square comes to resemble a museum, rather than a political square. It has become a space for the display of artefacts created by revolutionaries and open to aesthetic admiration. As the revolution continues to face its struggles and its challenges, one fact remains pertinent to this discussion. Profanation is still in motion as sectarian apparatuses continue to jostle for control over the public. The creation of negative spaces have become more incendiary as fires, rather than tents, have become the tool to achieve that aim. Although it has been a tool employed by the Tripolitan revolutionaries, erasing spaces continues to operate in more subtle forms that transcend the Tripolitan borders. While apparently non-sectarian, the recent 4 August 2020 Beirut explosions that 'killed at least 200 people and injured around 5,000 others' as well as rendered '300,000 people homeless' is a witness that incendiary forces of profanation are still operational ('Beirut Explosion', 2020). In fact, these forces seem to have gained a power of their own that neither the revolutionaries nor the authorities seem to be able to control. In Tripoli, erasing spaces, while retaining monuments to the protests, presents a stark image. This Tripolitan space of the threshold-*qanṭara*, of which Beirut has witnessed an incendiary variation, lays manifest a force of profanation that borders on the verge between promise and chaos, between heaven and hell, that only time can resolve.

Notes

1. By adopting Agamben's notion of 'profanation' to study the 17 October 2019 Lebanese Revolution, this article contributes to an increasing interest in reading Middle Eastern conflicts through the lens of Agamben's biopolitics and its spatial underpinnings. For example, in his study of the colonial occupation of Palestine, Achilles Mbembe (in *Necropolitics*) employs Agamben's notion of the camp within which inhabitants are reduced to 'bare life' and deprived of any rights to show how geography and identity are closely linked. In a slightly

different take on space, Derek Gregory (in *The Colonial Present*) investigates the physical creation of Agamben's 'space of exception' where bare life is abandoned in Palestine, Afghanistan and Iraq. Adopting the lens of Edward Said's 'imaginative geographies', Gregory illustrates how current colonial powers employ their colonial legacy to create spaces of exception whereby space becomes a mode of 'performance'. A third take on the spatial dimensions of Agamben's 'bare life' within the Middle East is Simon Mabon's 'Sovereignty, bare life and the Arab Uprisings'. In his study of the post-Arab Uprisings Middle East, Mabon links Agamben's 'bare life' to territoriality to highlight the importance of 'bringing back' and revisiting debates on the concept of agency in relation to sovereignty within the Middle East. While 'bare life' is not a concept with which this article deals, it highlights the significant role that Agamben gives to space in political calculations. Within the Middle East, and specifically Lebanon, profanation assumes a spatial guise that the protestors employ to regain agency, revisit sovereignty as well as redefine their sectarian identity. See Achilles Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (London: Duke University Press, 2019), pp. 66–92; Derek Gregory, *The Colonial Present* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), quote on p.19–28; Simon Mabon, 'Sovereignty, bare life and the Arab uprisings', *Third World Quarterly*, 38 (8) (2017), pp.1782–1799, //doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2017.1294483, quote on p. 1793.

2. The square is part of the Beirut-Tripoli coastal highway that used to be lined by the militia checkpoints during the civil war. Bernard Rougier, The Sunni Tragedy in the Middle East: Northern Lebanon from al-Qaeda to ISIS (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011), p.23.

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Notes on contributor

Hiba Ghanem is assistant professor of Philosophy at the Department of Sociology, Istanbul Gelisim University, Turkey. She received her PhD from the Department of Politics, Philosophy and Religion, Lancaster Univeristy, UK. Her research focuses on the fomulation of justice by the protests in the Middle East and North Africa.

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