

Lebanon's political dynamics: population, religion and the region

*Salma Mahmood **

As the Lebanese political crisis deepens, it becomes imperative to examine its roots and find out if there is a pattern to the present predicament, in examination of the past. Upon tracing the historical background, it becomes evident that the Lebanese socio-political system has been influenced by three major factors: the population demographic, regional atmosphere and sub-national identity politics. Though not an anomaly, Lebanon is one of the few remaining consociational democracies¹ in the world. However, with the current political deadlock in the country, it is questionable how long this system will sustain. This article will take a thematic approach and begin with the historical precedent in each context linking it to the current situation for a better comprehension of the multifaceted nuclei shaping the country's turbulent course.

Population Demographics

Majority of the causal explanations cited to comprehend the contemporary religio-political problems confronting the Middle East have their roots in the imperialist games. Hence, it is in the post First World War French mandate that we find the foundations of the Lebanese paradigm. In 1919, the French decision was taken to concede the Maronite demands and grant the state of a Greater Lebanon. Previously, under the Ottoman rule, there existed an autonomous district of Lebanon consisting solely of Mount Lebanon and a 1914 population of about 400,000; four-fifth Christian and one-fifth Muslim. Amongst the Christian population, the Maronites held majority with 60 per cent. After the First World War and the loss of Lebanon's autonomous status, the Maronites had two major demands of the French: they wanted a state which would be large enough to hold its own fort and one where the Christians, in light of their majority, would sustain primary control over the state system.²

In conceding to the Maronite demands, and expanding the demographics of the newly established 'Greater Lebanon', the addition of Tripoli, Akkar, Biqa valley, Hasbayya, Rashaya, Jabil Amil and the coastal strip that included Tyre, Sidon and Beirut was made. The addition of these regions brought with it a completely new population dynamic.

Though the Christians were still in majority at 55 per cent, the Maronites, while still the largest community, were now only one-third of the whole equation, with the Sunnis at one-fifth of the population. Over time, due to low rates of emigration and a higher natural increase, especially in the Shia population (17 per cent in 1921), Christian numerical superiority eroded. By 1932, the balance was 51 per cent against 49 per cent.³ Due to the political sensitivity of the population makeup, no formal census has been conducted since 1932. However, educated estimates and regional influxes have provided a sufficient assessment of the population status since. In Southern Lebanon by 1948, the presence of the Palestinian refugees on the outskirts of Lebanon's major cities — Beirut, Tripoli, and Sidon — was enough to substantially tip the population balance and weaken the government. Their adverse affect was felt primarily for two reasons: it shifted the Muslim-Christian demographic balance in favour of the Muslims, which threatened the Maronite population; and it rendered a parasitic relationship with the host regime, causing an additional social, political and economic challenge. If by the 1932 census, the Christians had slightly outnumbered the Muslims by the mid to late 1970s, it was estimated that the Muslims had surpassed the Christians in number due to larger Muslim birth rates and the influx of the Palestinian refugees which had mushroomed to over 350,000.⁴

These demographic changes concerned the Maronites because they feared that it would undermine their political supremacy and Lebanon may be converted into a Muslim state if the Muslims increase their political representation. This not only reinforced the minority status of the Maronites within the Arab world but also lowered their status in terms of policy formulation, and became the partial reason for the Maronites' sporadic clamp down on the Palestinian refugee camps.

The reason population dynamics continue to influence Lebanese realpolitik is because the premise of granting Maronite political supremacy, in accordance with their demands in 1919, was their majority

status. Hence, the disintegration of the Maronite majority status would be substantially threatening to their political domination and remains a central issue of contention in the confessional balance.

Confessional System; Sub-national Identity Politics

Another fundamental context in assessing Lebanese history is the conceptualisation of the confessional system. In 1922, representative councils to the ruling French governors were established, this was significant for the future of Lebanon because the deputies were elected on a confessional basis; were divided proportionately among religious communities. The system was established in 1922 and dated back to the mid-nineteenth century, and managed to prevail despite attempts by Sarail in 1925 to abolish the system and install a secular apparatus.

Subsequently, the concrete re-consolidation of the confessional system took place during the fight for independence from the French. Sectarian squabbles had compelled the French to suspend the constitution in 1935. But that resulted in the unification of the sects against the common French enemy and led to the formation of a key alliance in the achievement of independence; Christian-Muslim cooperation.⁵ An unwritten understanding about power sharing, known as the National Pact, was founded. Based on the wave of the unified sentiment that rose in the post-1935 period, the national pact endeavoured to secure cooperation in a pluralist polity in which power was based on a confessional basis. In practice it merely endorsed traditional Lebanese politics, and was organized as follows:

- President: Maronite
- Prime Minister: Sunni Muslim
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Although the confessional mechanism functioned relatively successfully for 30 years, regional turmoil had extremely adverse consequences for the Lebanese elite coalition. 'The mutually reinforcing nature of the Palestinian crisis, pan-Arabism, and inter-Arab discord fragmented the Sunni-Maronite ruling coalition to the extent that it effectively dissolved in 1975.'⁶ The divisive nature of leftist-Muslim socio-political demands and the Palestinian issue made it virtually unfeasible for the Sunnis and Maronites to retain the same policy positions. Although both the Maronite leaders (Franjiyeh, Chamoun, Gemayel, Father Kassis) and the Sunni oligarchs (Karami, al-Sulk, Salam) agreed that the Sunni-Maronite formula should not be altered, the Palestinian issue ultimately 'proved fatally divisive.'⁷ While the Sunni leadership supported the Palestinian raids against Israel, the Maronites plotted their confrontations with the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO). And in April 1973, the Sunni-Maronite partnership collapsed after Israel raided Beirut, Prime Minister Salam resigned rendering the Muslim half of the coalition ineffective and resultantly civil war erupted.

However, the Taif Accord was a significant shift in the confessional systemic. The Taif Agreement (also "National Reconciliation Accord" or "Document of National Accord"), was an agreement reached to provide "the basis for the ending of the civil war and the return to political normalcy in Lebanon." Negotiated in Taif, Saudi Arabia, it was designed to end the decades-long Lebanese civil war, politically accommodate the demographic shift to a Muslim majority, reassert Lebanese authority in South Lebanon (then occupied by Israel), and legitimize the Syrian occupation of Lebanon. It was signed on October 22, 1989 and ratified on November 4, 1989. Although it was a fundamental change to the Lebanese political system, it was still not able to entirely reconcile the issues which tore at the core of the Lebanese political fabric, namely the Palestinian refugee problem and the issues of political representation.

Although the Palestinian and political reform issues fragmented the Christian-Muslim coalition, they also created inter-community divisions within the Muslim and Christian elites. Within the Christian camp, the main reason for this disparity is that the Maronites have traditionally been the sole representatives of the Christians. In effect, Christian elite solidarity was tantamount to Maronite elite cohesion. And the fact of the matter is that although the Maronite elites that comprised the Lebanese Front⁸ (Chamoun, Gemayel, Franjiyeh and Kassis) competed and tried to undercut one another for the presidency, they also held

substantially divergent viewpoints on collaboration with Syria and the Palestinian issue. Although they maintained unity in 1975, it appears that similar problems are emerging for the new generation of Christian leaders in the present context, which are elaborated upon later.

In the Muslim context, elite cooperation was complicated by the presence of three sects (Sunni, Shia and Druze⁹), each with strong leadership. Though the 'ruling formula' prior to the civil war privileged the Sunnis, however they could not entirely discount the policy positions of the Shia elites, particularly since the speaker of the Chamber of Deputies was always Shia. Coupled with local populist figures such as Musa al-Sadr¹⁰ who commanded quite a substantial following and the revolutionary Jumblatt (a Druze leader with a secular outlook having considerable influence amongst the public) the Sunni ruling elite could not ignore voices from other factions. While the Sunni elites such as Prime Minister Salam struggled to maintain the socio-political status quo, Jumblatt was trying to instigate a socio-political revolution, al-Sadr was fighting for the improvement of the standards of living and greater political representation amongst the Shia population and Kamel al Asad (speaker of the Chamber) was detaching himself from these movements by disagreeing with al-Sadr and Jumblatt to retain his perceived credibility with the establishment and expand his power as speaker of the Chamber.

This disintegration of subgroup cohesion increased further on the Muslim side when students, intelligentsia, workers' unions and peasants became radicalised following four seminal events in the region: the 1967 war, the arrival of the PLO in Lebanon and the consequent Israeli reprisals, the spread of Arab and Palestinian nationalist ideologies and Egypt's participation in the Camp David accords. Tensions between the Muslim oligarchs and radicalised masses were mainly centred upon socioeconomic and political changes demanded by the Muslim left but escalated due to these events. There were the grievances of the lower class Muslims residing in southern Lebanon and Beirut over the inability of the Lebanese government to protect them from Israeli mortar attacks, air strikes and incursions. Hostility from the oligarchs, on the other hand, was directed towards the activities of the perceived Muslim militants; they felt that Israeli retaliation to these attacks would unravel the ruling dissensus, and correctly so as this is what commenced the civil war to an extent. Thus, once the 'newer' elites representing the leftist radical groups recognized that they would not be integrated into the political system, they began to undercut establishment Muslims, weakening 'the clientelist foundations of Lebanese political culture.'¹¹ The most prominent member of this ad hoc leftist community was Jumblatt,¹² who amplified the disintegration of the Muslim camp through his mission to deconfessionalize the political system and aspiring for Prime Ministership, although it must be noted that a far more serious threat to the subgroup cohesion arose from the leftist camps, Marxist rejectionist Palestinian groups, Arab Liberation Front, Syrian Socialist Nationalist party, communist and Nasserist groups. Like Christian militias (Phalanges, Kataib, Tigers) these militias were notorious for undermining ceasefires at the beginning of the civil war and to a large extent still continue to perpetuate violence. It is also important to note that the inter-Muslim roles in the political polities remain fairly similar in the current context with Saad Hariri as the reigning oligarch and Hezbollah as the opposition. However, the key difference is that Hezbollah has now been incorporated into the formal political system, which is a far cry from their status as a rejectionist militia in the 1970s.

On the Christian side, the Palestinian problem also placed considerable strain on intra-Christian elite. While Maronite elites such as Franjiyeh and Chamoun were publicly attempting to hold the ruling coalition together, militias controlled by some of these very same elites (Liberation Army of Zgharta, Phalanges, and the Tigers) were undercutting elite cooperation amid attempts to stave off civil violence. The intent of these militias was to exert control over the Palestinians and maintain the privileged status of the Maronites. And although scholarship argues that the Maronite elites, who led these militias, retained strict control of them, the militias often seemed to act in a possibly but perhaps not entirely arbitrary fashion. For example, they often refused to honour ceasefire agreements and occasionally went 'completely berserk' as in December 1975 when they massacred 200 Muslims in Beirut allegedly in retaliation for the killings of four Phalanges.¹³ However, in the case of moderate Christian politicians, these leaders were willing to concede a large share of power in the confessional system to the Muslim communities and to reach some kind of accommodation with the Palestinians in the interest of maintaining the Lebanese state (Elias Sarkis, Raymond Edde). And it is largely due to these figures and their Muslim counterparts, that the Lebanese systemic has remained functional until the tenure of Emile Lahoud.

Regional Dynamics

Since its conception the Lebanese system has had to contend with the challenge of establishing a democracy not only in a deeply divided society, but one where groups with shared identities transcend the state boundaries. As noted above, the nature of sub-national identity politics turns the domestic policy issues of communal groups into regional crises involving several states.

In the context of a case study; the best example would be the Lebanese civil war. In the theoretical framework, internal instability is indeed linked to external (regional) conflicts. And although there is no doubt that 'consociational failure stems from the cessation of elite consensus, regional factors represent important antecedent variables that contribute to elite dissension and ultimately regime collapse.'¹⁴ In the case of the Lebanese civil war, alongside the sub-national identity dynamic, alluded to in the section above, regional factors also rendered a phenomenal effect.

Palestine:

The most salient regional influence on the Lebanese system has been of the Palestinians. In the aftermath of 'Black September' when the Palestinian Liberation Organisation was expelled from Jordan in 1970; there was a major shift in the scale of the Palestinian population towards Lebanon. It is in the concentration of Palestinians we find the regional complications which exacerbated civil instability in Lebanon. Although like in any major conflict, multifaceted factors were responsible for the outbreak of the civil war, in the Lebanese context; regional factors had far more dire consequences. The killing of a protester by the Lebanese army, who happened to be the Sunni Muslim leader of the Popular Nasserite Organization of Sidon, triggered domestic unrest. However, in an attempt to stave off the army from taking over the city in context of reactionary protests, Palestinian commandos joined the radical Lebanese militiamen and the Palestinian left continued to dominate the opposition to the Lebanese Kataib.¹⁵ Further unrest resulted in direct clashes which led to fighting between the Kataib and the Palestinian militias and leftist Muslims resulting in death of over 300 people in three days. This level of Palestinian-leftist cooperation exemplified the extent to which the socioeconomic and political discontent was becoming inextricably intertwined with the Palestinian issue. Significantly, the ascendant activism that emerged amongst the Palestinians coincided with the rising protests and discontent that had manifested itself among the Muslim lower classes and those in the middle strata both of which had been excluded from the political system. Thus, 'the movement of social change' became linked to the Palestinian liberation movement. The Palestinian liberation movement, gained momentum in Lebanon in the aftermath of the Six-Day War (1967). The expulsion of the Palestinian commandos from Jordan at the end of the 1970s had made Lebanon the only base for operations against Israel; this initiated Israeli retaliation and angered the Maronite population. The aftermath of the Six-Day War further polarized the Maronite disenchantment with the Palestinians and 'the Arab-Israeli peace settlement in the 1970s increased the load on the Lebanese political system, which divided its masses and subsequently destroyed the elite consensus and Lebanon's proclaimed ideological neutrality.'¹⁶

After the 1967 war, the Palestinian population in Lebanon began launching raids across the Lebanon-Israel border with increased regularity. The Israeli army's overwhelming victory and the unequivocal support provided by the United States following the outbreak of war, mobilized the large Palestinian refugee camp population and its militias by igniting both Palestinian and Arab nationalist feelings.

Syria:

The Six-Day War (1967) also had a direct impact on Syria's relationship with Lebanon. In the historical context, Syria has sought to reserve a patronship role over Lebanon, given the belief (correctly so) that Syrian boundary with Lebanon was artificially drawn up by France to suit its colonial interests and given the presence of approximately 300,000 Syrian workers in Lebanon. However, the more pressing issue was that Israel's occupation of the Golan Heights increased the strategic significance of Lebanon for the Syrian regime.



As is evident from the map above, if the Israeli army was to penetrate South Lebanon in addition to occupying the Golan Heights, it could potentially attack Syria from two fronts. Thus, if Israel were able to annex Southern Lebanon, the Israeli defence forces would only have to travel about 18 miles to Damascus via the Bekaa Valley. Alternatively, an Israeli-PLO conflict could have led to partition, which was also undesirable in Syrian calculations. Specifically, if PLO operations provoked Israeli intervention in Lebanon, Syria feared that the Maronite Christians would solicit support from Israel and possibly create a separate state in the area of Mount Lebanon, and Israel would resultantly annex Southern Lebanon. The remaining Lebanese territory would then take the form of a leftist guerrilla state supported by Iraq and Libya which would be an idea beachhead into Syria. Iraq and Libya directly threatened the Syrian Ba'athist regime because of their perceived intention to turn Lebanon into a confrontationist state against Israel, which would inevitably endanger Syria's security.

An undesirable internal schism in Lebanon, in the scenario that the leftist Muslim camp defeated the rightist Maronite camp in civil war would also result in a radicalized Lebanon which would be permeable to Iraqi and Libyan influence. Consequently, Hafiz al-Assad, Syria's leader prior to and following the civil war, understood that although he needed to support the Palestinian resistance, he also needed to control it in order to preserve the Lebanese regime and prevent Israel's occupation of Lebanon or other adverse outcomes. Naturally, the attempted influence exerted over the PLO by Syria was resented by Palestinian leaders (including Arafat), who opposed foreign manipulation of the Palestinian resistance and reinforced by the local Lebanese who opposed the Syrians on the basis that their direct intervention led to the victory of the Maronites in the civil war.

In fact, Syrian interference was resented to such an extreme that in the aftermath of Rafiq Hariri's¹⁷ assassination on February 14, 2005, the Cedar Revolution or Independence Intifada (Intifada-al-Istiqlal) erupted. It was a chain of demonstrations and popular civic action in Lebanon (especially in the capital Beirut), demanding the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon, the establishment of an international commission to investigate the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri, the resignation of security officials, and the organization of free parliamentary elections. At the start of the demonstrations, Syria had been maintaining a force of roughly 14,000 soldiers and intelligence agents in Lebanon. Following the demonstrations, the Syrian troops completely withdrew from Lebanon on April 27, 2005. The pro-Syrian government was also disbanded, accomplishing the main goal of the revolution.

However, the fact of the matter is that even other regimes in the region were and continue to face a threat from Palestinian and Arab nationalism. Particularly, militant Palestinian nationalism in Lebanon posed a formidable challenge to the stability of the regime and went on to capture the attention of the Saudis and other conservative regimes who found it in their interest to fight against the leftist Muslim camp in order to establish a bulwark against the forces of radicalism, while simultaneously enacting the veneer of supporting the PLO due to the popular public sentiment.

These regional complexities naturally coloured the Lebanese political makeup substantially. Traditionally, the opposition group was made up of pro-Syrian, Iranian-backed Hezbollah and Amal, and the anti-Syrian Free Patriotic Movement (FPM). A number of smaller parties were also involved, including the Marada Party, the Lebanese Communist Party and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party. The majority of the members of the government were part of the anti-Syrian March 14 Alliance,¹⁸ a coalition of political parties and independents in Lebanon. The two groups were also divided along religious lines, with Sunnis and Druze supporting the government, and Shias supporting the opposition group. The Christian community was also split between the two factions. And it must be noted, that in the current situation, the same political associations prevail.

Israel

Finally, Israel's role in the Palestinian crisis and in Lebanon's spiral towards civil war in 1975, and in general, the state of Lebanese politics cannot be overstated. In addition to representing a critical part of Syria's calculus, Israel's foreign policy towards Lebanon, namely, its policy of using airstrikes, mortar attacks and incursions to induce a response from the Lebanese government which would result in the expulsion of the PLO (like in Jordan 1970) has played a fundamental role in intensifying conflict within the region and promoting cleavages within the Lebanese communities. For example, Israel's raids on Beirut in 1968, 1973, 1980 and 2006, its support for the Maronite Christians during the civil war and since, and its sponsorship of the Southern Lebanon Army (SLA) and its leader Sa'ad Haddad,¹⁹ dealt a serious blow to the Lebanese regime by fragmenting the Muslim camp and making the Lebanese army appear impotent and sectarian. Furthermore, in the context of non-state actors, Israel remains the *raison d'être* for their existence and the justified legitimating of their armed status.

The assistance provided by the Israelis to the Maronite camp also warrants attention. The Israeli government viewed a weak Lebanon, permeable to influence by Palestinian groups as well as Syria as a major threat to its security. Organizations such as Hezbollah, which have emerged as a major adversary to Israel, also pose an additional threat to the Israeli forces, particularly in the aftermath of the 2006 war where arguably Hezbollah retaliated against the Israeli attacks with effective military tactics and relatively high grade weapon systems (provided by Iran according to US and Israeli intelligence).²⁰ The fact is that the intention of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was not to purge Lebanon of the PLO but to establish a military force in there with the strength and ability to counter them. And the best perceived way to fulfil this policy was to supply the Lebanese Forces and the Kataib with light and heavy weapon munitions, and to also extend military training. However, a counter consequence of these militias was that it further strengthened the Muslim left and increased the ferocity of attacks on Israel, further polarising the religious dynamics in the country.

Current Situation:

As of 9 February, 2008, Lebanon has delayed elections for the 13th time since September 25, 2007 in the aftermath of a failure to install a successor to Emile Lahoud, the president who stepped down in November 2007.²¹

The government is completely split between anti-Syrian and pro-Syrian factions. The first is a loose alliance of Sunnis, Christians and Druze and enjoys the support of the United States. The second is an essentially Shia grouping dominated by Hezbollah, with the backing of Syria and Iran. The political deadlock has persisted into 2008, defying the mediation efforts of various Arab states.

The Arab initiative plan calls for General Michel Suleiman, the army chief, to be elected as president, the formation of a national unity government in which no one party has veto power, and the adoption of a new electoral law. Rival Lebanese leaders have agreed on Suleiman as the candidate to fill the presidency but

are at odds over the make up of the government. The ruling majority led by Saad Hariri has accepted the bid but the Hezbollah-led opposition is demanding it be granted a third of the seats in a new government so the opposition can have veto power. The opposition, which has nearly 45 per cent of the parliamentary seats, was seeking to create a national unity government, in which it demanded more than one-third of the Cabinet seats. This would give them veto power as well as the ability to topple the government.

Although the Muslim members, the pro-Western coalition led by Sunni Muslim Saad Hariri and the Hezbollah dominated opposition led by Shiite leader Hasaan Nasrallah remain united upon the nomination of Suleiman, it is the veto issue that has to be settled. Also amongst the Christian leaders, division prevails upon the additional issue of how to amend the constitution for the army chief to assume his role. The result of this deadlock is that both major blocs of the confessional government are not able to reach a consensus and many see the dispute over Suleiman as underscoring the subsidiary role played by Christian leaders in Parliament. (The leaders of both parliamentary factions, who happen to be Muslim). The persisting Christian disunity is being exacerbated by rumours that Hezbollah will alter the Taif Accord and demand that Lebanon change its constitution to reduce Christian representation from half to a third.²² Though Suleiman is a Maronite, his presence is not reassuring to the Christian parliamentarians because he remains on good terms with Hezbollah and the Syrians.

The public is getting further infuriated with a distinct increase in emigration, reported in the past few months, due to the political crises, suggesting that the remaining Christian population constitutes a lowly 30 per cent of the population.²³

Essentially, the current deadlock represents the culmination of all the problematic dynamics encompassed in Lebanese politics. The population demographics, regional influences and the fragility of the confessional system in the face of challenges are all reinforcing the crisis and polarising the binding elements of the governance systemic disintegrating in the face of the power struggle. Conclusively, it would be prudent to quote Yapp's insight into the Lebanese paradigm, "It is arguable that the division of power on a confessional basis is only tolerable so long as there is not much power to divide; if the stakes become too great then those who feel they have too small a share of the spoils will challenge the division or even the basis of the system."²⁴

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In the Muslim context, elite cooperation was complicated by the presence of three sects (Sunni, Shia and Druze⁹), each with strong leadership. Though the 'ruling formula' prior to the civil war privileged the Sunnis, however they could not entirely discount the policy positions of the Shia elites, particularly since the speaker of the Chamber of Deputies was always Shia. Coupled with local populist figures such as Musa al-Sadr¹⁰ who commanded quite a substantial following and the revolutionary Jumblatt (a Druze leader with a secular outlook having considerable influence amongst the public) the Sunni ruling elite could not ignore voices from other factions. While the Sunni elites such as Prime Minister Salam struggled to maintain the socio-political status quo, Jumblatt was trying to instigate a socio-political revolution, al-Sadr was fighting for the improvement of the standards of living and greater political representation amongst the Shia population and Kamel al Asad (speaker of the Chamber) was detaching himself from these movements by disagreeing with al-Sadr and Jumblatt to retain his perceived credibility with the establishment and expand his power as speaker of the Chamber.

This disintegration of subgroup cohesion increased further on the Muslim side when students, intelligentsia, workers' unions and peasants became radicalised following four seminal events in the region: the 1967 war, the arrival of the PLO in Lebanon and the consequent Israeli reprisals, the spread of Arab and Palestinian nationalist ideologies and Egypt's participation in the Camp David accords. Tensions between the Muslim oligarchs and radicalised masses were mainly centred upon socioeconomic and political changes demanded by the Muslim left but escalated due to these events. There were the grievances of the lower class Muslims residing in southern Lebanon and Beirut over the inability of the Lebanese government to protect them from Israeli mortar attacks, air strikes and incursions. Hostility from the oligarchs, on the other hand, was directed towards the activities of the perceived Muslim militants; they felt that Israeli retaliation to these attacks would unravel the ruling dissensus, and correctly so as this is what commenced the civil war to an extent. Thus, once the 'newer'

elites representing the leftist radical groups recognized that they would not be integrated into the political system, they began to undercut establishment Muslims, weakening 'the clientelist foundations of Lebanese political culture.'¹¹ The most prominent member of this ad hoc leftist community was Jumblatt,¹² who amplified the disintegration of the Muslim camp through his mission to deconfessionalize the political system and aspiring for Prime Ministership, although it must be noted that a far more serious threat to the subgroup cohesion arose from the leftist camps, Marxist rejectionist Palestinian groups, Arab Liberation Front, Syrian Socialist Nationalist party, communist and Nasserist groups. Like Christian militias (Phalanges, Kataib, Tigers) these militias were notorious for undermining ceasefires at the beginning of the civil war and to a large extent still continue to perpetuate violence. It is also important to note that the inter-Muslim roles in the political politics remain fairly similar in the current context with Saad Hariri as the reigning oligarch and Hezbollah as the opposition. However, the key difference is that Hezbollah has now been incorporated into the formal political system, which is a far cry from their status as a rejectionist militia in the 1970s.

On the Christian side, the Palestinian problem also placed considerable strain on intra-Christian elite. While Maronite elites such as Franjiyeh and Chamoun were publicly attempting to hold the ruling coalition together, militias controlled by some of these very same elites (Liberation Army of Zgharta, Phalanges, and the Tigers) were undercutting elite cooperation amid attempts to stave off civil violence. The intent of these militias was to exert control over the Palestinians and maintain the privileged status of the Maronites. And although scholarship argues that the Maronite elites, who led these militias, retained strict control of them, the militias often seemed to act in a possibly but perhaps not entirely arbitrary fashion. For example, they often refused to honour ceasefire agreements and occasionally went 'completely berserk' as in December 1975 when they massacred 200 Muslims in Beirut allegedly in retaliation for the killings of four Phalanges.¹³ However, in the case of moderate Christian politicians, these leaders were willing to concede a large share of power in the confessional system to the Muslim communities and to reach some kind of accommodation with the Palestinians in the interest of maintaining the Lebanese state (Elias Sarkis, Raymond Edde). And it is largely due to these figures and their Muslim counterparts, that the Lebanese systemic has remained functional until the tenure of Emile Lahoud.

Regional Dynamics

Since its conception the Lebanese system has had to contend with the challenge of establishing a democracy not only in a deeply divided society, but one where groups with shared identities transcend the state boundaries. As noted above, the nature of sub-national identity politics turns the domestic policy issues of communal groups into regional crises involving several states.

In the context of a case study; the best example would be the Lebanese civil war. In the theoretical framework, internal instability is indeed linked to external (regional) conflicts. And although there is no doubt that 'consociational failure stems from the cessation of elite consensus, regional factors represent important antecedent variables that contribute to elite dissension and ultimately regime collapse.'¹⁴ In the case of the Lebanese civil war, alongside the sub-national identity dynamic, alluded to in the section above, regional factors also rendered a phenomenal effect.

Palestine:

The most salient regional influence on the Lebanese system has been of the Palestinians. In the aftermath of 'Black September' when the Palestinian Liberation Organisation was expelled from Jordan in 1970; there was a major shift in the scale of the Palestinian population towards Lebanon. It is in the concentration of Palestinians we find the regional complications which exacerbated civil instability in Lebanon. Although like in any major conflict, multifaceted factors were responsible for the outbreak of the civil war, in the Lebanese context; regional factors had far more dire consequences. The killing of a protester by the Lebanese army, who happened to be the Sunni Muslim leader of the Popular Nasserite Organization of Sidon, triggered domestic unrest. However, in an attempt to stave off the army from taking over the city in context of reactionary protests, Palestinian commandos joined the radical Lebanese militiamen and the Palestinian left continued to dominate the opposition to the Lebanese Kataib.¹⁵ Further unrest resulted in direct clashes which led to fighting between the Kataib and the Palestinian militias and leftist Muslims resulting in death of over 300 people in three days. This level of Palestinian-leftist cooperation exemplified the extent to which the socioeconomic and political discontent was

becoming inextricably intertwined with the Palestinian issue. Significantly, the ascendant activism that emerged amongst the Palestinians coincided with the rising protests and discontent that had manifested itself among the Muslim lower classes and those in the middle strata both of which had been excluded from the political system. Thus, 'the movement of social change' became linked to the Palestinian liberation movement. The Palestinian liberation movement, gained momentum in Lebanon in the aftermath of the Six-Day War (1967). The expulsion of the Palestinian commandos from Jordan at the end of the 1970s had made Lebanon the only base for operations against Israel; this initiated Israeli retaliation and angered the Maronite population. The aftermath of the Six-Day War further polarized the Maronite disenchantment with the Palestinians and 'the Arab-Israeli peace settlement in the 1970s increased the load on the Lebanese political system, which divided its masses and subsequently destroyed the elite consensus and Lebanon's proclaimed ideological neutrality.'¹⁶

After the 1967 war, the Palestinian population in Lebanon began launching raids across the Lebanon-Israel border with increased regularity. The Israeli army's overwhelming victory and the unequivocal support provided by the United States following the outbreak of war, mobilized the large Palestinian refugee camp population and its militias by igniting both Palestinian and Arab nationalist feelings.

Syria:

The Six-Day War (1967) also had a direct impact on Syria's relationship with Lebanon. In the historical context, Syria has sought to reserve a patronship role over Lebanon, given the belief (correctly so) that Syrian boundary with Lebanon was artificially drawn up by France to suit its colonial interests and given the presence of approximately 300,000 Syrian workers in Lebanon. However, the more pressing issue was that Israel's occupation of the Golan Heights increased the strategic significance of Lebanon for the Syrian regime.



As is evident from the map above, if the Israeli army was to penetrate South Lebanon in addition to occupying the Golan Heights, it could potentially attack Syria from two fronts. Thus, if Israel were able to annex Southern Lebanon, the Israeli defence forces would only have to travel about 18 miles to Damascus via the Bekaa Valley. Alternatively, an Israeli-PLO conflict could have led to partition, which was also undesirable in Syrian calculations. Specifically, if PLO operations provoked Israeli intervention in Lebanon, Syria feared that the Maronite Christians would solicit support from Israel and possibly create a separate state in the area of Mount Lebanon, and Israel would resultantly annex Southern Lebanon. The

remaining Lebanese territory would then take the form of a leftist guerrilla state supported by Iraq and Libya which would be an idea beachhead into Syria. Iraq and Libya directly threatened the Syrian Ba'athist regime because of their perceived intention to turn Lebanon into a confrontationist state against Israel, which would inevitably endanger Syria's security.

An undesirable internal schism in Lebanon, in the scenario that the leftist Muslim camp defeated the rightist Maronite camp in civil war would also result in a radicalized Lebanon which would be permeable to Iraqi and Libyan influence. Consequently, Hafiz al-Assad, Syria's leader prior to and following the civil war, understood that although he needed to support the Palestinian resistance, he also needed to control it in order to preserve the Lebanese regime and prevent Israel's occupation of Lebanon or other adverse outcomes. Naturally, the attempted influence exerted over the PLO by Syria was resented by Palestinian leaders (including Arafat), who opposed foreign manipulation of the Palestinian resistance and reinforced by the local Lebanese who opposed the Syrians on the basis that their direct intervention led to the victory of the Maronites in the civil war.

In fact, Syrian interference was resented to such an extreme that in the aftermath of Rafiq Hariri's¹⁷ assassination on February 14, 2005, the Cedar Revolution or Independence Intifada (Intifada-al-Istiqlal) erupted. It was a chain of demonstrations and popular civic action in Lebanon (especially in the capital Beirut), demanding the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon, the establishment of an international commission to investigate the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri, the resignation of security officials, and the organization of free parliamentary elections. At the start of the demonstrations, Syria had been maintaining a force of roughly 14,000 soldiers and intelligence agents in Lebanon. Following the demonstrations, the Syrian troops completely withdrew from Lebanon on April 27, 2005. The pro-Syrian government was also disbanded, accomplishing the main goal of the revolution.

However, the fact of the matter is that even other regimes in the region were and continue to face a threat from Palestinian and Arab nationalism. Particularly, militant Palestinian nationalism in Lebanon posed a formidable challenge to the stability of the regime and went on to capture the attention of the Saudis and other conservative regimes who found it in their interest to fight against the leftist Muslim camp in order to establish a bulwark against the forces of radicalism, while simultaneously enacting the veneer of supporting the PLO due to the popular public sentiment.

These regional complexities naturally coloured the Lebanese political makeup substantially. Traditionally, the opposition group was made up of pro-Syrian, Iranian-backed Hezbollah and Amal, and the anti-Syrian Free Patriotic Movement (FPM). A number of smaller parties were also involved, including the Marada Party, the Lebanese Communist Party and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party. The majority of the members of the government were part of the anti-Syrian March 14 Alliance,¹⁸ a coalition of political parties and independents in Lebanon. The two groups were also divided along religious lines, with Sunnis and Druze supporting the government, and Shias supporting the opposition group. The Christian community was also split between the two factions. And it must be noted, that in the current situation, the same political associations prevail.

Israel

Finally, Israel's role in the Palestinian crisis and in Lebanon's spiral towards civil war in 1975, and in general, the state of Lebanese politics cannot be overstated. In addition to representing a critical part of Syria's calculus, Israel's foreign policy towards Lebanon, namely, its policy of using airstrikes, mortar attacks and incursions to induce a response from the Lebanese government which would result in the expulsion of the PLO (like in Jordan 1970) has played a fundamental role in intensifying conflict within the region and promoting cleavages within the Lebanese communities. For example, Israel's raids on Beirut in 1968, 1973, 1980 and 2006, its support for the Maronite Christians during the civil war and since, and its sponsorship of the Southern Lebanon Army (SLA) and its leader Sa'ad Haddad,¹⁹ dealt a serious blow to the Lebanese regime by fragmenting the Muslim camp and making the Lebanese army appear impotent and sectarian. Furthermore, in the context of non-state actors, Israel remains the *raison d'être* for their existence and the justified legitimating of their armed status.

The assistance provided by the Israelis to the Maronite camp also warrants attention. The Israeli government viewed a weak Lebanon, permeable to influence by Palestinian groups as well as Syria as a

major threat to its security. Organizations such as Hezbollah, which have emerged as a major adversary to Israel, also pose an additional threat to the Israeli forces, particularly in the aftermath of the 2006 war where arguably Hezbollah retaliated against the Israeli attacks with effective military tactics and relatively high grade weapon systems (provided by Iran according to US and Israeli intelligence).²⁰ The fact is that the intention of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was not to purge Lebanon of the PLO but to establish a military force in there with the strength and ability to counter them. And the best perceived way to fulfil this policy was to supply the Lebanese Forces and the Kataib with light and heavy weapon munitions, and to also extend military training. However, a counter consequence of these militias was that it further strengthened the Muslim left and increased the ferocity of attacks on Israel, further polarising the religious dynamics in the country.

Current Situation:

As of 9 February, 2008, Lebanon has delayed elections for the 13th time since September 25, 2007 in the aftermath of a failure to install a successor to Emile Lahoud, the president who stepped down in November 2007.²¹

The government is completely split between anti-Syrian and pro-Syrian factions. The first is a loose alliance of Sunnis, Christians and Druze and enjoys the support of the United States. The second is an essentially Shia grouping dominated by Hezbollah, with the backing of Syria and Iran. The political deadlock has persisted into 2008, defying the mediation efforts of various Arab states.

The Arab initiative plan calls for General Michel Suleiman, the army chief, to be elected as president, the formation of a national unity government in which no one party has veto power, and the adoption of a new electoral law. Rival Lebanese leaders have agreed on Suleiman as the candidate to fill the presidency but are at odds over the make up of the government. The ruling majority led by Saad Hariri has accepted the bid but the Hezbollah-led opposition is demanding it be granted a third of the seats in a new government so the opposition can have veto power. The opposition, which has nearly 45 per cent of the parliamentary seats, was seeking to create a national unity government, in which it demanded more than one-third of the Cabinet seats. This would give them veto power as well as the ability to topple the government.

Although the Muslim members, the pro-Western coalition led by Sunni Muslim Saad Hariri and the Hezbollah dominated opposition led by Shiite leader Hasaan Nasrallah remain united upon the nomination of Suleiman, it is the veto issue that has to be settled. Also amongst the Christian leaders, division prevails upon the additional issue of how to amend the constitution for the army chief to assume his role. The result of this deadlock is that both major blocs of the confessional government are not able to reach a consensus and many see the dispute over Suleiman as underscoring the subsidiary role played by Christian leaders in Parliament. (The leaders of both parliamentary factions, who happen to be Muslim). The persisting Christian disunity is being exacerbated by rumours that Hezbollah will alter the Taif Accord and demand that Lebanon change its constitution to reduce Christian representation from half to a third.²² Though Suleiman is a Maronite, his presence is not reassuring to the Christian parliamentarians because he remains on good terms with Hezbollah and the Syrians.

The public is getting further infuriated with a distinct increase in emigration, reported in the past few months, due to the political crises, suggesting that the remaining Christian population constitutes a lowly 30 per cent of the population.²³

Essentially, the current deadlock represents the culmination of all the problematic dynamics encompassed in Lebanese politics. The population demographics, regional influences and the fragility of the confessional system in the face of challenges are all reinforcing the crisis and polarising the binding elements of the governance systemic disintegrating in the face of the power struggle. Conclusively, it would be prudent to quote Yapp's insight into the Lebanese paradigm, "It is arguable that the division of power on a confessional basis is only tolerable so long as there is not much power to divide; if the stakes become too great then those who feel they have too small a share of the spoils will challenge the division or even the basis of the system."²⁴

References

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1. The consociational power sharing approach has been touted as the most promising model of political mechanisms for achieving sustainable democracy in societies beset by communal cleavages.
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4. Heiberg, Marianne "Lebanon and Premonitions of Battles to Come" Journal of Peace Research, vol. 20, no. 4 (Dec, 1983), p. 295.
5. Azar, F. and Mullet, E " Muslims and Christians in Lebanon: Common Views on Political Issues" Journal of Peace Research, vol. 39, no. 6 (Nov 2002) p. 739.
6. Seaver, Brenda M. "The Regional Sources of Power-Sharing Failure: The Case of Lebanon", Political Science Quarterly, vol. 115, no. 2 (Summer 2000), p. 251.
7. Ibid.
8. The Lebanese Front was a right-wing coalition of mainly Christian parties formed in 1976, during the Lebanese Civil War. It was intended to act as a counter force to the Lebanese National Movement (LNM) of Kamal Jumblatt and others. Its main participants were the Kataeb Party (Phalange) of Pierre Gemayel, Suleiman Franjeh and his Marada Brigade, the National Liberal Party (NLP) of Camille Chamoun, the Guardians of the Cedars of Etienne Saqr, and the Al-Tanzim of Georges Adwan. The members of this coalition broke off in 1978 as Bashir Gemayel tried to absorb all members under his wing which led to bloody attacks on his allies. Many believe this caused the breakup of the United Christian Lebanese Front as Bashir Gemayel also had fall outs with the prominent Christian families which led to violence. The members of this coalition created a strong political alliance before the breakup.
9. A heterodox offshoot of offshoot of the Ismaili sect of Islam, but is unique in its incorporation of Gnostic, neo-Platonic and other philosophies. Druze are not considered Muslims by most other Muslims because they are believed to address prayers to the Fatimid caliph Al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah, whom they regard as "a manifestation of God in His unity. found primarily in Lebanon, Israel, and Syria.
10. An Iranian-born Lebanese philosopher and a prominent Shi'a religious leader who spent many years of his life in Lebanon as a religious and political leader. Movement of the Disinherited developed an armed wing known as Afwaj al-Mouqawma Al-Lubnaniyya, better known as Amal. However, in 1976 he withdrew his support after the Syrian invasion on the side of Maronites. In August 1978 al-Sadr and two companions departed for Libya to meet with officials from Qaddafi's government. Al-Sadr and his companions were never heard from again.
11. Seaver, Brenda M. "The Regional Sources of Power-Sharing Failure: The Case of Lebanon", Political Science Quarterly, Vol. 115, No. 2 (Summer 2000) p 254.
12. Jumblatt was an important Lebanese politician. He was the main leader of the anti-government forces in the Lebanese Civil War until his assassination in 1977. Kamal Jumblatt officially founded the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) and declared its constitution on May 1, 1949. The PSP was a socialist party espousing secularism and officially opposed to the sectarian character of Lebanese politics. He is the father of the present Lebanese Druze leader Walid Jumblatt.
13. Cobban. Helena "Lebanon's Chinese Puzzle" Foreign Policy, no. 53 (Winter 1983-1984), p 40
14. Seaver, Brenda M. "The Regional Sources of Power-Sharing Failure: The Case of Lebanon", Political Science Quarterly, vol. 115, no. 2 (Summer 2000) p, 259.
15. The Lebanese Kataeb Party is a Lebanese political party first established by Pierre Gemayel in 1936 as a youth movement.. Although officially secular it is mainly supported by Maronite Christians. The party played a major role in the Lebanese war. In decline in the late 1980s and 1990s, the party slowly re-emerged since

the early 2000s. It is now part of the parliamentary majority, the March 14 Alliance, opposed to the alliance led by Hezbollah and the Free Patriotic Movement.

16. Cobban, Helena "Lebanon's Chinese Puzzle" Foreign Policy, no. 53 (Winter 1983-1984), p. 39.
17. Prime Minister of Lebanon from 1992 to 1998 and again from 2000 until his resignation, 20 October 2004. He headed five cabinets during his tenure. Hariri dominated the country's post-war political and business life and is widely credited with getting the country back on its feet after the devastating 15-year civil war. Traditionally opposed to Syrian intervention in Lebanon. His son, Saad Hariri is the current Prime Minister of Lebanon and is heading the March 14 coalition.
18. The March 14 Alliance named after the date of the Cedar Revolution, is a coalition of anti-Syrian political parties and independents in Lebanon, led by Saad Hariri, younger son of Rafik Hariri, the assassinated former prime minister of Lebanon, Samir Geagea president of the Lebanese Forces, former President Sheik Amine Gemayel and Walid Jumblatt of Progressive Socialist Party.
19. At the beginning of the Lebanon Civil War, Haddad, a major in the Lebanese Army commanded a battalion to engage the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) in south Lebanon. It was here where he joined a few other Christian soldiers to form the Free Lebanon Army. Haddad's militia collaborated with Israel and received the bulk of its arms, equipment, supplies and ordnance from Israel. The SLA controlled Israel's "Security Zone" following its invasion of Lebanon beginning in 1982. In 1984 Haddad died of cancer. His successor as the head of the SLA was general Antoine Lahad.
20. Lebanon's militias are potentially in possession of more weapons than the Lebanese army due to foreign suppliers.
21. Al Jazeera, 20 January, 2008.
22. Fil, Rana "Lebanon's Exodus" Newsweek, 11 December, 2007.
23. Ibid
24. Yapp, Malcom "Making of the Modern Near East" London : Longman, 1987. p 71