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The Uneasy Inter-communal Relations in Lebanon

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Abstract
This paper presents the development of the inter-communal relations in Lebanon and it approaches issues such as diversity and identity. Ever since the creation of modern Lebanon in 1920, the principle of proportionality has been subject of a significant inter-communal debate. Although, proportionality was to support state's development and fair representation of all religious groups, it ended up the basis for a rigid political system, which turned into a major problem for the inter-communal political relationship, situation which escalated to civil war. The war, not only emphasized the inter-communal debate of what constituted a fair power-distribution system, but it also deepened this question, because it added new components such as new political actors.
Keywords: Middle East, Lebanon, Identity, Diversity.
JEL Classification Codes: Y80.

Lübnan'da Toplumlararası Gergin İlişkiler[*]

Öz
Bu çalışma Lübnan'da toplumlar arası ilişkileri kimlik ve toplumsal çeşitlilik bağlamında analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. 1920 yılında modern Lübnan'ın kuruluşundan itibaren orantılılık prensibi meydana gelen toplumsal çatışmaların ana nedeni olmuştur. Orantılılık ilkesiyle ülke içerişimde yaşayan dini gruplar arasında adil bir temsil sistemi oluşturarak ülkenin gelişimine katkıda bulunması öngörülürken tam tersine bahsi geçen ilke ülkede siyasal sistemin çok daha sert bir hale dönüşmesine ve iç savaşa kadar uzanan bir sürece neden olmuştur. Savaş ülke içerisinde yaşanan güç paylaşımı hususuyla ilintili olmanın ötesinde aynı zamanda ülke siyasetinde yer alan yeni aktörlerinde meydana çıkışına neden olmuştur.
Anahtar Kelimeler: Ortadoğu, Lübnan, Kimlik, Çeşitlilik.
JEL Sınıflandırma Kodları: Y80.

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1. Introduction

When talking about Lebanon, one bears in mind the high literacy rate and the traditional mercantile culture, which made Lebanon an important commercial and cultural hub of the Middle East. However, this progressive image hasn't prevented Lebanon to be seen at the center of Middle Eastern conflicts especially during '70's and '80's. Despite its small size, its uniquely complex communal make-up made of Shia Muslims, Sunni Muslims, Christians and Druze, next to which live many other ethnic and religious minorities, Lebanon proved to be a huge deposit of political unsolved issues, some of them unusual for other Arab Middle Eastern countries.

Although Lebanon may not seem to be so uncommon in the general Middle Eastern background, which is characterized by diversity, heterogeneous societies and multilayered identities, especially if we take note that for decades, Lebanon was an example of applied consociational political system, which was based on the principle of proportionality. Even though, generally speaking, principles are keys to many doors, sometimes they don't open just the door to prosperity and development, but also to unexpected problems. This is the case of Lebanon, where the system worked for few decades and produced prosperity, but failed to solve the issues that appeared in time within the 18 official recognized Lebanese communities.

Diversity, manifested in various forms, was normal for this area for centuries. As Zeine (1996, 143) points out the Ottoman Empire was composed of a mosaic of races, nationalities and religions, which for long time the Turks united them in the name of loyalty to the sultan. However, in this context, it must be mentioned that during the greatest part of the Turkish rule, the Arabs did not consider it as a foreign rule because the Arabs, the Turks and the other ethnics lived in a non-national world. However, the non-national world, which was mainly based on religious brotherhood, cannot be regarded as a heterogeneous construction because the clan/tribe affiliation was still strong and in favorable circumstances might develop to conflicts.

The methodology of this study is connected with historical research and analysis of the facts that influenced and determined the evolution of the Lebanese political system. The presentation of the sequence of stages and events helped in identifying the main traits of the system, which later turned into constraints for the development of the system.

2. Purpose

The article examines the development and evolution of the Lebanese political system, a country divided by sectarianism and civil war, but a country somehow able to find innovative methods to surpass obstacles and to reinvent herself. As

well, the evolution of Lebanese identity will be approached in this paper, especially if we take into consideration that there was a time during Lebanon's civil war years (1975-1990) when identification cards indicating religion could get a person killed if he/she was in the wrong neighborhood. Lebanese ID's no longer mention religion, but the road to unity is still under construction. Having in mind the inherent religious differences that divide the Lebanese, we'll reflect on how this situation influenced Lebanon's political and social development during various historical stages. In addition, we will analyze how much the situation changed given the fact that it has been over two decades since the political and sectarian forces agreed to a peace deal. As well, a topic of interest is how different confessions linked themselves to the construction of a Lebanese national identity. A problem in Lebanon is that, what one community sees as a fair system of power-distribution, another community sees as a system of ethnic dominance.

3. Lebanon's History at a Glance

Early evidence of the Lebanese state goes back to 16th century when Emir Fakhr el-Din took control of the Shuf Emirate. Ambitious and wise, he soughtt to enlarge and enrich his emirate, and surrounded himself with Christian, Druze and Muslim advisors. He succeeded in annexing the Beka'a, Sayda, the Keserwan area and Beirut. After Fakhr el-Din execution in Istanbul, Bashir Chehab, a Sunnite Muslim took control of the emirate. Later Chehab family shared power with Abillama family and at the end of 18^{th} century they converted to Christianity (Emir Bashir Chehab became the first governing prince of the region to be a Christian-Maronite in 1788). His successor, Bashir III Chehab was appointed by the Ottomans and he was the last Prince of Mount Lebanon, as in 1842 Omar Pasha, an Ottoman army officer, became the new governor of the area.

At the end of 1840 two decades of serious conflicts took place between Maronites and Druze in Mount Lebanon area. Salibi (1971, 78) states that in 1860-1861, after a brutal civil war, negotiations took place for calming the area and the Ottomans involved delegates from France, Great Britain, Russia, Austria and Prussia. As a result, Mount Lebanon became an autonomous Ottoman province, called Mutasarrifiya. Daoud Pasha, a Christian, was the first of eight governors to rule Lebanon until World War I. Under this new arrangement, Beirut progressed not only economically, but culturally as well. Starting 1860, education became widespread mainly with the help of the European and American "missionaries". The Saint Joseph University and the American University of Beirut were founded, and new printing presses were installed in order to publish many books and newspapers. As a result of this newfound freedom of expression, a literary movement, known as the *Nahda,* was born in Beirut and later it extended to the entire Middle East. *Nahda* provided the basis of a cultural revival of the Arabic language, but also for the development of literature, sciences, arts and the entire

society. During this period, Beirut became the cultural center of the Middle East and it managed to keep this status until 21st century.

During this period, an important contribution to the creation of a common ideal was the activity of the Syrian Scientific Society, which was strongly supported by Butrus Bustani and Nasif Yaziji. This was the main basis of collaboration between different religions, which despite the setback it suffered after the 1860 civil war, it managed to continue the idea of unity in culture.

As Antonious (1938, 59-60) pointed out, the 1860 upheaval was a decisive event of the nineteenth century. It awakened men's minds to the horrors of their moral stagnation and rekindled the zeal of those who saw that at the root of the country's tribulations was the sectarian hatred. This reinforced the activity of establishment of schools and the fought against ignorance.

With the broke of the First World War the Ottoman army abolished the Mutasarrifiya and appointed a Muslim Ottoman governor. Famine spread in Lebanon and Syria due to a naval blockade and the destruction of crops by locusts. After the Ottoman Empire was dissolved, France was entrusted with the Mandate over Lebanon and Syria.

In 1920, France proclaimed the creation of Greater Lebanon in Beirut, which included Mount Lebanon, the Beka'a, Wadi el-Taym, Jabal Amel, Sur, Saida, Beirut and Tripoli. Starting 1922, the Lebanese elected a local Representative Council, which drew up the Lebanese Constitution under French supervision.

This Constitution became the law of the country, and it was approved by the French in 1926. It defined the borders of Greater Lebanon which it was renamed the Republic of Lebanon and described as united, independent, indivisible and absolutely sovereign State having all citizens equal under the law. Executive power was given to the President of the Republic, assisted by a Cabinet of Ministers. Legislative power was held by the Parliament, whose members were democratically elected by the people. The Parliament elected the President, who appointed the Prime Minister who, in turn, decided Cabinet members. The first President of Lebanon was Charles Debbas, who was elected in 1926 still under the French Mandate.

Yapp (1996, 106) observes that although the roots of a political system had been laid, the development was impaired by the continued refusal of about half of the population of Lebanon to collaborate. The Sunnis were wholly opposed to the state, the Shiites were suspicious, although some notables were more willing to cooperate and many Greek Orthodox, although concerned about the prospect of Muslim rule, continued to resent Catholic pre-eminence. The Druze were divided, they disliked Maronite domination, but were in favor of an independent Lebanon. This situation, which prolonged even decades after the period of state's formation,

influenced the behavior towards the political system. Even nowadays distrust tends to be one of the dark traits of Lebanese identity, which during difficult periods led to conflict escalations.

It was not until 1943 (although initiatives had taken place since 1941) that Lebanon became fully independent. Bishara el-Khouri was elected the first President of free Lebanon, Emile Eddeh being the second one. The "First Republic" laid its foundations on the National Pact, an initiative which proved the openness to cooperation when a common goal was shared, which in this case was the independence.

After 1943, for three decades, Lebanon enjoyed a period of prosperity and it became an economic success story. In 1948, Lebanon had adopted a policy of free trade and free currency exchange. Trade expanded and Beirut became the leading banking center of the Middle East. But the confessional system which set the premises for economic growth also created the conditions for the major crisis of 1958 and gave the first sign on the fragility of the Lebanese political system.

4. Basic Features of Lebanese System before 1975

According Salibi (1971, 78), one of the most prominent Lebanese historians, the establishment of the Mutasarrifiyya of Mount Lebanon gave the Lebanese identity, for the first time a legal definition. The Lebanese people were to enjoy citizenship in the Mutasarrifiyya and the various privileges that went with it (its own budget derived from local taxation, exemption from Ottoman military service for its citizens, no feudal prerogatives recognized). Hence a major feature of Lebanese system before 1990 refers to the **territory**, which, even today, is the center of national pride and source of benefits.

Another feature resides in the **compulsory coexistence** of all confessions. The Mutasarrifiyya included Mount Lebanon, but excluded Tripoli, Tyre, Beirut, Sidon and the valley of Beqa'a. In this territorial context, Maronites were the largest community, but given the fast social and economic development after 1861, enlarging territorial limits of the Mutasarrifiyya was necessary for further development. The opportunity appeared with the establishment of the French Mandated and in September 1st 1920, the French High Commissioner, General Henri Gouraud, proclaimed the State of Great Lebanon. Under the Mutasarrifiyya, the Maronites were the majority, while in the Great Lebanon context, they had to share power and accept identity features specific to other communities since in the coastal cities Muslims, either Sunni or Shiite, were predominant. In this new context, the idea of a Lebanese independent state, which had started to flourish previously among the Maronites, had to be not just reevaluated, but also redesigned. Therefore, the need to find a *modus vivendi* proved to be absolutely necessary. Later, the compulsory coexistence reflected in the National Pact provisions and then in dealing with the 1958 crisis.

Stewart (2012, 153) noticed that Lebanon's history as a refuge for persecuted minorities and an entrepôt of international trade, which, in some ways, fostered a unique culture of openness and tolerance making it an "oddity" in its neighborhood, and contributing to the formation of what can be termed as a "distinct Lebanese identity." A glance at Lebanon's languages, traditions, history, and culture of power-sharing, suggests that despite periods of violence and inter-communal dissentions, patterns of coexistence among Lebanon's various groups have developed organically, and often logically, even since the establishment of French Mandate in the early twentieth century.

Sectarianism is another important feature of the Lebanese system. Although it seems to be a natural characteristic of Lebanon, the implementation of the sectarian formula was the merit of Michel Chiha, who depicted Lebanon as an association of Christian and Muslim communities living together in a spirit of cooperation and mutual respect, as Salibi (1971, 80) observed. His understanding of Lebanese identity was based on the Phoenician roots and the position on the Mediterranean coasts, which provide Lebanon with the ability be become a bridge linking East to West. This division of political power between sects was embodied in the National Pact, a gentlemen's agreement between the country's Maronite Christian President Bishara al-Khouri and his Sunni Muslim Prime Minister, Riyadh al-Sulh. Through this pact it was consecrated the confessional formula, which became probably the main feature of Lebanese politics. Thus, it was agreed that the President of the Republic was to be a Maronite Christian, the Prime Minister a Sunni Muslim, and the Speaker of Parliament a Shia Muslim. Other lower political posts were also assigned according to this formula. Representation in Parliament was set according to a ratio of 6:5 in favor of the Christians. The Taif Agreement of 1989, which officially ended the long-running civil war, reasserted the confessional formula, but changed parliamentary representation to a 50:50 Christian/Muslim ratio.

Even though the confessional formula managed to set a political system, which for some decades brought prosperity and welfare, it created other problems, such as the fear of affiliation with other ideologies, given the great number of religious communities represented in Lebanon. To put it in a simplistic view, while the Muslims in general wanted close relations with their Arab, mostly Muslim neighbors, the Christians wanted to maintain close relations with the West, despite their Arab heritage. These attitudes and possible dangers to Lebanon's existence led the way to innovative solution, which was the **compromise**. This is another important characteristic of the Lebanese political identity, but also of the Lebanese individual, which is best seen in the content of the National Pact. The 1943 unwritten agreement divided parliamentary seats along communal lines as defined in the 1932 census, when the country had a Christian majority. As stated already above, this principle was later extended to other government institutions,

practically all confessions accepting the idea that power sharing was a prerequisite condition for state's survival.

The idea of compromise is well emphasized by Corm (2012), historian and former Finance Minister, who noticed that the generation of Nahda and of the independence made an extraordinary effort to balance different political sensibilities or contradictory ideologies just for the sake of Lebanese prosperity and evolution.

Another feature is the **tolerance**. This is not just a purely Lebanese characteristic, but tends to be seen in many multicultural societies. Though when the focus moves to "who is the majority", tolerance tends to disappear, the fact that in Lebanon communities had a mutual veto power, helped the country to be open and tolerant. An example of Lebanese tolerance resides in the acceptance of Armenians after 1915. Although, some voices argue that the acceptance of Palestinian refugee represents as well an example of tolerance, we agree to this just to a certain extent. Lebanese society was far more tolerant with the Palestinians in 1948, than it was three decades later or today. However, except the Palestinian case which is far more complex than other cases, the reality of coexistence of so many communities it is a proof by itself of tolerance.

5. The Civil War 1975-1990

From 1975 until the early 1990s Lebanon endured a civil war in which regional players, in particular Israel, Syria and the Palestine Liberation Organization, used the country as a battleground for their own conflicts. Syrian troops moved in shortly after the war started. Israeli troops invaded Lebanon in 1978 and again in 1982, before pulling back to a self-declared "security zone" in the South, from where they withdrew in May 2000.

The reasons behind the outbreak of the civil war are complex: the multifaceted nature of the war and the involvement of foreign powers make it difficult to construct a straightforward historical narrative that captures the varied war-time experiences of different segments of Lebanese society. In other words, the protracted nature of the war and the numerous political parties involved meant that the ideological logics that structured the civil war shifted continuously and that people experienced the war and the civil violence that accompanied it differently based on religion, geographical location, class, and gender locations, among others.

On an internal level, the Lebanese civil war was a largely sectarian conflict that was initially confined to Christian-Muslim hostilities, but that later incorporated Shiite, Druze, and Leftist militia groups. All of these groups played a big role in the perpetuation of violence. However, the Lebanese civil war was triggered by

social grievance but quickly grew into a complex social system perpetuating itself in the absence of an efficient state apparatus.

6. Lebanese System after 1990

The Lebanese civil war, which covered two decades of the twentieth century, proved to be a central event in Lebanese and Middle Easter history. Even until today many are surprised by the intensity of fights, which devoured this tiny Mediterranean country. Despite war brutality, the Lebanese society returned to compromise, which took the form of Taif Agreement.

An important change in the political system spectrum, which is visible compared to the period before the civil war, is the **strengthening of religion's role**. Identification according to family and tribe had been long dominant, with political and social privileges determined by family affiliation, class and social status. After the first civil confrontation (1860/1861), religious identities became the main trigger of identity, and this position became even stronger with Taif, which is a kind of official recognition of Lebanese political system. If the National Pact was just an unwritten agreement, Taif turned to be a milestone and an official recognition that religious affiliation determines one's social status and main level of belonging. However, Taif reexamined each sect's role and established a new modus vivendi, which provided the basis for new cooperation between them.

But this kind of affiliation is not totally new or uncommon to Middle East. As Lewis (1998, 28) argues, in Middle East religion is more powerful that in Western societies, mainly because in Muslim theory, the church and the state are not separated. Islam, in its various forms represents the religion of majority in Middle East; therefore it sheds this particularity of affiliation. What may seem surprising is the fact that this particularity is available in Lebanon, which had not until recently a dominant Muslim community, but an explanation can be found in its continuous existence in an environment influence by Muslim political culture.

Compromise for survival may be a new behavior that describes Lebanese identity after the civil war. When referring to this, we bear in mind the common decision of all communities to refrain from blaming the other for the war. It is clear that victims belonged to all communities, so the suffering for the loss was a common trait. Although, a complete process of reconciliation never took place, individuals were somehow united in grief and political elites took advantage of this situation when reaching Taif compromise. After 1990, the unwritten and somehow not verbalized decision of all communities to not to blame any other religious groups for the civil war helped to keep the nation united. Whether due to a real desire to coexist or simply as a matter of pragmatism, Lebanese people decided that coexistence and unity were preferable to state dissolution.

The assassination of Rafik Hariri turned to be a new challenge for the idea of compromise for survival, which seemed to be embraced after 1990. Before Hariri's killing, Lebanon managed to push aside almost every single political murder, but after the creation of a special tribunal to investigate this murder, the society faced a new time of division. Hariri seemed to be endowed by many groups with great expectations regarding the country's reconstruction and after his death people felt as if they turn back in time. Not only the work, but also the existence of the special tribunal were reasons of debate between Hizballah and Sunni supporters, therefore, reaching a conclusion equally accepted by most people is totally unexpected. Having the killing of Hariri unsolved, it is understandable why the outbreak of the Syrian crisis strongly heightened sectarian divisions.

Compared to most Western societies, Lebanese society used to present stronger connection to the family/clan/tribe and to the religious community; nevertheless, lately it can be identified a triple commitment: to the sect, to the state and to individual survival. The third characteristic tended to develop in the recent years, although germs were present in the search for social cohesion of common people in the absence of elites. Most people ended up dragged into the war that the political elites started and, many people ended up assuming the war as a personal duty. However, after two decades of fighting, the individual returned to compromise and common grief worked as a cohesion factor.

A feature common with other Arab societies is the **feeling of malaise,** as it was described by Kassir (2006, 2). This feeling tends to unite the Lebanese society and become a unitary trait, especially when Lebanese, regardless of religion, compare themselves with other societies. The fast growth of Gulf countries switched the center of the Arab world from Levant from all points of view. Young educated Lebanese look with admiration to Gulf countries, mainly fascinated by the economic progress. Brain exodus to Europe, Canada and Gulf countries made Lebanon lose a good part of its resources and instead brought new expectations for the state, because even though the people left, they remained engaged in Lebanese life. In this context, it is important to point out that another characteristic of Lebanese people is their **strong connection with the homeland,** regardless the level of success they might have acquired in other countries. This strong connection to homeland is not visible just to those who emigrated and somehow may be influenced by homesick feelings. This is shared by most of Lebanon's inhabitants and it is visible in tensioned moments such as the Cedar Revolution, which made Syria withdrawn its troops in 2005, ending a 29-year military presence or during the 2006 conflict with Israel.

For most Lebanese, Syria and the Palestinians are "uneasy friends", sometimes considered responsible for many internal issues. Even during the decades when Arabism and Arab unity plans were a fashion in Middle Eastern politics, Lebanon

managed to stay away of political projects that involved unity. Somehow that helped in attributing a distinct Arab profile to Lebanon, which grew in time and later, after 1990, made the communities to see themselves as "Lebanese", despite any other complexities of ethnic and national identities. As Reinkowski (1997, 494) noticed a **feeling of belonging to Lebanon** and to the Lebanese people existed among a great part of the Lebanese. Therefore, in Lebanon the rise of a national identity is not the result of a nationalist ideology, but of the history of common existence, statehood, suffering and failure.

Although it may seem emotional, this approach is not totally new. When trying to define Arab identity, Sati al-Husri included the feeling of belonging and the pride of being Arab on his list, as Cleveland (1971, 127) observed.

As a consequence, in this context, it is acceptable to maintain "Lebanese" as an ambiguous concept. All sects and maybe all individuals may have different interpretations of what being Lebanese means, each equally valid, because in the end uniformity is not the main purpose.

7. Instead of Conclusion: Contemporary Challenges

At internal level, during the past years, Lebanon is facing the problem of reducing confessional system's importance in individual life, a provision paradoxically included even in Taif Agreement. Although many issues are on the Lebanese agenda, some of them with a high potential of endangering the fragile stability, our attention is focused on a recent social development: the sharp debate regarding civil marriage, which is a step ahead in reducing the importance of belonging to a certain confession.

From Western point of view, it's hard to understand how this personal choice can influence state's future. However, this tackles the confessional system's basis because the long-term implications of such a development could be very interesting since Lebanon's politics are based, in a fundamental way, on the parsing of the country's population into confessional communities.

When it comes to private affairs, a decree issued in 1936 by the French mandate gives religious communities the legal administrative status and jurisdiction over personal status matters, including marriage. The decree states "for those that do not belong to administratively to a religious community, the civil law applies to their personal status matters". Nowadays, a decree issued in 2007 allows Lebanese citizens to remove references to their religion in state records. Thus, only by not belonging "administratively" to a religious community, people were eligible for civil marriage. Yet, Mawad (2013) points out that mixed marriages are socially and religiously discouraged and interfaith couples, who do not wish to convert to one another's religion, still have to travel abroad to get a civil marriage. Ironically, then that marriage is easier recognized and registered in Lebanon.

For the first time, the above presented scenario was applied by Kholoud Sukkarieh and Nidal Darwish. Their marriage contract was approved by the Interior Ministry in April 2013 and in this way the road is already paved for other young people. Although it may seem a small battle, this leaves the door open for creating, in time, of a large group of people who, from an administratively point of view, do not belong to an official sect. Now it may seem just a hypothesis, but the question that arises is whether this group will form the first serious group of "citizens" of a secular state, people who would belong to a nation, not to a sect.

In this context, Muhanna (2013) noticed that given the Lebanese confessional system questions such as how would such people run for political office under the current system? How would they get divorced and bequeath property to their children? Speaking of their children, what is their own administrative status? Alternatively, would it not make more sense to start taking seriously the long deferred problems of the confessional system altogether? All these are questions that must be answered by events that will take place in the future, but now since that the door was open, the need for answers is just a question of time.

Another contemporary challenge for Lebanon lies in the brutal Syrian crisis. In addition to the economic burden represented by the Syrian refugees, this crisis opened the Sunni-Shi'a rivalry, which led to blasts, innocent deaths and the growth of the unsafe feeling and lack of trust. Most of Lebanon's Sunni Muslims back the overwhelmingly Sunni rebels in Syria, while many Shiites support Assad, who is a member of Syria's minority Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shiite Islam.

As Middle East Report (2013) emphasis, the sectarianism is reaching boiling point, with Hizbollah's intervention, foreign volunteers streaming to the aid of both camps and Sunni clerics' inflammatory statements. Containing or cauterizing a crisis already engulfing the region is, in some respects, a pipe dream. Still, elements of strategy focused on Syria's periphery should be considered. These include vastly increasing assistance to refugees, notably in fragile states such as Lebanon and Jordan; both overstretched countries also need more general economic aid. In addition, there is an urgent need to reduce sectarian tensions in Lebanon, which requires Hizbollah at a minimum to lower its profile in Syria and change its rhetoric and Gulf Arab states to refrain from (rhetorically and otherwise) feeding a confessional beast that – given the balance of power in Lebanon – can only turn to the Sunnis' disadvantage.

During the past year, the situation was critical many times, but Lebanese managed to keep a bit of space from the Syrian crisis and many politicians urged people avoid inciting sectarian strife. Although there is no guarantee but just the hope of many that the situation will remain somehow stable, it remains the question of how the Syrian crisis will impact Lebanese national identity, given the fact that it

seems to enhance the "sect belonging feeling" instead of "Lebanon belonging feeling".

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