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Lebanese “Political Sectarianism” in Context and Some Regional Lessons

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INTRODUCTION

The cycles of revolution in the Arab world and the subsequent unraveling or political erosion of states across the Middle East, particularly in the Levant, have unleashed a process of fragmentation in Arab societies along the lines of primordial ties. This is becoming a growing phenomenon and perhaps an irreversible trend.

The fragmentation has largely occurred in countries with heterogeneous social fabrics and a mosaic of self-defined identity groups. It is also a factor, paradoxically, in most heavily centralized and strongly Jacobin nationalistic state systems where nation-building never really gained traction despite their close association with strong or brutal moves to consolidate power.

Amid ongoing political erosion, sub-state and subnational identities have increasingly prevailed, in part in response to the perception of threats defined and described in sectarian terms. The broader Shia-Sunni divide—currently a very intense issue across the entire region—is the most visible and grave of these identity-based responses. However, the issue of minorities who define and perceive themselves as marginalized by a dominant group or suppressed by an aggressive minority is also heavily at play.

All of this brings about the necessity of rethinking the state model and state-society relations in the contemporary Middle East. Contrary to a well-established

negative belief, the Lebanese model of a consociational democracy could regain relevance in the current context, at least as a heuristic tool to rethink the relationship between communal groups, political organizations, and the state. In countries like Syria, Iraq, Libya, and possibly elsewhere in the Middle East, the process of fragmentation that seems to have been unleashed by the Arab uprisings will be difficult to address without new and inventive mechanisms of (re)integration, both at the societal (reconciliation, justice, etc.) and political levels. Political engineering will have to be implemented to devise new power-sharing formulas and new constitutional provisions that take the new context into account.

THE LEBANESE MODEL OF “COMMUNAL DEMOCRACY”

When an independent Lebanon was established in 1943 its political elite, contrary to other Arab countries, opted for “political confessionalism” or political sectarianism—a system of power-sharing between religious communities. This was integrated into a grander scheme, the National Pact of 1943, a historic compromise between Muslims and Christians that has served as the foundation of an independent Lebanon. The pact aimed to give the Lebanese entity a mission (or, as Lebanese like to call it, a message) to become a bridge between East and West.



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To what extent can the “Lebanese formula” be replicated in other societies? And to what extent is the Lebanese system viable in its present form?

Alternative options for Lebanon entail crippling costs and major pitfalls that could cause more damage than solve problems. Moreover, the current state of conflict, violence, and disarray in the region could complicate any reform effort.

This system unraveled after the Lebanese civil war in 1975. Its restoration through the sect-based power-sharing of the Taif Agreement of 1989 helped to end the conflict, but did not resolve the original flaws of political confessionalism. While political confessionalism dominated Lebanon, Syria exploited sectarian differences, and managed and arbitrated sectarian relations to its own benefit. Whatever equilibrium existed in Lebanon was shattered in 2005 with the assassination of the country's former prime minister, Rafik Hariri.

The spillover from Syria's civil war since 2011 has further exacerbated the shortcomings of the Taif Agreement by indirectly immersing Lebanon in a regional crisis. Sunni-Shiite tensions took on a much sharper edge with the breakout of Syria's civil war, threatening Lebanese coexistence and the consociational model altogether.

LESSONS LEARNED?

Yet the Lebanese case offers lessons to its neighbors—ones to draw from as well as to avoid. When considering Lebanon's confessional system, two questions arise: To what extent can the “Lebanese formula” be replicated in other societies? And to what extent is the Lebanese system viable in its present form?

However appealing the Lebanese experience could be, one caveat involves the historical background of the Lebanese system. Time and experience have largely rendered sectarianism an integral part of Lebanon's social and political culture; it is now deeply entrenched in the country's collective ethos and national behavior. Such sectarianism is largely lacking in other Arab countries, where models of centralized Jacobin states are the rule and the idea of pan-Arabism has always been more attractive than the idea of states built around subnational identities.

In Arab political culture, Lebanon has always been admired and envied for its social and cultural liberalism and openness—but it has also been very much vilified and denigrated as a system of governance that has undermined the growth of a national

identity while it generated crisis after crisis interrupted by a sporadic war. The narrative of the National Pact, building on a previous narrative of Lebanon as a refuge for persecuted minorities from the Arab East, sought to idealize the country's sectarian-based system, injecting it with an element of universalism—a coexistence and dialogue between Christianity and Islam.

Another limitation to the adoption of a Lebanese formula in other Arab countries is linked to the differences between societies in terms of demographics and size, and in the way states are collapsing along primordial ties. Over time, despite crises and conflicts, Lebanon has almost always emerged from its travails due to its desire to preserve what it had, rather than allow a permanent break. The recurring formula of “no winner and no loser” perpetuated Lebanon's sectarianism. It was an outlook deeply rooted in Lebanon's society and political elite, and it worked in tandem with outside intervention. This allowed for hegemony to take root more smoothly through governance mechanisms that also accommodated those on the losing side of conflicts.

In the Lebanese case, demographic formulae—originally parity between Muslims and Christians and later a tripartite division among Sunnis, Shiites, and Christians—were critical factors in easing the implementation of a consociational culture by concealing the true demographic weight of each sect.

This relative parity is definitely not seen in countries where a consociational culture is missing. Nor is it likely to be found in countries such as Syria where bloodshed or population displacements have made reconciliation difficult. And it is particularly challenging in places where a demographic majority strongly resents a repressive minority in power, or where the demographics are so imbalanced that the majority does not see why it has to make concessions to smaller sects.

Another impediment to the adoption of a Lebanese-style sectarian solution has to do with the existence of a viable regional sponsor of the system. It was clear that the Taif Agreement could only function because it had an external regulator, Syria, that could

enforce decisions thanks to its physical presence, domination, and instruments of tutelage between the late 1970s and 2005. Lebanon’s crisis today is in large part due to the absence of a regulator—a reminder of the limitations of its endlessly patched-up system. Likewise we should ask, which power or set of powers could ultimately emerge to guarantee peace in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, or Bahrain? To what extent would outside powers be accepted and respected, and for how long?

IS THE LEBANESE SYSTEM VIABLE FOR LEBANON ITSELF?

Today, Lebanon is at a crossroads and faces three potential choices. First, it could once again mend its system of political sectarianism in a way that addresses imbalances and discrepancies—mainly those affecting the Sunni–Shiite relationship. A revision of the political system needs to take into account and reflect as accurately as possible the prevailing balance of power in Lebanon. Because regional and domestic political conditions are in flux, it is almost impossible to conceive of engaging in such a process under present conditions. It would be akin to opening a Pandora’s Box with all of the sensitivities involved. Moreover, the uncertainty surrounding the question of how long a modified system might be sustainable before new factors necessitate a recalibration looms large. It is therefore probable that simply patching up Lebanon’s consociational model will not bring about a lasting solution.

A second option offers a more radical, Jacobin solution. The main premise of this option is that Lebanon will be perennially doomed to swing from crisis to crisis as long as it is hampered by a system that creates dissatisfaction at home and invites permanent outside interference. Ironically, it is the chaos in the region that tarnishes this option today. At a moment when strongly centralized states are disintegrating, the challenge would be to prove that the most diverse of all Levantine societies could produce a secular, tolerant state.

The third choice is to establish a more diffuse political system among different forms of decentralization, including federalism or even partition. Advocates of this option believe it is necessary to face reality and Lebanon’s history of repeated conflicts, and imagine something fundamentally new. For Christians, an amicable divorce in the form of a hard decentralization or partition would be the last guarantee preventing the community’s disappearance. For Sunnis, where such an approach is starting to gain ground, it could be seen as the optimal way to keep emboldened political Shiism at bay until better times. However, this option would inevitably incorporate the existing balance of power among different religious groups, which would come to define any discussion on establishing a more diffuse system. Each community’s position might affect its bargaining capacity, potentially skewing the system unfavorably toward some communities.

A “CONSERVATIVE” CONCLUSION?

All changes to the Lebanese political system have followed episodes of violence of sorts. How might a new system of governance be negotiated without Lebanon once again paying so heavy a price?

Any attempt to revisit Lebanon’s political system in the current regional context would be affected by the Syrian crisis. What Syria’s ordeal has highlighted is the paradoxical nexus between pluralism and authoritarianism. The Lebanese model, despite its shortcomings and the criticism of its neighbors, has accommodated pluralism as much as possible, and it functioned exceptionally well when compared to authoritarian or dictatorial environments. Now that Syria is imploding and Lebanon’s system is faltering under the weight of its own contradictions, the value of an alternative model should be met with circumspection.

Despite the crisis, Lebanon’s system of political confessionalism endures. Alternative options entail crippling costs and major pitfalls that could cause more

The status quo is thus the only realistic horizon for Lebanon today. This does not, however, suggest that marginal changes, reforms, or progress cannot be achieved.

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damage than solve problems. Moreover, the current state of conflict, violence, and disarray in the region could complicate any reform effort. What the Lebanese should consider, however, is that the entire Middle East is today in disarray; transformations of any sort, anywhere, are unlikely. They should, for now, seek consolation in the fact that their society is stronger, more resilient, and more inventive than their state—one that is by many benchmarks a failed state.

The status quo is thus the only realistic horizon for Lebanon today. This does not, however, suggest that marginal changes, reforms, or progress cannot be achieved. Reforms must first and foremost tackle areas that affect the daily lives of Lebanese citizens; the services they are entitled to expect from the state; urgent economic patches to avoid a sudden and general collapse of the system; and legislative changes that open breaches in the wall of the sectarian system to facilitate inter-communal building blocks in areas such as civil marriage and personal status issues.

The “Lebanese formula” is far from being a road without bumps. On the contrary, it is one where accidents are all too frequent and that is dangerously near a breaking point. The Lebanese should thus admit that theirs is a country of permanent precariousness, of endless unstable equilibrium—a country constantly on the brink of crisis.

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