Colonialism, Lebanon and the Middle East

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EVAN RITLI, JUL 5 2011

How the enduring legacy of colonialism continues to be a source of conflict in the Middle East

Recent turmoil across the Middle East has brought renewed attention to the politics of the region. Long standing regimes in Egypt and Tunisia have been toppled and a civil war has broken out in Libya between forces loyal to dictator Colonel Muammar Gadaffi and rebel forces seeking to overthrow him. While media attention has largely been focused on Libya, lesser known uprisings have occurred all over the Middle East. In Lebanon thousands of protesters have filled the streets seeking an end to the political system known as Confessionalism. Interestingly many of these uprisings have been in reaction to political systems and traditions which can be traced back to the colonial period. This is very much the case with the protests against Confessionalism in Lebanon. Although for most Middle Eastern states colonial rule ended some 60 years ago, its legacy continues in contemporary Middle Eastern politics.

This essay seeks to assess the extent to which the legacy of the colonial period can be seen in contemporary Middle Eastern politics. In order to do this, it will focus on the Republic of Lebanon as a case study. By examining Lebanon's history from the colonial period onwards this essay will demonstrate how the legacy of the colonial period has continued to influence the politics of both Lebanon in specific and the Middle East in general. I will begin by defining the colonial period and providing a brief overview of Lebanon's colonial history. I will then examine the legacy of colonial borders in Lebanese politics and the way in which these borders have led to conflict in the Middle East. Following this I will discuss the role that colonial period played in the creation of Lebanese nationalism and the system known as Confessionalism. I will assess the impact that nationalism and Confessionalism have had on Lebanon, focusing on the Lebanese Civil War in particular. In doing so I will show how Lebanon's borders, nationalism and system of government are all constructs of the colonial period and it is through these, and their often violent consequences, that the legacy of the colonial period can be seen in contemporary Middle Eastern politics.

It is near impossible to create a clear cut, all-purpose definition of the colonial period for the Middle East as a whole. Middle Eastern states experienced different circumstances, were ruled by different colonial metropoles and became independent at different stages and in different ways. There are also different understandings of what exactly constitutes colonial rule and, as a consequence, the exact timeline of the colonial period. Cole and Kandiyoti (2002) usefully divide the Middle Eastern colonial period in to several stages: informal imperialism, formal colonial domination, and neo-colonialism. In this essay I will largely be discussing the legacy of the first two of these three stages and in particular will focus on the period of formal colonial domination. For Lebanon, the colonial period began with the collapse of the Ottoman empire following World War 1. During the war, the French and British began to divide up the region according to their colonial interests, many of which had long pre-dated the war (see Shorrock 1970). This resulted in the now infamous Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916. This division of the Middle East became formalised at the end of the war by the League of Nations Mandate system. In 1920 the League of Nations officially granted France a Mandate for Syria, which at this point included Lebanon, while the British were allocated a Mandate for both Palestine and Iraq. French colonial rule, known as 'French Mandate for Syria and Lebanon', continued until l 1943 at which point Lebanon became an independent state. It was during the French Mandate that many of Lebanon's defining political characteristics were formed.

The most strikingly obvious of these characteristics is of course Lebanon's territorial borders. Rather than being

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based on any specific geographic or historical division, the borders of Lebanon were almost entirely a creation of the French. In September 1920 the French created the 'State of Greater Lebanon'. As I will discuss later, there had been some sense of an autonomous Lebanese territory prior to the French Mandate, however this was far smaller in area then the new Lebanon. Nonetheless, the French drew on this precedent and divided Lebanon from Syria. This division gave the Maronite population, long allies of the French, a state in which they were the majority (Baxter & Akbarzadeh 2008, pp. 17-24). This not only allowed the French to fulfil the wishes of their Maronite Christian allies, but was also a convenient way of reducing the support base of the rival Pan-Arab nationalist movement that was growing out of Damascus (Salem 1993; Zamir 1985). It was in this way that the modern borders of Lebanon were delineated and demarcated and the foundations of a Lebanese nationalism were laid.

In contemporary Middle Eastern politics these borders have been the cause of much conflict and turmoil. This has not only included domestic conflict within Lebanon, but also regional conflict involving Lebanon, Syria and Israel. When the French withdrew from the Mandate in the mid-1940s, the newly independent states of Syria and Lebanon failed to conclusively establish a formal border. In the 1950s a joint Lebanese-Syrian committee was convened to conclusively determine the border but an agreement could not be reached. The committee was subsequently disbanded in 1964. In recent years the border's porous and undefined nature has been linked to issues including weapons smuggling, terrorism, and the deaths of farmers caught in disputed territory (AFP 2010b; Dhaher 2009; Lyon 2008; nowlebanon.com 2009; Ravid & Stern 2008; Stern 2007). The potential consequences of these issues for both regional and international security has resulted in calls for actions from states such as the United States and France, as well as the United Nations. In 2010 Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Lebanese President Michel Suleiman announced they would again work together to fix their countries' common border (AFP 2010a). The issues they face can all be seen as political consequences of the legacy of the colonial period.

Of all the contemporary political issues arising from the Lebanon-Syria border, arguably the most pressing is the Shebaa Farms dispute. The area known as the Shebaa Farms is a small piece of land currently occupied by Israel but with contested ownership between Syria and Lebanon. The area is relatively small, it consists of only 14 farms and is less than 20sqkm in size, but has nevertheless become a serious flashpoint for conflict. Asher Kaufman (2004) acutely described the situation as a "micro level conflict" with "macro implications for the security of the region". When the French divided the region under the Mandate, the farms lay on the Syrian side of the border. On the ground the facts were quite different. The area was populated by Lebanese farmers and few Syrians lived in the area. From the French Mandate until 1967 the area could therefore have been said to be *de jure* Syrian but *de facto* Lebanese. Israel understood the area to be Syrian and so, along with the Golan Heights, the territory was conquered as part of the 1967 'Six Day War' (BBC 2000; Chelala 2008; Cimino 2010). They have remained an occupying power in the area since.

The issue came to the fore in May 2000 when Israel ceased its 18-year occupation of Lebanon and withdrew all of its military forces from Lebanese territory. Since Israel understood the Shebaa Farms to be Syrian rather than Lebanese, they did not withdraw from the area. The United Nations oversaw the withdrawal process and concluded that Israel had done so completely, complying with United Nations Security Council Resolution 425 (UN 2000). However, Lebanon claimed that since Israel had not withdrawn from the Shebaa Farms they remained in violation of Resolution 425. Somewhat ironically, Syria sided with Lebanon and declared the Shebaa Farms to be Lebanese territory. Hezbollah, a militant group formed in response to the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, has since used the occupation of the Shebaa Farms to gain legitimacy and support for their continued violent action against Israel (Chelala 2008; Cimino 2010). Most notably, this resulted in the violent 2006 'July War' between Hezbollah and Israel. This war caused Lebanon approximately US$3.5 billion in damage (Baxter & Akbarzadeh 2008). The on going conflict caused by the Shebaa Farms dispute, exemplified by the July War, highlight the devastating and ongoing legacy of the colonial period in Middle Eastern politics. (Chelala 2008; Cimino 2010)

In addition to geopolitical issues, the legacy of the colonial period can also be seen in Lebanese nationalism and its role in Middle Eastern politics. Of all the Middle Eastern nationalisms, Lebanese nationalism is often considered the most straightforward in relation to its connection to the colonial period. The mainstream discourse surrounding Lebanese nationalism is that it was created by the French as a tool to further their colonial ambitions. To reach an accurate understanding of the legacy of the colonial period on Middle Eastern politics it is important to examine this

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claim in further detail. Note that here 'Lebanese nationalism' refers to the ideology and sentiment that the people of Lebanon are a distinct people with a shared values, culture and history. That is, the 'official' nationalism of the state of Lebanon. Of course, there are competing understandings of what Lebanese nationalism should mean, as well as competing nationalisms, most notably Arab nationalism and Syrian nationalism, within Lebanon.

The term 'nationalism' is used often in both academic and non-academic literature and as a consequence has lost much of its analytical clarity. It is therefore crucial that I first define exactly what is meant by the term nationalism in this instance. Commonly, nationalism refers to either one of two separate but related ideas. The first of these can be described as the ideology of nationalism. This is arguably the most common usage of the term in International Relations. As Newnham and Evans (1998, p. 346) explain, the ideology of nationalism "seeks to identify a behavioural entity – the nation – and thereafter to pursue certain political and cultural goals on behalf of it". The most common of these 'goals' is a sovereign land for the nation. The second use of the term is often described as the 'sentiment' of nationalism (see Breuilly in Baylis, Smith & Owens 2011; Evans & Newnham 1998). This aspect of nationalism refers to the feeling of loyalty or connectedness a person feels towards a given group of people, i.e. a nation. It is these groups that Benedict Anderson famously referred to as 'imagined communities' (see Anderson 2006). Lebanese nationalism entails both a political ideology and a sentiment. It is therefore important to use a suitably broad definition of nationalism to describe it. Hearn (2006, p. 11) defines nationalism as being "the making of combined claims, on behalf of a population, to *identity*, to *jurisdiction,* and to *territory*". This definition is an accurate description of modern Lebanese nationalism.

As with all Middle Eastern nationalisms, there is the view that Lebanese nationalism, in one form or another, was established well before the colonial period. This primordialist view of Lebanese nationalism, referred to as Phoenicianism, posits that the people of Lebanon are the descendants of the ancient and important Phoenician tribe. For primordialist Lebanese nationalists the argument that subsequently follows is that as descendants of the Phoenicians, modern Lebanese "are not part of the Arab ethnicity, their contribution to Western culture is priceless, their skills in commerce are incomparable, and their inherent national characteristics are wisdom and tranquillity" (Kaufman 2001). Phoenicianism is largely associated with the Maronite population of Lebanon. The Phoenicianist argument, although historically discredited, provides an obvious source of unification and legitimation for nationalists which, importantly, frames the Lebanese nation as being ancient and enduring. As discussed earlier, this claim of an ancient heritage is a common trait shared by nationalisms worldwide. Although the influence of the primordialist view of the origins of the Lebanese nation should not be understated, it is historically dubious and relies on little more than mythology to connect the ancient tribe with modern Lebanon. We must therefore look to other sources for the origins of a Lebanese nation and Lebanese nationalism.

Modernist theorists suggest the first signs of a distinct Lebanese identity, far from being ancient, emerged during the the reign of the Ottoman Empire, somewhere between the end of the 18th century and the middle of the 19th century. This identity was created as a result of the emergence of the Maronite Church as a strong political power in the Ottoman Empire, the rule of the Shihab dynasty over the Emirate of Mount Lebanon, and the subsequent creation of the autonomous *mutasarrifiyya* of Mount Lebanon (Salem 1993; Salibi 1971). Although often considered an early form of 'Lebanese' identity, the extent and importance of this identity is still a topic of much debate. Kais Firro argues that culturally and politically, most people in the area would still have identified as Syrians or Arabs, and "as Lebanese only in the more restricted territorial sense" (2003, p. 16). Nevertheless, it is apparent that a Lebanese identity did exist to some extent prior to the colonial period.

Modern Lebanese nationalism is, however, vastly different from this pre-colonial identity. Far from simply being an 'identity', modern Lebanese nationalism has developed territorial claims and ideological aspirations. It has also expanded its demographic affiliation from the limited Maronite population of Mount Lebanon to the much larger population of modern Lebanon. These changes all bear the legacy of the colonial era. In fact, modern Lebanese nationalism is a direct result of the French Mandate and the colonial period. As Eric Hobsbawm famously declared "nationalism comes before nations. Nations do not make states and nationalisms but the other way around " (1990, p. 10). The State of Greater Lebanon was not created as a homeland for a pre-existing Lebanese nation. Rather, it led to the creation of a nation. The newly formed state necessitated a Lebanese nationalism to create a stable, unified Lebanese nation. Although Lebanon was a majority Maronite state, sizable minorities of both Sunni and Shia

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muslims were present and as such there was not yet a widespread Lebanese identity or nationalism. As discussed earlier a Lebanese identity did exist prior to the colonial period however this was largely only present in the Maronite population and even then came second to competing identities, ie Arab or Syrian. In order to encourage the formation of a Lebanese nation, a nationalism "characterized by confessional pluralism, political freedoms, and economic liberalism" (Salem 1993) was created and spread by Lebanese intellecutals and elites such as Michel Chiha. In support of this new nationalism, a new political system was created to 'unify' the diverse sectarian cultures of Lebanon. This system was known as Confessionalism.

Confessionalism is a system of government in which political representation is proportionally allocated according to the demographic size of religious or ethnic groups. It is derived from a political science idea known as Consociationalism (Harb 2006) and "aims to provide integrated leadership in societies marked by the presence of multiple sectarian or religious groups" (Baxter & Akbarzadeh 2008, p. 20). In Lebanon, Confessionalism not only proportionally divides representation according to religious affiliation, but important political roles are also allocated by religion. The President must always be a Maronite Christian, the Prime Minister a Sunni Muslim, and the Speaker of the Assembly a Shia Muslim (Baxter & Akbarzadeh 2008). This system was institutionalised at Independence in 1943 by the 'National Pact', an agreement between Christian and Muslim political leaders (Baxter & Akbarzadeh 2008). The National Pact also attempted to further the idea of the distinctness of the Lebanese people by adopting a "neither Arab, nor Western" formula (Salamé 1993) which outlined that Lebanon would neither seek unity with the Arab world nor special relations with the West (Krayem 1995).Confessionalism and the "neither Arab, nor Western" sentiment, both legacies of the colonial period, became the back bone of Lebanese nationalism and have continued to influence contemporary politics.

Although designed to unite the newly created nation, Lebanese nationalism, supported by Confessionalism and characterised by the "neither Arab, nor Western" formula, led to intense sectarianism and, ultimately, a violent and protracted civil war. A large part of the reason for this was that the Lebanese nationalism that was created marginalised those who did not identify with the core tenets it espoused. The colonially-constructed nationalism obviously appealed to the Maronite population as it was laden with Maronite values and history and was intentionally designed to keep them in power. Many upper and middle class Muslims also identified with Lebanese nationalism as their "trading and entrepreneurial activities meshed well with [the] liberal conception of political power" (Salem 1993) that it embodied. However, large swathes of society, notably the Druze and remaining Muslim population, did not. This created an ideological void which   "was filled in various stages by Arab nationalism, Syrian nationalism, revolutionary Marxism, Nasserite socialism, and Islamic fundamentalism" (Salem 1993). These rival nationalisms and ideologies, combined with the"institutionalized under-representation and marginalization" (Baxter & Akbarzadeh 2008) of Confessionalism, led to the unstable political environment that was the root cause of the Lebanese Civil War.

The Lebanese Civil War is without a doubt the bloodiest and most tragic contemporary consequence of the colonial period. Although it occurred more than 25 years after the decolonisation of Lebanon, the political environment that led to its outbreak, as outlined above, was a legacy of the French Mandate. In 1970 King Hussein of Jordan evicted the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) from his state. The PLO subsequently relocated its operations to Lebanon. According to Reynolds (2000, p. 379), "the PLO presence frightened Maronites and alarmed Sunni leaders…but it was applauded by many younger Muslims." The already unstable political environment of Lebanon was therefore pushed even further by the arrival of the PLO. In 1975 Pierre Gemayel, the leader of the right-wing, Maronite-supported Phalange party, was the target of an assassination attempt. In retaliation a Phalangist militia massacred 27 Palestinians while they crossed on a bus through a Christian area. Violent tit-for-tat reprisals between Muslim and Christian militias ensued until finally a full scale civil war broke out. In its early years the war was dominated by two opposing forces; on the one side was the right-wing, majority-Christian 'Lebanese Front' and on the other was the left-wing, majority-Muslim 'Lebanese National Movement' in alliance with the PLO.

The specific details of the 15 years of conflict that followed are far beyond the scope of this essay. However, a brief overview of its key events is important in order to understand the impact that the war has had on contemporary Middle Eastern politics. In 1976 Syria militarily intervened in the war on behalf of the losing Lebanese Front. They

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turned the war around in favour of the Maronites and by the end of that year controlled much of the country. However, PLO forces maintained control over the south of Lebanon. From this base, dubbed Fatahland after the leading PLO faction, the PLO continued attacks against Israel. This led to an Israeli invasion of the country in 1982. In response to this invasion the militant group Hezbollah was formed. A war between Israel, Syria, Lebanese militias, the PLO, and Hezbollah continued until the signing and ratification of the Taif Agreement in November 1989. Israel and Syria remained as occupying forces in Lebanon until May 2000 and April 2005 respectively (Baxter & Akbarzadeh 2008; GlobalSecurity.org 2006; Krayem 1995; Reynolds 2000).

It has been estimated that by the end of the war over 100,000 people had been killed and a further 100,000 were left permanently handicapped. 900,000 people were displaced. This amounts to around one fifth of the pre-war population (GlobalSecurity.org 2006). On top of this human cost, the war also irreversibly changed the political environment of the Middle East in several important ways. Israel received widespread criticism, including domestically, for its actions in Lebanon. In fact, Baxter and Akbarzadeh (2008, p. 63) argue that the war marked "a turning point in Israeli political history" in terms of the domestic perception of Israel's conflicts and its defence of Zionism.

The war also saw the creation and rise of Hezbollah, a group which has since become a substantial political force in the region. Furthermore, the lack of response by the regions Arab states severely damaged the Pan-Arabist movement which had been a prominent political force in the region prior to the war. As these are all outcomes of a war which was at its root a legacy of the colonial period, they too can be seen as a part of this legacy, albeit indirectly.

The Taif Agreement that ended the war recognised that the system created during the colonial period was a key source of instability in the country. Interestingly, in an attempt to unify Lebanon after years of war the document used nationalist language similar to that of the Lebanese nationalism established in the colonial period. One notable difference however was the acknowledgement that "Lebanon is Arab in belonging and identity" (*The Taif Agreement* 1989). This represented a dramatic shift from the original "Neither Arab, nor Western" sentiment espoused by nationalists. The impact of Confessionalism was also acknowledged and a series of reforms were implemented. The political representation of different religions was readjusted to be equal between Maronites and Muslims. Despite these reforms, widespread discontent with the system of Confessionalism remains. Many Muslims argue that they are still under-represented in the system (Baxter & Akbarzadeh 2008). One analyst described it as "a cancer on the country's body politic" (Harb 2006) and, as mentioned at the beginning of this essay, earlier this year protests erupted in Beirut calling for it to end. The thousands of protesters that filled the streets claimed that the system has led to widespread political corruption, cronyism, and sectarian violence (AFP 2011; Barker 2011). Indeed, despite the 1990 reforms Confessionalism remains as the most visible legacy of the colonial period in Lebanon.

In this essay I have demonstrated that Lebanon's borders, nationalism and system of government are all constructs of the colonial period and it is through these, and their often violent consequences, that the legacy of the colonial period can be seen in contemporary Middle Eastern politics.

Lebanon's porous borders, created by the French during the French Mandate, have led to conflict between Lebanon, Syria, Israel and Hezbollah. Notably, the area known as the Sheba Farms continues to be a source of conflict in contemporary politics. Lebanese nationalism, created in order to unify the Lebanese nation during the colonial period, was a primary cause of the tension and political unrest which ultimately led to the Lebanese Civil War. It continues to be an important force in contemporary politics. Confessionalism, established as the system of government during the colonial period, institutionalised the sectarian politics which sparked the Lebanese Civil War. It continues to be the system of government in Lebanon and, as was made clear by the recent protests in Beirut, continues to be a source of conflict. Through these examples we can see that the legacy of the colonial period continues to dominate contemporary Middle Eastern politics.

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