A Spectre of Conflict: Shaping Lebanese Sectarianism and Identity Politics

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In 1975, Lebanon waged a self-destructive war. An estimated 120,000 fatalities have been reported as a result of the civil war (CIA World Factbook: 2016), with numbers also shaped by Israeli military expeditions in the 1980s against terrorist acts committed by the Hezbollah organisation (Commission on the Inquiry on Lebanon, 2006: 7). Sectarian division has been a major impediment for the country, which led to a 15-year long civil war. Max Weiss defines sectarianism as a continuing practice of "social, cultural, political, and intellectual habits", whose actions are imposed in order to either include or exclude a certain group or *sect* from a population, often through violent segregation and resentful antagonism over resources within a given territory (Weiss, 2010: 154).

How did the division escalate into a violent conflict during 1975-1990? Lebanon has historically been divided into several religious sects, notably Maronite, Greek Orthodox and Greek Catholic Christians, Druze, Shi'a and Sunni Muslims. Sects have been assigned different constitutional rights and powers within state-run structures since 1926, when France granted independence to its Lebanese mandate. For instance, the President is a Maronite Christian, and the Prime Minister is a Sunni Muslim even today (Saliba: 2010), despite changing demographics that might have caused the shift in the population of each religious group.

These changing demographics have not been properly addressed in Lebanon, as it retains its constitution in present-day, fuelling sectarianism. Salibi's contribution shows how Christians, for example, were frightened of pointing out this change in demographics, as it could jeopardise their legitimacy in ruling the state (2002: 197-198). Some researchers would argue that this is due to the "primordial" nature of identity and ethnicity which is deeply rooted historically in society (Esman: 1994), whereas others argue that ethnicity-powered sectarianism is a more modern element (Brass: 1991). In defining what these approaches mean, I side with a fusion of instrumentalist and post-cultural features, arguing that identity is not deeply rooted – it is an evolving element in politics, being constantly shaped and reconstructed. Primordial accounts and identity politics, then, are ultimately misguided and fuel sectarianism in post-war Lebanon. To effectively demonstrate this, the paper will first inspect the theoretical debate on ethnicity within sectarianism. This will help address the conflict through a theoretical scope. Later on, the civil war will be examined, showing how foreign actors and colonial impediments have helped orchestrate a change in identity and have fuelled the conflict. Lastly, I will conclude by examining whether the sectarian division can be overcome by focusing on strengthening and shaping the Lebanese national identity and unity.

The Theoretical Debate

"Ethnicity" as a term, while originally deriving from the Greek word *ethnos* (nation or race), it has been associated with those sharing common cultural or biological characteristics and "live and act in concert" (Hutchinson and Smith, 1996: 4). When referring to 'ethnic groups', Max Weber uses the term to capture those who share a common heritage, the same historical experiences in society, but are not bound by blood; those subscribing to an 'ethnic membership' merely refers to those engaging in "group formation", and the emergence of an ethnic society based on the political – it is not ideologically-based, unlike the first group (Weber, 1968: 389).

With that in mind, academic debates have revolved around this very question of ethnicity: is it an inseparable part of

our identity, or a social construct for political purposes? The essence of primordial accounts is rooted in the assumption that ethnicity in general, inclusive of ethnic identity, conflict and solidarity are inherently historical elements embedded in a population or group and cannot be changed or separated from human nature itself (Esman, 1994: 1). At the same time, ethnicity can be employed as a nationalistic tool to unify and command people in a greater community, with shared identity, language, religion, tradition and values that might often stand as obstacles in furthering social evolution and transformation when encountering ethnic minorities within a country's population (Geertz, 1973: 257-258). Geertz, by using India as an example, identifies this as a fundamental impediment to modern nations, since primordial ties cannot be easily broken, with groups often resorting to violence to maintain those ties (Ibid: 259-260). Even the more peaceful approaches, such as 'ethnic solidarity', which aims at maintaining unity can be politicised, thus contributing to conflict, since unity is acquired at the expense of those who cannot be part of such solidarity (Esman, 1994: 9). As long as historical ties are maintained, the primordial School argues that conflict might not be overcome. Geertz also mentions that primordial elements are observed in areas where no linguistic differences are marked, just like in the case of Lebanon (1973: 262).

Modernist approaches, on the other hand, signify a pattern of change in the nature of ethnicity and its link to sectarianism. Instrumentalism is derived from a constructivist concept of International Relations, whereby ethnicity (and identity, for that matter), can be constantly subjected to change: just like identity, ethnicity is also a social construct which is shaped in response to changing conditions. (Hempel, 2004: 253-254). Alexander Wendt best captures this in his Arab-Israeli example on the conflict, where it is specified that identity is a strong component that will not allow either side to back down, even if either wishes to do so – there is a strong "desire to maintain" such an identity (Wendt, 2003: 228). Identity, then, is what maintains conflict, thus the shaping of such identities towards a path of hate, and emphasising the different ethnic elements among minorities, is what feeds sectarianism.

Simultaneously, the post-cultural approach to modernism has offered a critical Foucaultian contribution to the modernist side. Post-culturalism is a behavioural model which denotes resemblances in society, with patterns of repetition and variation, whereby no action will necessarily be immediately replicated in any given area (Banner, 1993: 2,4) The primordial understanding, according to this framework, only serves to fuel tension and to deliberately attack even those entities who might act as neutral arbiters: in Lebanon, this is particularly evident, as the Lebanese society is divided into various sects, which makes it much harder for citizens to overcome their current situation due to a firm politico-economic and ideologically-based sectarian system that divides and splits the national identity (Salloukh et al, 2015: 3-4). Nonetheless, the elements drawn out of this approach are strictly focused on identity, just like instrumentalism. In order to understand how sectarianism and ethnicity are inherently linked, both approaches must be employed against the limiting assumptions of primordialism.

The Conflict during 1975-1978

The civil war is the result of an explosion of a build-up of colonial restrictions and indirect rule, which emphasised some political and religious identities over others (Cammett, 2014: 11). As mentioned earlier, the French colonial rulers drafted a constitution favouring different sects against others, with ambitions of creating a "Greater Lebanon" in the Levant (which included territory from Syria, where the French also had influence) with a Christian-majority population (Winslow, 1996: 39-40, 59). Such favouritism would ensure the continuing influence and interests of Europeans (France, in particular) in terms of trade, state and political influence, due to the fact that a more fragmented society is more vulnerable to intervention, as will be demonstrated below. The end product was a "sect among sects" (Weiss, 2010: 24).

It is also worth noting that despite this favouritism, there was no established state religion mentioned in the constitution, unlike in other Arab states (Salibi, 2002: 197). This imposed sectarianism is not only about religion, however. In the Lebanese case, it can reach political, legal, and cultural levels, as evident in the diversity of postcolonial Lebanon and its weakness in terms of national identity, simply because of a strong communal solidarity in some sects, but a lack of commitment to the "nation-state" (Weiss, 2010: 11-12). This is particularly important to acknowledge, since this focus on one religious sect has transcended into other evolving forms of sectarianism, and this helps us identify the roots of the civil war (Ibid: 15).

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Additionally, it is important to understand the actors at play before and during the war. With the formation of the United Arab Republic (UAR) in 1958, Druze and Sunni elements wished to join the Republic, in pursuit of Pan-Arabist ambitions set out by Egypt's Nasser, while Christians and President Chamoun opposed and received assistance from US Marine Corps to restore the status quo (Salloukh et al, 2015: 18; Salibi, 2002: 197). This involvement of foreign actors soon dragged fragmented Lebanon into a conflict with Israel. Again, Sunni and Druze would support the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) through its Lebanese faction, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) (Winslow, 1996: 182) against Israel, but this was opposed by Christians and Shi'as. Consequently, Maronite Christians employed the paramilitary organisation known as the Phalange, which helped trigger the civil war in 1975, with attacks against the PLO faction – these attacks were sponsored by the CIA, having delivered weapons to the Phalange in the early 1970s (Winslow, 1996: 186). The Phalange's paradoxical mission was to exclude Arab and Syrian influence in Lebanon, yet it accepted Syrian intervention in 1976 (Ibid: 186, 190). At the same time, the Phalange attacked other Christian militias, such as Antoine Franjieh, a prominent politician and militia (Fisk, 1991: 76), showing that the conflict was beyond religious issues, supporting the understanding that sectarianism has various forms.

However, although the Phalange allowed Syria to intervene in 1976, it backed the Israeli Operation 'Litani', which was the invasion of southern Lebanon in March 1978 to eliminate PLO elements (Laffin, 1985: 18; Winslow, 1996: 208). This confirms two things: first of all, sectarianism was maintained due to assumptions of 'historical rootness', yet it was not simply a religious division, since the multiple actors' involvement shows that pragmatism would often prevail to further political gains; secondly, the identity and the behaviour of the domestic players in Lebanon shows the divided society, but also the evolving pattern of change, whereby actors' interests are continuously shaped. This verifies the vulnerability of the Lebanese state, as well as how primordial accounts are inferior to instrumentalist and post-cultural analysis.

The Conflict during 1978-1982

With the invasion of Israel, the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) was deployed to ensure the removal of the invasive Israeli forces and to restore peace and security in the region, yet by 1980, the PLO faction managed to assert itself, infiltrating UNIFIL-controlled zones (Laffin, 1985: 18-19). At the same time, Syrian forces and the PLO bombarded the Maronite Phalange and the Israeli, with tension escalating by 1982 (Ibid; Katz and Russell, 1985: 9). Syria's actions were supported by the Shi'a community in Lebanon, in an attempt to escape their "political and cultural marginalisation" (Weiss, 2010: 22).

These ongoing incidents, as well as an assassination attempt on Israel's ambassador to London by the rival Palestinian Abu Nidal Organisation prompted a second Israeli invasion (Winslow, 1996: 208, 222). Consequently, Lebanon in 1983-1990 entered a state of war, with external forces leading the show. The United States launched its own plan for the region – the Reagan Plan – and called for Israel to stop any further the settlements on West Bank, as well as for Arab recognition of the State of Israel (Ibid: 226). The ongoing political marginalisation and economic exclusion of the Shi'a community fuelled Shi'a Islam fundamentalists and led to the emergence of new actors, namely the pro-Iranian Hezbollah party organisation (Salloukh et al, 2015: 157; Laffin, 1985: 201; Weiss, 2010: 91). Its pro-Iranian stance was guaranteed due to subsidies from Tehran, but even so, the state could not control the organisation's every aspect (Winslow, 1996: 265). Therefore, the involvement and the rise in power of non-state actors is confirmed as legacies of colonial sectarianism, moving away from traditional inter-state conflict.

The continuous external intervention, as well as the domestic challenges from 1983 onwards transformed the Lebanese state. With multiple entities engaged in the civil war, the state had lost the monopoly of legitimate coercion (Salloukh et al, 2015: 20). By 1984, the government-controlled army was incapacitated, whereas the president-elect was murdered and Hezbollah destroyed the US Embassy in Beirut in 1983; elections failed to elect a head of state in 1988 and gave rise to political rivalry in other regions (Fisk, 1991: xviii). The response to instability was the Ta'if Accord of 1989, which came into force in 1990. This document was more than a mere response to political rivalry: it called for restructuring sectarianism in Lebanon, with international involvement (Shalloukh et al, 2015: 20-21). The Maronite President was retained, but was subject to a Sunni veto, and the Chamber of Deputies would have to equally split between Muslims and Christians (Winslow, 1996: 264). This was an attempt to emphasise a united Arab

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identity, but all it actually achieved was to ensure foreign dominance in Lebanon (Hudson, 1997: 113; Salloukh et al, 2015: 21). For instance, Syria was given a "special relationship" with Lebanon and was allowed to intervene in matters of national security (Hudson, 1997: 113).

Post-War Lebanon: Sectarian Division?

After the Lebanese Civil War ended in 1990, the Israelis retained their presence in a "security zone" in southern Lebanon to ensure there would be no further aggression from PLO, whereas at the same time, Syria advocated further military presence because of the Israelis (Hudson, 1997: 113). Simultaneously, Hezbollah officials refused to recognise the Accord due to potential Israeli aggression (Salloukh et al, 2015: 21).

What is more, the agreement was breached shortly after the ceasefire was reached, with Maronite General Aoun breaking the ceasefire seeking refuge in the French Embassy in October (Winslow, 1669: 271). This showed that in order to uphold the new Ta'if Accord, radical elements had to be suppressed. Every bit of attempt had to be made in order to guarantee some stability. The Ta'if was an attempt to eradicate these elements of primordial thought and to create a united national identity. Even today, nonetheless, Lebanon's society is divided due to sectarianism. For two and a half years, the Lebanese were left without a head of state, until October 2016, when Michel Aoun was voted by parliament (Saab: 2016). This return of Aoun brings uncertainties: a formerly exiled General becoming the President of Lebanon. However, this merely signifies the continuing changing identities.

This paper has presented a debate against primordialism, linking sectarian favouritism to colonialism. Because of a belief in primordialism and historical ties, groups tend to be unable to move beyond their divided society, with identity politics encouraging sectarian division. The historical account presented, however, shows that in many cases, sectarianism had gone beyond mere religious elements, and it is actually fuelled by identity politics. A united identity in Lebanon is needed in order to ensure continuing stability. Instrumentalist and post-cultural thought identify that the split national identity is at fault, with primordial accounts failing to acknowledge this. The Ta'if Accord might not have been perfect, but it has served as a starting point to further tackle the colonial remnants that fuel sectarianism in Lebanon. Policy-makers, then, should focus on retaining a strong Lebanese identity, by overcoming identity politics, step-by-step.

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