

IDENTITY FEATURES IN THE SHADOW OF SECTARIANISM: LEBANON

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Abstract

The article will examine the features of identity in Lebanon, a country divided by sectarianism and civil war, but able to find innovative methods to surpass obstacles and to set up characteristics for a national identity. 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. Keeping in mind the inherent religious differences that divide the Lebanese, we'll reflect on how this situation influenced Lebanon's political and social development. 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. Nevertheless, questions such as "Are the identities relationally defined (family, region) or are they more collectively ascribed (national, pan regional, pan religious etc)?" and "How strong are national identities compared to sectarian identities?" are to be approached.

Keywords: identity, Middle East, Lebanon, religious sects

Introduction

When talking about Lebanon, one has in mind the high literacy rate and the traditional mercantile culture, which made Lebanon an important commercial and cultural hub for the Middle East. However, this progressive image didn't prevent Lebanon to be seen at the center of Middle Eastern conflicts especially during '70's and '80's. Despite its small size, because of its borders with Syria and Israel and 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 issues, some of them unusual for other Arab Middle Eastern countries.

But up to this point, Lebanon may not seem to be so uncommon, if we take into consideration that the entire Middle East is characterized by diversity, heterogeneous societies and multilayered identities. Of course, these are general characteristics, because the situation, therefore the identity and self-perception, may change a long time.

Diversity in different areas was normal for this area for centuries. The Ottoman Empire was composed of a mosaic of races, nationalities and

religions, which for long time the Turks did not try to transform into a homogenous group. 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 and Turks lived in a non-national world¹. Nevertheless, the non-national world, which was mainly based on religious brotherhood, should not be regarded as a heterogeneous construction because clan/tribe affiliation was still strong and in favorable circumstances might develop to conflicts.

Purpose

This paper aims at examining the features of identity in Lebanon, a country divided by sectarianism and civil war, but somehow able to find innovative methods to surpass obstacles and to set up characteristics for developing a national identity. This article will be exploring the realities of sectarian divisions in Lebanon, how they influences people, society and politics. As well, a topic of interest is how different confessions linked themselves to the construction of a Lebanese national identity.

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. He enlarged the 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 18th 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 of the Princes of Mount Lebanon, as in 1842 Omar Pasha an Ottoman army officer became the new governor of the area.

During the nineteenth century two decades of serious conflicts took place between Maronites and Druze in Mount Lebanon area. 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 a Mutasarrifiya². 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.

¹Zeine N. Zeine, *The Emergence of Arab Nationalism*, Khayats, Beirut, 1966, p. 143

² Kamal S. Salibi, *The Lebanese Identity*, in "Journal of Contemporary History", Jan/1971, p. 78

Starting 1860, education became widespread, again with the help of European and American "missionaries". The Saint Joseph University and the American University of Beirut were founded, new printing presses were installed and many books and newspapers were published. 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 for the collaboration of different religions, which despite the setback it suffered after the 1860 civil war, it managed to continue the idea of unity in culture.

As George Antonious 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 that thrives on ignorance. That reinforced the activity of establishment of schools and the fought against ignorance³.

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. As for the political development, 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, JabalAmel, Sur, Sayda, Beirut and Tripoli. Starting 1922, the Lebanese elected a local Representative Council, which in 1926 drew up the Lebanese Constitution under French supervision.

This Constitution became the law of the land and 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 with 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,

³ George Antonious, *The Arab Awakening*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1938, p. 59-60

who appointed the Prime Minister who, in turn, chooses Cabinet members. The first President of Lebanon was Charles Debbas, who was elected in 1926 still under the French Mandate.

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 work the system. 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 the Maronite domination, but were in favor of an independent Lebanon⁴. This situation, which prolonged even decades after the period of 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 is not until 1943 (although initiatives had taken place since 1941) that Lebanon became fully independent, during World War II. Bishara el-Khoury 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.

For three decades after 1943 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 East⁵. 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.

Basic Features of Lebanese Identity before 1975

According Kamal S. Salibi, 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. Lebanese enjoyed 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

⁴ M. E. Yapp, *The Near East since the First World War. A History to 1995*, Second Edition, Pearson Education Limited, London, 1996, p. 106

⁵Ibidem, p. 114

recognized)⁶. Hence a major feature of Lebanese identity before 1990 refers to the **territory**, which is the center of national pride.

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 development acquired after 1861, enlarging territorial limits of the Mutasarrifiyya of Lebanon was needed for further development. The opportunity appeared with the establishment of the French Mandate in September 1st 1920, the French High Commissioner, General Henri Gouraud, proclaimed the State of Greater Lebanon. Under the Mutasarrifiyya, the Maronites were the majority, while the Great Lebanon context, they had to share power and accept identity features from other communities. 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 reevaluated. In this context, the need to find a *modus vivendi* proved to be absolutely needed. Later the compulsory coexistence reflected in the National Pact and in dealing with the 1958 crisis.

Lebanon's history as a refuge for persecuted minorities and an entrepôt of international trade, 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 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 dissensions, patterns of coexistence among Lebanon's various groups have developed organically, and often logically, since the French Mandate Period in the early twentieth century⁷.

Sectarianism is another important feature of Lebanon. Although it seems to be a natural characteristic of Lebanon given its historical background, the sectarian formula implementation 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 respect⁸. His understanding of Lebanese identity was based on the Phoenician roots and the position on the Mediterranean coasts, which provide Lebanon with the ability to become a bridge linking East to West. This division of political power to sects was embodied in the National Pact,

⁶ Kamal S. Salibi, op.cit., p. 78

⁷ Hannah Stewart, *Lebanon's National Identity: Walking Between Raindrops*, in "The Levantine Review", Volume 1, number 2, Fall 2012, p. 153

⁸ Kamal S. Salibi, op. cit., p. 80

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 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 create 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 identity. These attitudes and possible dangers to Lebanon's existence led the way to innovative solution, which favored **compromise**. This is another important characteristic of the Lebanese political identity, but also of the Lebanese individual, which is best seen in the National Pact. A 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. As George Corm, historian and former Finance Minister, noticed: 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 evolution⁹.

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, in Lebanon the fact that 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.

⁹Georges Corm, *Les conditions de l'émergence d'un étatsouverain, pluraliste et démocratique au Liban*, in *Revue Tumultes*, Paris, May, 2012, <http://www.georgescorm.com/personal/download.php?file=tumultescormartliban.pdf>

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.

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 in 1978 and again in 1982, before pulling back to a self-declared "security zone" in the south from which 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.

Lebanese Identity after 1990

The Lebanese civil war which covered two decades of twentieth century proved to be a central event in Lebanese and Middle Eastern 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 identity 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 Bernard Lewis argues, in Middle East religion is more powerful than in Western societies, mainly because in Muslim theory, the church and the state are not separated¹⁰. 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 influenced 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 have 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.

Although compared to most Western societies in Lebanon there is a stronger connection with the family/clan/tribe and with the religious community, 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 political elites started and some of them ended up by assuming it given their above two levels of commitment.

¹⁰ Bernard Lewis, *The Multiple Identities of the Middle East*, Schocken Books, New York, 1998, p. 28

Nevertheless, after two decades of fighting, the individual returned to compromise and common grief worked as a cohesion factor.

An identity feature common with other Arab societies is the **feeling of malaise**¹¹. This feeling tends to unite the Lebanese society and become a unitary trait, especially when Lebanese, regardless of religion, compare themselves with other society. 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 they 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 having 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 was a fashion in Middle Eastern politics, although less powerful than other neighbors, 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 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 failure¹². 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 list¹³.

¹¹ Samir Kassir, *Being Arab*, Verso, London, New York, 2006, p. 2

¹² Maurus Reinkowski, *National Identity in Lebanon since 1990*, in "Orient: Deutsche Zeitschrift für Politik und Wirtschaft des Orient", 39, 1997, p. 494

¹³ Sati al-Husri, apud William Cleveland, *The Making of An Arab Nationalist*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1971, p. 127.

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.

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, not belonging "administratively" to a religious community, they were eligible for civil marriage. Mixed marriages are socially and religiously discouraged and interfaith couples, who do not wish to convert to one another's religion - previously had to travel abroad to get a civil marriage. Ironically, that marriage was then recognized and registered in Lebanon¹⁴.

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

¹⁴Dalal Mawad, *Lebanon civil marriage raises hope for change*, May, 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/04/20134309242619227.html>

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.

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 altogether¹⁵? All these are questions are to be answered by events that are to take place in the future, but now that the door was open, the need for answers is just a question of time.

Another contemporary challenge for Lebanon is 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. Lebanon’s Sunni Muslims mostly 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 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. Too, 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’ disadvantage¹⁶.

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

¹⁵ Elias Muhanna, *Will Civil Marriage End Lebanon’s Confessional System?*, in “Jadaliyya”, Jan/2013, <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/9796/will-civil-marriage-end-lebanon%E2%80%99s-confessional-sys>

¹⁶ **, *Syria’s Metastatic Conflicts* in “Middle East Report”, edited by the International Crisis Group, Brussels, No. 143, 27 June 2013, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/egypt-syria-lebanon.aspx>

impact Lebanese national identity, given the fact it seems to enhance the “sect belonging feeling” instead of “Lebanon belonging feeling”.

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