

Lebanese Christians and Shifts in Political Power: from Taif Accords to the Second Lebanon War

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“Lebanese history is a history of differences which is close to the coexistence among the Lebanese confessions. The problem of Lebanon is that it is the scene where all the regional and international intelligence services meet and where there are attempts to implement international projects in the conflicts among countries [...]” (Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah)¹

The Taif Agreement also known as “National Reconciliation Accord,” or “Document of National Accord” was an agreement reached to provide “the basis for the ending of the civil war and the return to political normalcy in Lebanon”. Negotiated in Taif, Saudi Arabia, it was designed to end the decades-long Lebanese civil war, politically accommodate the demographic shift to a Muslim majority, reassert Lebanese authority in South Lebanon (then occupied by Israel), and legitimize the Syrian occupation. It was signed on October 22, 1989 and ratified on November 4, 1989.²

The aim of this essay is to study the shifts of political relations between Christians and Muslims in Lebanon, focusing on those that have been taken place since the end of the civil strife. Special attention is going to be paid to the circumstances among which an alliance was forged between the Michel Aoun led Free Patriotic Movement and the Shiite Hezbollah. New elements of Hezbollah’s discourse that lately elevates pan-Arabism over the bonds of Islam, and shifts in the public opinion of Lebanese Christian as mirrored by polls and surveys are going to be studied as well.

The Christian Community

The present Lebanese Constitution officially acknowledges 18 religious groups. After the Islamic conquest, the Aramaic-speaking original Christian inhabitants were joined by

¹ Shiite Ayatollah in Lebanon allegedly related to Hezbollah: *Interview with Hizballah’s Ayatollah Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah* by Manuela Paraipan, available at: <http://www.globalpolitician.com/24569-lebanon>.

² Krayem, Hassan: *The Lebanese Civil War and the Taif Agreement*, in *Conflict Resolution in the Arab World: Selected Essays*, Paul Salem (ed.). Beirut; American University Press, 1997, pp. 411–435. Available at: <http://ddc.aub.edu.lb/projects/pspa/conflict-resolution.html>.

other Christian and Shiite communities from Syria and Iraq. At the beginning of the eighth century, the disciples and followers of fourth-century St. Maroun formed the autonomous community of the Maronites. During the Crusades, around 1180, they had established relations with the Papal State and later, in 1215, keeping their own hierarchy, liturgy and holidays they joined the Catholic Church. The second largest Greek Orthodox community of the Middle East may be found in Lebanon, and there is a significant number of Greek Catholics also known as Melkites, who accepted the supremacy of the Pope in 1724.³ Today, it is estimated that the Christian population makes up about 39% of the total population.

The Shiites (twelvers) settled down mainly in the areas east of Sidon, in the south-Lebanese highlands of Jabal al-Aamil, and in the Beqaa Valley around Baalbek.⁴ In the eighteenth century, the Maronites started to move gradually from the northern highlands towards the south, while the Sunnites started to settle mainly in the coastal towns. According to travellers of the time, these communities lived in peace with each other.⁵ In modern times Armenians came after World War I, and the Palestinian refugees arrived in several waves starting in 1948.⁶

Today Maronites are scattered around the Lebanese countryside but with heavy concentrations on Mount Lebanon and in (East) Beirut. Some of them see themselves as descendants of the Phoenicians/Canaanites and tend to deny Lebanon's Arab heritage. Greek Catholics, the Greek Orthodox, and some Maronites are likely to focus on the Greek inheritance of the region from the days of the Byzantine Empire. Other Christians even claim partial descent from Crusaders.

As early as in the 12th century French crusaders established close relations with the Maronite community. From the moment they arrived, the Crusaders had spontaneous and immediate help from the Maronites who, in turn, benefited from their particular protection and privilege. Louis IX, King of France (Saint Louis) went so far as to declare that the Maronites were part of the French nation. The various regimes which succeeded the monarchy of St. Louis and of Louis XIV all maintained in law, and in fact, the ancient privilege of France in the protection of the missionaries and Christian communities of the Orient.⁷

Understandably, in 1920 the Maronite Patriarch, Elias Hoayek wholeheartedly supported the creation of Greater Lebanon under French tutelage. Between the two world

³ Hourani, Albert: *Political Society in Lebanon*, Papers on Lebanon I, Centre for Lebanese Studies, published jointly with Emile Boustani Seminar at MIT, p. 6.

⁴ Hitti, Philip K.: *Lebanon in History*, Macmillan and C. O. LTD, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1957, pp. 244–65.

⁵ See: Volney C. F.: *Voyage en Syrie*, pp. ii., 31, 57, 68.; Frederick J. Bliss: *The Religions of Modern Syria and Palestine*, New York 1912, pp. 318–319.; cf. Isaac Riley: *Syrian Home Life*, New York, 1874, p. 181.; N. Bouron: *Les Druzes: histoire du Liban et de la montagne haouranaise*, Paris 1930, pp. 299, 315. in: Hitti: *op. cit.* p. 407.

⁶ Hourani: *op. cit.* p. 4.

⁷ Risterhueber, René: *Les Traditions françaises au Liban*, Paris, 1925, pp. 42ff.; Salibi, Kamal S.: *The Maronites of Lebanon under Frankish and Mamluk Rule (1099–1516)*, Arabica, IV, 1957, 288.

wars the political institutions of the country were dominated by Maronite politicians, most of whom had served in the office of the French high commissioner.⁸

The policy of the Maronite Church was based on two principles. Its leaders wanted to maintain the autonomy they had as a protected minority in the Ottoman sense of the *millet* system,⁹ and also wished to exercise political hegemony based on their slightly superior numbers contradicting to Article 7 of the Lebanese Constitution.¹⁰ This aspiration to hegemony slowly but surely gave rise to a growing reaction among other religious communities. When the number of Maronites in Lebanon fell significantly, the new – Muslim – majority started to require a redistribution of power shares and resources based on their increasing numbers. Demographic changes can be considered as the final reason for the antagonism between the various communities and the outbreak of the civil war in Lebanon. This question has not been resolved until the present day.

The Maronite patriarch even nowadays continues to exercise the role of final authority among Christian politicians and thus to exercise a decisive, yet informal, veto power in Lebanese politics.¹¹ It means that the religious factor is decisive in shaping the political identity of the Maronites.

Can patron–client relationship explain the situation of Christians in Lebanon?

In Lebanon political ties and alliances are grown out of an archaic social structure that has survived in each community. However, due to the shock of the civil strife the so-called patron–client system started to lose its prevailing position and recently gave rise to new, purely political formations in each side.

According to Samir Khalaf, the social history of Lebanon is but the pursuit of a functioning patron–client system by different groups of interest in each confessional community. In this framework clients are guaranteed their security and welfare, while the

⁸ Hourani: *op. cit.* p.10.

⁹ In this sense *millet* means legally protected religious community with reference to non-Muslim minorities (*dhimmi*) holding the same status throughout the empire. See: Ursinus, M.O.H: *Millet* in: *Encyclopedia of Islam*. Some Muslim historians argue that the millet system of Ottoman Islamic law can be considered an early example of pre-modern religious pluralism, since millet communities possessed separate legal courts pertaining to personal law under which minorities were allowed to rule themselves (in cases not involving any Muslim) with fairly little interference from the Ottoman government. See: Sachedina, A.A.: *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism*, OUP, 2001. Today the millet system is still used at varying degrees in some dominantly Muslim countries which maintain the principle of separate personal courts and/or laws for every recognized religious community and reserved seats in the parliament.

¹⁰ All Lebanese are equal before the law. They equally enjoy civil and political rights and equally are bound by public obligations and duties without any distinction. See: http://www.servat.unibe.ch/law/icl/le00000_html.

¹¹ Mugraby, Muhammad: An Islamic rule of law for Lebanon? *The Daily Star* (Beirut), 15 October 2008, available at: http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=1&categ_id=2&article_id=96785.

patrons are assured political and consequently economic power.¹² The social structures of religious enclaves share certain characteristics; in every denomination there were major noble families which had been carrying out the public administrative duties of a certain area for centuries. Their main responsibilities were law enforcement and tax collection.¹³ At the same time, they protected farmers from the excessive exploitation by the establishment.

As a result of the integration of the prominent urban and rural families into the bureaucracy, the feudal nature of the patron–client system gained an official colour; talented lawyers and civil servants may well have aspired to a political career under the Ottoman and later French control. Descendants of the excelling families during these times have provided the Lebanese political elite ever since.¹⁴ These landowners are called *zu`ama`* (Sg. *za`im*) in Arabic, which best translates as patrons. We must not forget however, that the *zu`ama`* had communities of different religious composition living under their control,¹⁵ thus “patron–client relationship” in itself is unable to explain why these communities are divided on religious bases and why their identity remained religious for many centuries up to now.

A confessionalist system

The confessionalist system is considered as the heir to the Ottoman *millet* system, in which peoples belonging to monotheist (*dhimmi*) denominations were guaranteed legal, and limited administrative autonomy according to their religion. This concerns both Christians and Jews.

Between 1920 and 1945, governance was based on the agreement of the leaders of the different religions and communities. This period is known as the establishment and consolidation of the confessionalist system, in which administrative functions and the proportional representation were distributed according to the denominational division data of the 1932 census.¹⁶ As a result, the Christian population with a mere 55% majority gained a superior position. In this structure, patrons are connected to their clients who are politically and economically subordinate and committed to them. The *zu`ama`* set up parties and charity organisations; however, apart from securing their own power, they do not have a comprehensive strategy. To disguise this lack, these patrons try to appear as religiously devoted local patriots.¹⁷

Between 1947 and 1972, one third of parliamentary mandates were in the hands of 26 families, and one fourth of the representatives elected in 1960 were given their positions by

¹² Khalaf, Samir: Changing Forms of Political Patronage in Lebanon in: *Patrons and Clients in Mediterranean Societies*, ed. Ernest Gellner, John Waterbury, Duckworth, 1977, p. 187.

¹³ Picard, Elizabeth: *Zá`im, zu`amá`* in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*.

¹⁴ Khalaf: *op. cit.* pp. 193–194.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 189–192.

¹⁶ Krayem: *op. cit.*

¹⁷ Johnson, Michael: Political bosses and their gangs: *Zu`amá* and *qabadayat* in the Sunni Muslim quarters of Beirut, in *Patrons and Clients in Mediterranean Societies*. *op. cit.* pp. 208–214.

inheritance. For decades even ministerial positions were held by clan leaders. During the civil war of 1975–1990, numerous militia leaders came from their ranks.¹⁸

Lebanon has no civil code for personal matters; each sect has its own set of personal status laws that include such matters as engagement, marriage and dowry, annulment of marriage, divorce, adoption, and inheritance. These laws are obligatory for the citizens, whether one is a practicing member of the sect or not. The confessional system of personal-status laws strengthens the role of communal religious leaders and hampers the growth of nationalistic or secular ideas in Lebanon.¹⁹

Confessionalism turned Lebanon into a “country of associated minorities”²⁰, imposing a threefold burden on the people up to the present day: it inhibits the formation of a common sense of identity, preserves the inequality of development, and as proven by the history of the civil war, it leaves the country defenceless at the mercy of foreign interests. This situation proved to be fatal.²¹

Deepening rifts in pre-war Lebanon

Upon returning from a trip to the 1936 Berlin Olympics, Pierre Gemayel inspired by the discipline of the Nazis, formed his own extreme right movement in Lebanon – the Phalange Party. Named after the Spanish dictator Franco’s party, the Phalangists (known as the *Kataeb* in Arabic) – backed by the French and the U.S. – remained Lebanon’s most powerful political party until the onset of the civil war in 1975.

Social development in the first decades of the Lebanese Republic had proven to be extremely unbalanced in the different regions, for it was characterized by an unequal distribution of national income and misuse of benefits and funds.²² The central government regarded the regions annexed to what was Mount Lebanon in 1920 as marginal parts of Lebanon. The economic situation in peripheral Lebanon differed sharply from that around Beirut. Along the northern, southern and eastern borders poverty zones had formed, with a continuous migration to the suburbs of Beirut. The land was divided among a small elite, and working conditions on the large estates were harsh. The centralization of government in Beirut also worsened the conditions of the rural areas, pushing many Lebanese to crowded cities. Consequently the community-based segregation deepened, poverty belts grew around the metropolitan centres inhabited by the privileged – mainly Sunnite and Christian – families.²³

Beirut and its suburbs became politically and socially explosive when people from the impoverished periphery migrated to the city and came in contact with the affluent city

¹⁸ Khalaf: *op. cit.* pp. 197–199.

¹⁹ Library of Congress Country Studies, available at: [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+1b0048\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+1b0048)).

²⁰ Chiha, Michel: *Un pays de minoritiés associées, Politique Intérieure*, Beirut, 1964, p. 232.

²¹ Daher, Massoud: *The Socio-Economic Changes and the Civil War in Lebanon 1943-1990*, VRF Series No. 201, Institute of Developing Economies, 1992, p. 4.

²² *Ibid.* p. 4.

²³ Library of Congress Country Studies, *op. cit.*

dwellers. The situation was further worsened by the settlement of the approximately 150,000 Palestinian refugees and the anti-Israel fights of their armed groups.²⁴

The Palestinian issue

Palestinians were settled in refugee camps near Beirut, but their integration was not enhanced in any way since granting the Lebanese citizenship to refugees – whose majority was Sunnite Muslim – would have changed the denominational division of the country significantly. After the formation of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1964, the camps were gradually turned into military training bases, and from 1968, they launched attacks on Israel from south Lebanon, obviously calling for countermeasures. The situation had also divided the Lebanese people into two opposing sides: the Christians, whose majority wished the Palestinians to be controlled, and into the Muslims, whose solidarity with the Palestinians forced them to support their cause.²⁵

The rapid expansion in Palestinian military influence in Lebanon speeded up after the PLO's expel from Jordan due to a military confrontation they had with the Jordanian Army in 1970 (Black September). PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat fuelled sectarian tensions among many Lebanese and provided an excuse for the organization of armed private militias by turning West Beirut into his headquarters whereas there was no official Lebanese political power to check the Palestinian activities.²⁶

The civil war and its effect on the Christian community

In the spring of 1975, a general breakdown of law and order followed the series of conflicts that had erupted between the PLO and the Christian Phalange. In the meanwhile the national government was rapidly losing its credibility and consequently could not correspond to the need to maintain order and ensure its functioning. When in June, 1976 – as a result of the continuous clashes – collapse of the government became a matter of hours, the Syrian Army entered the country, with the support and consent of the big powers led by the United States, and swiftly ended the fight. Its occupation of Lebanon was welcomed by the Maronite Christian leaders.

In 1978, the Israeli Army launched 'Operation Litani' and Major Saad Haddad, commander of a Christian militia called South Lebanon Army (SLA) took command of a garrison besieged by the PLO by travelling via Israeli-held territory. Israel in close cooperation with Major Haddad's force, established a "security belt" in South Lebanon to

²⁴ Daher: *op. cit.* pp. 105–106.

²⁵ Sankari, Jamal: *Fadlallah: The Making of a Radical Shiite Leader*, Saqi, London, 2005. pp. 148–149.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

protect Israel. This zone constituted 10% of Lebanon's territory and its custodian, the SLA was financed, equipped and controlled by Israel.²⁷

The largest of the Christian militias was borne of the Phalange Party and, after subduing by force the rival Tigers militia led by Camille Chamoun, came to be known in the late 1970s as the "Lebanese Forces" (LF). The LF was also trained, armed and financed by Israel. In 1982 the Israelis had invaded Lebanon in an alliance with Bashir Gemayel, the commander of the Lebanese Forces militia, son of the founder of the Phalange Pierre Gemayel. He was assassinated a few days after he had been made president as an Israeli ally. In revenge for Bashir's death, Lebanese Forces militiamen carried out a massacre in the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila, killing hundreds of mostly Palestinian civilians, relatives of the militiamen who had been evacuated from Beirut two weeks earlier.

The Phalange movement began to fall apart when, after Bashir's assassination, Amin, his much less talented and less charismatic brother was elected president with full Israeli and American support.

The Syrian army, the Israeli forces, and the American and European peacekeepers all came at the invitation of leading Maronite political or militia leaders in the different phases of the civil strife, but in all three cases the result was not what Christians expected.

Amid this turmoil, the dominant Christian Lebanese Forces (LF) militia created a state-within-a-state, while advocating a "federal" system of government that would preserve Christian autonomy. Its leaders were ready to accept the formation of a Christian mini-state under Israeli tutelage.

In the late 1980s, loyalties split between the LF and the Army, led by Gen. Michel Aoun. Amin Gemayel appointed Michel Aoun as acting prime minister in September 1988. As the war came to a close, Amin Gemayel fled to France, and the Lebanese Government split. The former president was accused of robbing the treasury of its money before he departed, which consequently caused a massive devaluation in the Lebanese pound.²⁸

Taif Accords

Christians lost both militarily and politically during the civil war. The official end of the strife, the Taif Accords in November 1989 left the confessionalist system untouched. However, it stated that the abolition of political sectarianism constitutes a basic national goal, which is to be achieved according to a gradual scheme. Due to the demographic changes, it adjusted the Christian-Muslim parliamentary representation from the previous 6:5 ratio to 50-50 per cent.²⁹ The president remained a Maronite, the Prime Minister a

²⁷ Cobban, Helena: "The Growth of Shi'i Power in Lebanon and Its Implications for the Future", in J. R. I. Cole, N. R. Keddie: *Shiism and Social Protest*. Yale University Press, New Haven & London 1986., pp. 137-155.

²⁸ Rubeiz, Ghassan: *Christian Politics in Lebanon*, available at: <http://www.globalpolitician.com/24569-lebanon>.

²⁹ In 1920, it was generally assumed that the ratio of Christians to Muslims among the population of Lebanon was 55:45. The population census of 1932 failed to conclusively validate this ratio, and was never repeated. In 1958 it was slightly modified to a 6:5 ratio. In 1991, that ratio was updated to 50:50. See: <http://www.mideastinfo.com/documents/taif.htm>.

Sunnite, and the president of Parliament a Shiite. The new confessional formula was based on reducing the prerogatives of the President of the Republic and transferring the executive authority to the Council of Ministers as a collegial body.³⁰

However, the Christian community's post-Taif decline had less to do with the reduced political influence than with its own inability to forge a united front that would agree at least on the basic questions of sovereignty and democracy. Post-Taif presidents were formally elected by parliament, but in practice installed by Syria, since they were leading Christian figures from the security sector.

Constituencies

Political manoeuvres can not be interpreted without an insight into the Lebanese electoral system. In the confessionalist structure, most parties declare their religious affiliations. There are 128 seats in the Lebanese parliament, split at 64 seats for Muslims and Christians. Both Sunnis and Shiites have 27 seats each, with 8 for Druze and 2 for Alawites on the Muslim side. Maronites provide the largest parliamentary bloc with 34 seats on the Christian side, with the other 30 seats split between the rest of the Christian sects.

The religious composition of the representatives of a given constituency reflects the ratio of its denominational composition. Electors vote for lists of an unlimited number of candidates drawn up by the parties, which enter into an alliance with each other and represent denominational setup within a given constituency. Thus, in a constituency with 2 Sunnite and 1 Maronite candidates, the 2 Sunnite and 1 Maronite candidates with the most votes get elected to Parliament. The Maronite candidate with the second most votes does not get a mandate even if he won more votes than the number one Sunnite candidate. In general, electors may choose between two lists in one constituency.

Lists are drawn up locally, and possible candidates are determined by the political veterans (today's patrons) known as *aqtaab* (Sg. *qutb*). They sponsor the campaigns of the candidates, who in return represent their interests. The constituencies still operate according to the structure set up in 1960. Namely, Lebanon was divided into five big provinces³¹ (*muhaafaza*), with a total of 26 constituencies (*qadaa*). Electors may vote for a given list, however, they may also choose candidates from all the lists available; that is to say, they can set up a list of their own choice.

It is essential for the candidates that they win the support of people belonging to other denominations than their own, since parties of the same denominations also compete against each other. Most candidates face a multiconfessional electorate, and many must contest districts in which their sect is not a majority. Those who win the handful of Sunni seats in predominantly Shiite south Lebanon, for example, are effectively beholden to

³⁰ Krayem: *op. cit.*

³¹ Beirut, North Lebanon, South Lebanon, Mount Lebanon, and Beqaa.

Shiite politicians, while the Sunni vote is decisive in electing Christian and Shiite deputies of Beirut.³²

Demography³³

Since 1932 there has not been any official census in Lebanon. The consequent “debate over the exact numbers sustains acute perceptions of deprivation among both Shiites and Sunnis, thereby providing seedbed for external exploitation and internal radicalization.”³⁴ By 1988, according to an assessment the percentage of Shiites in Lebanon had risen to 32%, while the number of Maronites had decreased to 17%.³⁵ However, estimations are far from authoritative. Although Muslim fertility rates are much higher, estimations do not consider infant and child mortality. Since voter registration records, known as “check lists” (*lawa'ih ash-shatb*), only include adults aged 21 or older and they do not take account of the disproportionate Muslim youth.³⁶ A study by Youssef Douwayhi, based on birth records (*sijillat an-nufus*) since 1905, estimates Shiite and Sunni demographic weight to be virtually equal (29.05% and 29.06%).³⁷ Although this method includes Lebanese under the age of 21, it also fails to exclude Lebanese citizens who have emigrated. According to this study, all Christians presently make up a mere 23.3% of Lebanese under the age of 20.³⁸

Perhaps the main reason why calls for a revision of Taif remain muted is that Lebanese Christians are split between the Sunni-led March 14 coalition and the Shiite opposition, and both sides know that raising the issue of political-demographic incongruity would upset their allies. Ironically, then, any initiative for an overhaul of Taif would have to be initiated by leaders of the Christian community – the very confession destined to lose the most from such a reform.³⁹ With rival Christian leaders struggling for the loyalty of their community, however, they cannot afford to be seen as chipping away at the last remnants of Christian privileges in the system.⁴⁰

³² Farha, Mark: *Demography and Democracy in Lebanon*, available at: <http://www.globalpolitician.com/24382-lebanon>.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Majed Halawi, *A Lebanon Defined: Musa Al-Sadr and the Shi'a Community*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1992, p. 50. Halawi estimates the number of Shiites at 1,325,499 out of a population of 4,044,784 in 1988.

³⁶ According to Duwayhi's investigation of the birth records, of those under the age of 20, only 23.31% are Christian, and the remainder, i.e. 76.59%, Muslims. See: *Al-Nahar* (Beirut), 16 November 2006.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Young, Michael: *Lebanon's Pact: Prelude to a Postmortem*, *The Daily Star* (Beirut), 19 December 2007, available at: http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=10&categ_id=5&article_id=87562

⁴⁰ Farha also mentions that “...obvious political implications can prejudice the accuracy and interpretation of statistical data. Case in point is the CIA, which has abruptly revised its own demographic estimates. In its 2004 edition, the CIA World Factbook had reported that Muslims and

Christian political streams⁴¹

While the Shiites have today closed ranks behind Hezbollah and the Sunnis mostly support the Hariri family, Lebanese Christians – secular and multi-denominational – have never been uniform in their politics. Presently four groupings can be distinguished in the Christian leadership.

Pro-Syrian Christians are the smallest in number. Some of them consider the Syrian Alawite leadership a natural ally of Christians in the face of Islamisation. Others are ideological proponents of Lebanese–Syrian unity. In 1932, Antoun Saadah established the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), a movement that dedicated to achieve Lebanon's absorption into Greater Syria. Saadah rejected both language and religion as defining characteristics of a nation, and instead argued that nations develop through the common development of a people inhabiting a specific geographical region. He claimed that Syria was historically, culturally, and geographically distinct from the rest of the Arab world, and stressed that "Syrianism" transcended religious distinctions. His ideas had a solid following among the Greek Orthodox, the second largest Christian community in Lebanon (and the largest in Syria).⁴² Saadah viewed secularization and social nationalism the only way to transform traditional society into a dynamic and progressive one. He also opposed colonization that broke up Greater Syria into sub nations declaring that (Greater or Historical) Syria is a single entity and belongs exclusively to the Syrians.

Leftish ideology has always meant an ideological refuge for the region's Christians from Arab nationalism and Pan-Islamism. The Lebanese branch of Syria's Baath Party also has a sizable Christian membership.

"Westocratic" Christians is a diverse category of mostly traditional politicians, businessmen who advocate a strong relationship with the West for cultural, economic, and political reasons. They became largely marginalized during the 1990s and formed an umbrella group known as the Qurnet Shehwan Gathering during the final years of the Syrian occupation. The Phalange Party, led by former President Amin Gemayel, and the National Liberal Party (NLP), led by Dany Chamoun are now closely aligned to this camp.

The **Christian nationalist** trend is represented by the Lebanese Forces (LF). Originally an outgrowth of the Phalange militia, the LF became more narrowly sectarian in the 1980s under the leadership of Samir Geagea. The LF leadership has been convinced that Christians cannot reconcile their differences with Muslims under a common national identity, and that Lebanon should be a federal state with autonomous sectarian enclaves. They are convinced that a strong relationship with the West – particularly Washington – is central to their political aspirations.

Christians constitute 70% and 30% of the population, respectively. Amid an intensified Israeli–American push to disarm Hezbollah, these numbers were conspicuously adjusted in the 2005 edition to reflect a highly improbable, precipitous decrease in the overall Muslim population to 59.7%, while the Christian population rose a sudden 9%." See <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/print/le.html>, last accessed March 3, 2006. *CIA: The World Factbook: Lebanon*, CIA World Fact Book, 2006.

⁴¹ Rubeiz: *op. cit.*

⁴² <http://www.ssnp.org/new/ssnp/en/ssnp.htm>

The **Secular nationalist** trend is embodied in Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (FPM). The FPM, like Hezbollah, is ideologically opposed to political sectarianism, federalism, and other formulas that privilege primordial ties. Aoun aims to reform Lebanon's corrupt and feeble government institutions, thus departing from the narrow pursuit of sectarian and clan-based interests and thinks in national terms. The FPM was by far the most popular Christian political force at the time of Syria's withdrawal in 2005.

Aoun's personal popularity stems largely from his failed but widely supported revolt against the Syrians in 1989–1990 and from the role of the FPM played as leading opposition to the Syrian occupation after his exile. The Aounists led boycotts of elections (1992, 1996, 2000), while 'Westocrats' played according to the rules set by Syria. Neither side really got what they wanted, succeeding only in deepening the rifts of the Christian community.

The FPM won a large majority of Christian votes running against the Hariri led "March 14 Coalition" in the 2005 elections, and with 14 seats became the largest Christian party in the new parliament.

Michel Aoun⁴³

During the course of his military career, Aoun earned a reputation for honesty, integrity, and sectarian impartiality that was unrivalled at that time. As Lebanon slipped into civil war in the mid-1970 and the army fractured along sectarian lines, Aoun's devotion to the central government remained unshaken. In the early 1980's he was head of the "Defence Brigade" of the Lebanese army, a unit stationed along the "Green Line" separating East and West Beirut which engaged in sporadic fighting with Syrian military forces. During the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, Aoun was the only Christian officer who commanded his troops to block Israeli forces advancing on the presidential palace. No other Christian officer attempted to confront the invading army. In late 1982, Aoun was assigned the task of forming and commanding a new multiconfessional unit, the 8th Brigade. In 1984 he was appointed commander of the Lebanese Army.

In the fall of 1988, Syria and the Lebanese Forces (LF) militia brought about a political crisis by preventing parliament members in areas under their control to convene and elect a new president. However, fifteen minutes before the expiration of his term, on September 22, 1988, the outgoing President, Amin Gemayel, dismissed the civilian administration of Prime Minister Selim al-Hoss and appointed a six-member interim military government. Backed by Syria, al-Hoss declared his dismissal invalid. Thus there was no president, but two governments emerged – one civilian and mainly Muslim in West Beirut, headed by al-Hoss, the other, military and mainly Christian, in East Beirut, led by Michel Aoun acting as Prime Minister.⁴⁴

⁴³ Gambill, Gary C.: Dossier: Michel Aoun, *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, Vol. 3. No. 1. January 2001, available at http://www.meib.org/articles/0101_ld1.htm.

⁴⁴ Gemayel's move violated the National Pact of 1943. He argued, however, that as the National Pact also reserved the *presidency* for a Maronite Christian, and as the Prime Minister assumes the powers and duties of the President in the event of a vacancy, it would be proper to fill that office temporarily

Aoun responded to provocations from the LF militia by ordering the 15,000 Lebanese army troops under his command to seize the port of Beirut and other economically vital facilities. This was the first time that government authority had been restored to a militia-controlled area since the beginning of the civil war in 1975. The fact that Aoun chose to target the main militia of his own Maronite community evoked expressions of surprise and satisfaction from Lebanese Muslims, whose victimization at the hands of the LF had never before elicited state intervention.

Next, Aoun enforced a maritime blockade of illegal ports run by Syrian-allied Druze and Shiite militias in West Beirut. When the Syrians responded by shelling civilian areas of East Beirut, Aoun declared war on the Syrian army on March 14, 1989.

The Taif Accord signed later that year stipulated constitutional changes, which, according to Aoun, required the democratic consent of the Lebanese people. He also denounced the Accord for not appointing a real date for the withdrawal of the Syrian army from Lebanon. Hundreds of thousands of Lebanese flocked to the presidential palace in late December 1989 to form a "human shield" in Aoun's support. The presence of thousands of Shiite and Sunni Muslim Lebanese at these demonstrations illustrated the multi-confessional appeal of Lebanon's first popular nationalist movement. Sunni religious leaders in West Beirut sent a "Muslim Solidarity Delegation," led by Sheykh Hasan Najjar, who gave numerous rousing speeches during the demonstrations.

In return for the Syrian support to the United States in the 1st Gulf War, the U.S. granted Syria's interests in Lebanon. Despite the enormous destruction, popular support for Aoun's war against the Syrian military skyrocketed. On October 13, 1990 with American permission, Syrian forces attacked the presidential palace and Aoun was pressed to leave Lebanon with the help of the French Ambassador.

The post-Taif era

The two Hariri governments (1992–98; 2000–2004) built alliance with the new segments of the bourgeoisie most of whom had lived outside the country during the war years. These persons came into power with their own program of reconstruction and development. This program was independent of the internal traditional and sectarian militia forces, but was subservient to regional and international ones.

The Hariri faction did not establish a new political culture nor produce a clear, definitive political program. Many institutions acted independently of any auditing or review by either government or parliament. Hariri controlled the basic financial and economic decision-making processes through his command of the Council of Development and Reconstruction (CDR), the Central Bank, and the Finance Ministry. In turn, the old militia forces controlled other resources and played an important political role in the cabinet and the parliament.⁴⁵ Apart from the two Christian leaders Aoun in exile and Geagea in

with a Maronite. It has already happened in 1952, when General Fouad Chehab, a Christian, was appointed as prime minister of a transition government following the resignation of President Beshara El-Khoury.

⁴⁵ Krayem: *op.cit.*

prison, warlords and politicians who built high positions for themselves during the second phase of the war, such as Hobeiqa, Berri, and Jumblatt also got their share. The Council of South Lebanon was tied to the Speaker of the Parliament, Nabih Berri, the Fund for the Return of the Displaced and Refugees was tied to the Minister of the Refugees Walid Jumblatt.⁴⁶

This state of affairs was, in effect, subsidized by Iran and Saudi Arabia. Iranian funding enabled Hezbollah to build a vast network of social welfare institutions that compensated for the ravaging impact of Harirism on poor Shiites, while much larger inflows of Saudi money into the Lebanese economy allowed Hariri to compensate for the ravaging impact of Hezbollah's war on his efforts to attract international investment. The shaky equilibrium was safeguarded by the Syrian army.⁴⁷

Western attitudes started to change when the Syrian government under President Bashar Assad did not back the 2003 invasion of Iraq launched by President George W. Bush. This signalled a new round of confrontation between the U.S. and Syria. The first battle in this confrontation was Lebanon. Bush signed into law on December 12, 2003, the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act. When in November 2004 the term of the Lebanese president, Emile Lahoud, was to expire, he, like many of his predecessors, was considered an ally of Damascus. Lahoud wished to have a second term in office, although re-election was explicitly forbidden by Article 49 of the Constitution. The United States and France, which had cast a blind eye on the term extension of Elias Harawi, were now opposed the Lahoud's extension.⁴⁸

The Hariri assassination and its aftermath

Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri was assassinated in February 2005, in a car bombing in Beirut. Blaming Syria, many Lebanese flocked to the streets on March 14 organised by the ruling coalition, prompting the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon. On the other hand Sheykh Hasan Nasrallah, Secretary General of the Hezbollah called for huge peaceful demonstrations to express "appreciation" to the Syrians for their support of the continued existence of Hezbollah's militia, and opposition to any peace with Israel. The biggest of these demonstrations was held on March 8. Since then Hezbollah has been considered the leader of the March 8 or pro-Syrian movement in Lebanese politics.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Haugbølle, Sune: *Collective memory of the civil war in Lebanon*, available at: <http://www.111101.net/Writings/Cat/Thesis/>.

⁴⁷ Gambill, Gary C.: Hezbollah and the Political Ecology of Postwar Lebanon, *Mideast Monitor*, Vol. 1. No. 3., September-October 2006, available at: http://www.mideastmonitor.org/issues/0609/0609_1.htm

⁴⁸ Mugraby: *op. cit.*

⁴⁹ However, Syria did not always have a smooth relation with Hezbollah, since Damascus wanted to hinder any shift in the shaky Lebanese equilibrium. President Assad's decision to call a halt to President Emile Lahoud's anti-corruption campaign (which had indicted several Haririst officials) and Hariri's return to office in 2000 after a two-year hiatus clearly signified that the core economic rules of the game in Lebanon were untouchable, while his refusal to permit Hezbollah to run against Amal

Neither the opposition nor the so-called majority is religiously homogenous, the overwhelming majority of the Shiites stand in the opposition, while the majority of Sunnis and Druze stand in the "majority" camp, but the Christians are split in almost two halves.

The Forces of March 14, winners of the elections in 2005, essentially made up of the Sunnite *Current of the Future* of Saad Hariri, son of the assassinated Prime Minister, the Druze *Progressive Socialist Party* of Walid Jumblatt, the Christian *Lebanese Forces* of Samir Geagea, and of the *Movement of the Democratic Left*, a split from the Lebanese Communist Party, have all supported the Western political offensive in Lebanon. They demanded the withdrawal of Syrian troops, and also argued in favour of the disarmament of the Lebanese Resistance (i.e. Hezbollah) in the south, thus indirectly satisfying Israeli demands.

The Hezbollah-led Coalition of March 8, which finds most of its social base in the Shiite community, but is also supported by pro-Syrian forces of the Sunni and Christian communities, re-affirmed the Arab dimension of Lebanon and the need to preserve the political line opposed to American–Israeli interests in the region. For them it also meant accepting Hezbollah's strategic partnership with Iran and Syria. Together with the Free Patriotic Movement they formed the opposition after the 2005 elections.

Aoun returned from France to find the "Westocrats" and the Christian nationalists lined up with Saad Hariri and Druze leader Walid Jumblatt in a coalition designed in part to spoil his ambitions in the May/June 2005 parliamentary elections, so – although the FPM took part in the March 14 anti-Syria demonstration, he found his natural ally in the March 8 Front. He teamed up with pro-Syrian Christians and defeated March 14 Front in some districts where Christians are in majority. Some saw this as indicating a belief that pro- and anti-Syrian positions are no longer relevant, now that Syrian troops have left Lebanon.

Although the 2005 Lebanese General Elections were won by the March 14 Front led by Saad Hariri, the coalition did not have the desired majority. Most Sunni and Druze leaders did not want to see any strong Christian politician among the decision-makers, but the governing coalition still needed Hezbollah's electoral support, to stem the advance of Aoun's FPM and win control of parliament. Hezbollah agreed but with assurances that major decisions would be made only with the unanimous support of the cabinet. However, in the next two years, it continued to oppose firmly the March 14 coalition's corruption and repressive economic policy, and eventually left government.

Following the demonstrations, the Syrian troops completely withdrew from Lebanon on April 27, 2005. With Syria gone, Aoun has focused on fighting corruption and the tradition of clan-based politics – aims that resonate with many Lebanese. In view of Aoun's provocative rhetoric about investigating the abuses of the past 15 years, none of the other power brokers wanted him in government. The FPM formed a united opposition front with the Hezbollah-led Shiite bloc (and with pro-Syrian politicians), jointly calling for the resignation of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and his cabinet. Although the common enemy forged the alliance of the FPM and Hezbollah, they had always shared certain domestic reform principles. Aoun supports the idea that domestic reform must precede disarmament, thus would be possible the integration of Hezbollah's militia into the defence structure of

in the Fall 2000 elections indicated that Nasrallah would not be allowed to convert his skyrocketing popularity into greater political power. Gambill: *op. cit.*

the country. In his scenario Aoun himself could act as an agent trusted by Shiites to realize this process.

Besides governmental corruption, the uncertain future of Lebanon's nearly 400,000 Palestinian refugees is another issue that greatly concerns both Christians and Shiites fearing foreign-made (i.e. Saudi–American–Israeli) plans for their naturalization.

The fact that the Hariris have cultivated close ties with radical Sunni Islamists in Lebanon also worries both Shiites and Christians.⁵⁰

Most Christians also fear Saudi domination of Lebanon and the paralysis of the state as a result of the constant power abuse. Prime Minister Siniora's economic reform program called for greater gasoline and value-added taxes that heavily burden the poor, while leaving one of the world's most regressive income tax scales in place, and conspicuously neglecting obvious remedies to extensive corruption (e.g. independent regulatory bodies). Voting rights of expatriate Lebanese is also a key issue to both communities, since Christians in the Americas and Shiites in West Africa are the biggest Lebanese expatriate communities.

Aounists, like Hezbollah leaders claim that the inclination to invite foreign diplomatic, political, and military intervention in pursuit for domestic advantages is the root of the country's weakness.

Memorandum of Understanding between Pro-Syrian Christians and Shiites

In February 2006, Michel Aoun and Hezbollah Secretary General, Hasan Nasrallah signed a Memorandum of Understanding outlining a broad range of social, economic, and political reforms that aimed to erode Haririst political power. Most Christians were supportive of the FPM's efforts to build bridges to Hezbollah. According to a survey by the Beirut Center for Research and Information 77% of them approved of the February 2006 Memorandum.⁵¹

In November 2006, Hezbollah, the FPM, and the Amal Movement jointly demanded the establishment of a "national unity government", with early elections and one third of the Cabinet seats. When negotiations with the ruling coalition failed, five Cabinet Ministers from Hezbollah and Amal resigned their positions.

The Memorandum of Understanding stresses the necessity of prioritizing national interests by national dialogue on "all issues that have a national character and require general consensus". Hezbollah and FPM advocate a consensual democracy "in which the citizen becomes a value in and of himself". According to the opposition, adoption of a

⁵⁰ During the 2005 parliamentary election campaign, Hariri paid the bail for four Sunni jihadists who had been arrested in September 2004 for plotting to bomb the Ukrainian and Italian embassies in Lebanon and sent Siniora to personally attend a celebration where they were welcomed after their release. [*Al-Safir* (Beirut), 18 June 2005] One of the first acts of Lebanon's new parliament was the passage of an amnesty law freeing over two dozen suspected Sunni Islamist terrorists (seven had been detained for plotting to bomb the Ukrainian and Italian embassies in September 2004; twenty-six of the detainees were captured in 1999 during a brief, but bloody, Sunni Islamist uprising that left 40 people dead). Gambill: *op. cit.*

⁵¹ *Al-Diyar*, (Beirut), 11 February 2006.

modern electoral law would mean limiting the influence of money and sectarian extremism in politics. Hezbollah and FPM stress the importance of re-building the state by setting up fair and impartial courts, respecting constitutional institutions, sheltering them from political influence, and preventing their paralysis. Financial and administrative controls have to be activated together with judicial investigations concerning the misuse of public funds. It is essential to enact laws to combat corruption, together with the execution of a comprehensive administrative reform that makes competence the only decisive factor at assigning tasks and responsibilities. Deadlines have to be set to tackle these problems.

The next section urges full cooperation from all the forces and parties that participated in the war to uncover the fate of the missing and the locations of mass graves. Separate chapters deal with Lebanon's relations with all neighbouring countries, requiring urgent actions to enable Lebanese Citizens' return from both Israel and Syria.

The Memorandum condemns political assassinations of any kind, and states that investigations have to be executed without any compromise. It stresses the inevitability of a comprehensive security plan that places security agencies above all political influence. Consequently urges setting up a joint parliamentary-security committee charged with monitoring the process.

As far as Lebanese-Palestinian relations are concerned, Palestinians have to respect the authority of the Lebanese state and comply with its laws. Lebanon, in return, reaffirm solidarity with their cause, and its authorities provide means to improve social conditions in the refugee camps. A legitimate body has to represent Palestinian people in their relations with Lebanon, and the security situation inside the camps has to be organized.

FPM supported the idea that Hezbollah's arms are to be considered by objectively defining conditions that would eliminate the reasons and justifications for keeping these weapons, such as liberating the Shebaa Farms from the Israeli occupation, liberating Lebanese prisoners from Israeli jails and the formulation of a national defence strategy.⁵²

Christian views

While many Christians have worries about Hezbollah's militant Islamist ideology and its refusal to respect the authority of the state, most of them see Sunni fundamentalism in Lebanon as a far more dangerous internal threat than Hezbollah, particularly after the unclarified uprising of Fatah al-Islam in the summer of 2007. Despite their reservations about Hezbollah, in 2007 43% of Maronites believed that its weapons "are necessary to face Israel until the liberation of Shebaa Farms and the detainees".⁵³

The main concern of Christians is not that Hezbollah will directly harm them (there has been little Shiite-Christian violence in Lebanon's history) or that they will try to Islamicize Lebanon, but that their fight will jeopardize the country's prosperity. Peace and political stability are essential for the growth of Lebanon's service-based economy, and necessary for the vital Western and Arab gulf investment in Lebanon. A government which formally

⁵² The full text can be read at: http://yalibnan.com/site/archives/2006/02/full_english_te.php.

⁵³ Opinion Poll, Information International, *The Monthly*, December 2007, No. 65.

accepts Hezbollah's "resistance" sooner or later runs the risk of setting back the country's economic recovery and alienating the international public and policy makers.

Many Christians who normally refuse any form of Islamic fundamentalism, however saw no alternative to a political compromise and reform process that give Shiites (or at least the Hezbollah) greater voice in government.⁵⁴

Before and after 2006

The 2006 Lebanon War was a 33-day military conflict in Lebanon and northern Israel. The principal parties were Hezbollah and the Israeli military. The war began on July 12, 2006, with an abduction of IDF soldiers by Hezbollah for a prisoners' swap to secure the release of Lebanese citizens convicted of terrorist acts and incarcerated in Israel.

Before the war the Christian public was more divided concerning the arms of Hezbollah and mostly favoured a western political pressure on the organization. As can be expected Muslims and Christians had differing views about the threat of Islamic extremism and the possibilities of a two-state solution in Palestine.

In 2004, among 600 Lebanese adults asked about the disarmament of Hezbollah, 18% of the Christians supported unconditional disarmament, 17% said yes on condition that peace exists in the region; 51% said yes, provided that Hezbollah also agrees, and 8% opposed. 53% of the Christians welcomed more U.S. pressure on Syria to disarm Hezbollah, and 29% of them opposed to such foreign intervention.⁵⁵ In 2005 nearly 72% of Christians had a favourable view of the U.S. and 60% of them supported the U.S. anti-terrorism policies. The same survey showed that 53% of the Christians and 4% of the Muslims believe that Islamic extremism poses a great threat.⁵⁶ In 2003 75% of Muslims and 50% of Christians agreed with the statement "the rights and needs of the Palestinian people cannot be taken care of as long as the state of Israel exists."⁵⁷

After and during the 33-day war Lebanese Christians showed a considerable growth in support of Hezbollah's resistance activities parallel with a radical decline in their judgement concerning the stance of the United States. However, in sharp contrast with the Shiite population, they remained considerably loyal to the Siniora government.

There were four major surveys of Lebanese public opinion, which were conducted by local and international polling firms during and after the war in 2006 between Israel and the Hezbollah movement.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Rubeiz: *op. cit.*

⁵⁵ Source: Zogby International / Information International / The Arab American Institute, available at: <http://www.angus-reid.com/polls/view/6914>.

⁵⁶ Pew Global Attitudes survey in May 2005, see: <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/41/lebanons-muslims-relatively-secular-and-pro-christian>.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ The four polls by the Beirut Center for Research and Information (BCRI), the French research firm Ipsos, Information International, and the Center for Strategic Studies (CSS) at the University of Jordan, are generally regarded as statistically sound, but their use of suggestive wording, different

Between 24 and 26 July 2006, the Beirut Center for Research and Information queried 800 citizens regarding the capture of two Israeli soldiers by Hezbollah earlier that month; its military operations against Israel, and the American position on the crisis. Respondents were also asked to assess the performance of the Lebanese government as far as its diplomatic and relief efforts are concerned. According to this survey, 54.7% of the Christians supported “the resistance’s move to capture the two Israeli soldiers for a prisoners’ swap”, and 80.3% of them supported “the confrontations carried out by the resistance against the Israeli aggression against Lebanon”. This support was based on a conviction that Israel and the U.S. had already prepared their plan to implement UN Security Council Resolution 1559 by force, regardless of Hezbollah’s military actions.⁵⁹ Moreover, the results show that the majority of Lebanese believed that the only way to liberate Lebanese detainees in Israeli prisons is through a prisoner swap of captured Israeli soldiers as was the case in 2000.

Strikingly, despite of their growing support for Hezbollah, 44.7% of the Christians thought that “Israel will defeat the resistance”, and 57.8% thought “that the United States and Israel will succeed in imposing their conditions to reach a cease-fire”. This time 85% of the Christians refused the idea that “the United States plays the role of the honest mediator in this war”, and 87.1% of them refused that “the U.S. adopted a positive stand regarding Lebanon in this war” in contrast with the 38% who expressed firm support for the U.S. role in Lebanon in January.⁶⁰ When asked about the efficiency of the government 43% of the Christians “believed that the Lebanese government’s political and diplomatic movement is enough to face the assault”, and 61.9% believed that “the government assumed its responsibility to relieve the displaced”.

In the Ipsos Survey 600 adult Lebanese citizens were asked between 11 and 17 August 2006 about the demilitarization of Hezbollah.⁶¹ This time 23% of Lebanese Christians believed that Hezbollah “should keep its weapons” even after the conflict. The question was phrased in a way to elicit preferences about the desired state of Hezbollah’s militia – and only a very strong supporter of Hezbollah agreed that it should keep its weapons under any and all post-war scenarios. Answering no to this question did not either imply support for its unconditional disarmament. It is important to note that many Lebanese have ambivalent attitude in this question, saying that even if they are not comfortable with the idea of an armed militia, they still believe that specific circumstances require it.

In a poll by Center for Strategic Studies (CSS) 1200 adult Lebanese citizens were surveyed after the 33-day war in 2006, and even among the Christians 19% said that “Hezbollah came out as the winner against Israel”.⁶²

estimates of Lebanon’s sectarian demography, and different contexts (i.e. during or after the war) render the findings somewhat inexact. Nevertheless, they reveal important insights into how the Lebanese public perceived the conflict. See: http://www.mideastmonitor.org/issues/0609/0609_6.htm.

⁵⁹ The full text of UN Resolution 1559 can be read at: <http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N04/498/92/PDF/N0449892.pdf?OpenElement>.

⁶⁰ Source: BCRI, See: *Al-Safir*, (Beirut), 31 January 2006.

⁶¹ *L'Orient Le Jour*, (Beirut), 28 August 2006.

⁶² “CSS poll shows 84% of Lebanese agree war attempt to impose Middle East order”, *The Jordan Times* (Amman), 12 October 2006.

In August 2007, a by-election took place in Metn, a predominantly Maronite district. Amin Gemayel was running to take the seat previously occupied by his recently assassinated son. Support for the Gemayel family was so strong here that in 2005 the FPM did not even challenge a seat in the district. In the by-election, however, the FPM candidate, Camile Khoury, an unknown physician, narrowly defeated the ex-president. Gemayel, backed up by the U.S., lost to Aoun's candidate, whose party had already been allied to Hezbollah. This fact can be considered a clear sign that the Gemayel clan had lost its leading role in the Christian community. The "best candidate" for president according to 45% of all respondents to a poll in August 2006, was Michel Aoun. Consequently Aoun would have easily won a *direct* election for president, as he could count on the overwhelming majority of Shiites, at least half of Christians, and perhaps a fourth of Sunnis and Druze to vote for him.⁶³

Lebanese Muslim views⁶⁴

Given the confessionalist political structure and the 15- year civil war in Lebanon the findings that Lebanese Muslims are relatively secular and pro-Christian can be surprising.

Data from the Pew Global Attitudes survey conducted in May 2005 shows that Lebanese Muslims are considerably more secular in their outlook than Muslims in other countries.

Although Lebanese Muslims consider religion an important part of their lives, they place less emphasis on their faith than Muslims do elsewhere. Just over half (54%) said religion was very important in their life, compared to 69% in Turkey, 86% in Jordan, and more than 90% in Indonesia, Pakistan, and Morocco.

Muslims in Lebanon say they think of themselves first as Muslims (30%) in equal numbers as they identify primarily as Lebanese (30%). Elsewhere, even in Turkey, majorities identify more strongly with Islam than with their nationality.

Among Lebanese Muslims only 47% wanted to see Islam play a major role in the world in contrast with 84% in Morocco and 73% in Jordan.

Despite their relatively secular worldview, Lebanese Muslims are among the most supportive considering military acts in the name of Islam. In 2007, 34% said suicide bombing and other forms of violence against civilians could be justified in order to defend Islam from its enemies. However, taken the 72% who approved such actions in 2002, the tendency shows a considerable decrease.⁶⁵ However, only 4% of Lebanese have confidence in Osama bin Laden, which is the lowest level of support in the six predominantly Muslim countries surveyed.

⁶³ "Poll respondents give high marks to Nasrallah, Berri, Aoun," *The Daily Star* (Beirut), 7 September 2006, available at: <http://www.inbaa.com/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=14970>.

⁶⁴ <http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?PageID=813>

⁶⁵ <http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=257>

Political versus religious sectarianism

Despite widespread sectarian violence during the 1975–1990 civil war, today Lebanese Muslims and Christians generally have positive attitudes towards one another. Fully 86% of Muslims have a favourable opinion of Christians, which is the highest rating among Muslim countries. At the same time, 82% of Christians have a positive view of Muslims.⁶⁶

Today both the March 8 and the March 14 Fronts include Sunnis, Shiites, Christians and Druzes. The prime minister does not represent the Sunni line in the religious form, and the House speaker does not represent the Shiite religious line. It proves that the tensions stem from political, not from religious sectarianism. For Khaled Hadade, general secretary of the Lebanese Communist Party, “Hezbollah has two faces: a positive face which is the resistance and another face which is that of its religious and Islamic confessional affiliation. If today the Hezbollah is defeated, it would be the resistance of Hezbollah which is defeated.”⁶⁷

Hezbollah’s changing discourse

The post-Taif history of Hezbollah during which it has become a significant parliamentary party and achieved the Israeli withdrawal from South Lebanon, shows the capacity of the movement to connect the building of a strong military resistance with the development of broad political alliances that transcends the logic of political and confessional polarisation.

In the Middle East social issues are the concern of Islamic movements and religious foundations (waqf) only. Experts on Hezbollah like Judith Palmer Harik and Nizar Hamzeh, note that the movement’s provision for basic social services, law courts, and schools provide services on a low-cost basis to all Lebanese who need them; whether Muslim or Christian.⁶⁸ Many Christian parents send their children to schools run by Hezbollah, especially in south Lebanon, where those are considered to provide the best education available. Harik notes that Hezbollah’s commitment to, and success in, providing these services on a permanent basis is unique among the political parties in Lebanon and as a consequence, Hezbollah gained considerable loyalty and respect.⁶⁹

The fault line that became apparent after the death of Rafiq al-Hariri does not only regard the country’s sovereignty, the weapons of the resistance and the role of Syria. It is much broader and includes the social question as well. The confrontation between the Forces of the March 14, which are anti-Syrian and pro-Western, and the March 8 allied to Hezbollah, also implied a social cleavage which has always existed. According to Ali Fayyed who is in charge of the Consultative Centre for Study and Research in Hezbollah,

⁶⁶ <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/41/lebanons-muslims-relatively-secular-and-pro-christian>

⁶⁷ Qualander, Nicolas: “The Savage Anomaly” of the Islamic Movement, available at: <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article1169>.

⁶⁸ Cobban, Helena: Hizbullah’s New Face, *Boston Review*, April–May 2005, available at: <http://bostonreview.net/BR30.2/cobban.html>.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

“The world of business, no matter from what community, hostile in principle to any state that is strong and redistributes wealth. [...] We want a state which takes the side of the poor, against the multi-nationals, against the international economic institutions, against the logic of unlimited productivity and capitalist accumulation.”⁷⁰ Hezbollah is the only Islamic movement which has taken part in the World Social Forums since 2003, and translated into Arabic the documents of the WSF together with the writings of Latin American liberation theology. It has gained good reputation for having high morals and integrity, refusing any form of bribery and corruption.

The attitude and personal charisma of Nasrallah is also a significant factor. Many Lebanese remember how he refused to be treated differently from any other bereaved parent when his 18-year-old son was killed fighting the IDF in south Lebanon in 1997. Contrary to Israeli speculations that they might be able to extract a high “price” for the return of Hadi Nasrallah’s body, Nasrallah praised the sacrifice that *all* the Lebanese, “including our Christian brothers”, were making in defence of the homeland. Nasrallah also introduced an extensive reorientation of Hezbollah’s propaganda from religious to nationalist discourse, which characterizes its battle against Israel as a national liberation struggle, not a holy war.

Issa Goraib, editor of the Lebanese daily *Le Orient Le Jour*, claimed that Hezbollah’s guerrillas today are of different character than before, since they have managed to conduct a very modern and efficient resistance against the Israeli occupation during the past years. “There is a lot of admiration for them among the village people [in the south], both among the Christians and Muslims”, emphasized Goraib.⁷¹

The popularity of Hezbollah is also attributable to the fact that during the civil war it battled the Amal militia for control of Shiite areas and vigorously attacked Israel’s Lebanese proxies but, unlike other wartime militias, it never engaged in sectarian bloodletting. The inter-denominational attitude of the organisation is well represented in the following remark of Kassem Oleik, the head of the Holy Reconstruction Organ “We do not discriminate between helping Muslims or Christians in the resisting society. If a mosque is hurt and a church is hurt we start rebuilding the church. We want to obstruct the enemy from entering through this hole [...] because then the enemy won’t be able to divide us... [This] is a kind of strategy of ours.”⁷²

The 33-day war in 2006 evoked a broad political and social front in support of the resistance by all sects and communities of the Lebanese society. As the Lebanese historian and economist Georges Corm has stressed, “the patriotic and nationalist discourse of this Lebanese resistance should in the long term influence the different Islamist rhetorical discourses, taking them away from their delirious aspect and bringing them into the different national, local, and pan-Arab realities.”⁷³ A good example of this new rhetoric was the address by Hassan Nasrallah on 30 November 2006, two weeks after that five Cabinet

⁷⁰ Qualander, *op.cit.*

⁷¹ Wärm, Mats: *Staying the Course: the “Lebanonization” of Hizbullah*, available at: <http://almashriq.hiof.no/lebanon/300/320/324/324.2/hizballah/warn2/contents.html>.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Georges Corm interviewed by Youssef Ait Akdim, *Tel Quel online*, September 24, 2006.

Ministers of Hezbollah and Amal had left their positions due to the failed government policies.

Nasrallah in his speech called on people from “different regions, thoughts, beliefs, religions, ideologies and different traditions” to take part in “the formation of a national unity government”. If they “want to preserve Lebanon’s independence and sovereignty, and prevent the country from falling under any foreign tutelage”, people have “to [...] cooperate in addressing the suffocating social and economic crisis, address the political crises ..., and give [Lebanese movements and groups] real participation in the country’s administration.” According to Nasrallah it is the only way “to deal with various crises and face existing challenges local, regional and international”.

The Secretary General of the Hezbollah stressed the necessity of integration, solidarity and cooperation “of all the Lebanese from various regions, currents, arenas, ideas, beliefs, religions and backgrounds as well as the various popular movements, to a civilized peaceful public action”. Nasrallah called Beirut “the capital of Lebanon, whose heart is big enough to encompass all of Lebanon and all the Lebanese [...] the capital of Pan-Arabism and Arabs, whose heart is large enough to contain [...] all the issues of our *umma* (i.e. the entire Muslim community), which embraces its folks, sons and loved ones, who will come from all Lebanese regions”.⁷⁴ Even as a rhetorical device, stressing the Arab identity over the bonds of Islam, is surprising from a Muslim religious leader.

On December 1, political protests started in opposition to the government. Finally, on May 7 2008, the 18-month long political crisis spiralled out of control, when the worst internal violence erupted since the 15-year civil war ended in 1990. Tensions escalated after the government had voted to outlaw Hezbollah’s communications network and sack the Hezbollah-allied head of security. In return Hezbollah and its opposition allies took over key areas of Lebanon held by the government. At the end, rival Lebanese leaders reached consensus in Doha on May 21 2008, to end the political anarchy. On the basis of the Doha Agreement, Hezbollah was granted veto power in the parliament, national unity government was formed in which the opposition controls eleven of thirty seats.

A nationwide poll by the Lebanese Opinion Advisory Committee (LOAC) was conducted in April, 2008⁷⁵, which was partly repeated in July after the Doha Agreement.⁷⁶ As the findings show, clashes stalled and decreased the growing confidence in the opposition. Although the popularity of Aoun and Nasrallah considerably declined, in July they were still the leading figures of their respective communities. Christian respondents were the most divided when it came to leadership choices. While in April 30% of Christians named Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun as their top choice; in July it was only 24% and the popularity of Samir Geagea rose from 19% to 22%. Only 4% had a preference for the Phalange Party President Amin Gemayel. In July, both Nasrallah and Gemayel received 6% by Christian voters; and 4% named Marada chief Suleiman Franjeh as their top choice.

While in April, 32% of Christian respondents believed that national defence should be jointly assumed by government forces and the Resistance, in July this ratio fell to 19%

⁷⁴ The full text was available at: <http://www.moqawama.org>.

⁷⁵ <http://www.lebaneseopinion.org/upload/poll4.pdf>

⁷⁶ <http://www.lebaneseopinion.org/recentpolls.html#4>

among Christians. That time 79% of the Christians thought it should be the privilege of the government and 2% left this task to the Resistance alone.

The Doha Agreement kept in office Fouad Siniora as Prime Minister. When satisfaction with Siniora's appointment was polled, respondents were given the choice of four responses ranging from "very satisfied" to "very dissatisfied". Shiites and Christian responses comprised most of the answers for the "very dissatisfied" category with 59% and 29% respectively. This result is quite surprising considering the basically loyalist attitude of the Christians even during the 2006 war.

To the question concerning the political party that best represents one's point of view 50% of the Shiites named Hezbollah, 29% of Sunnites chose Hariri's Future Movement, but 29% of Christians could not name any such movement or leader.

Divisions within the Christian – and especially in the Maronite – community kept worsening in the following months and led to clashes in September 2008 between Suleiman Franjeh's Marada Movement and the Lebanese Forces (LF), leaving two men dead. Franjeh, is allied to Hezbollah, while LF is led by former rightwing warlord Samir Geagea, who belongs to the Western-backed alliance led by Hariri.

CONCLUSION

It is worth noting here that, since 1943, political confessionalism has been considered as a temporary arrangement that should be obliterated as soon as possible, but it has continued to predominate. In Lebanon, transforming the provisional decisions into permanent ones has become a tradition, reaffirmed most recently with the Taif Agreement.⁷⁷

Post war years witnessed a shift in the mentality of many Christians and Muslims in Lebanon. Confessionalist structures are still at work, but there are people in each community who, in political matters, do not seem to think according to exclusively religious principles. According to a survey in 2004, 46.9% of the Lebanese people set up their own list during the election. The same poll showed that 25.3% of respondents consider a candidate's political affiliation to be their main voting criteria, 18.8% consider the candidate's political platform, while only 12% consider the sect in the first place.⁷⁸ Furthermore, in 2005 the proportion of Lebanese who privileged their national identity over their confessional identity was 34%, which is considerably high for a confession-based society.⁷⁹ As Mark Farha notes "The most underrepresented constituency in Lebanon is not the Shiites, Sunnis, or Christians, but the considerable number of Lebanese who do not identify primarily with the sect or creed into which they are born."⁸⁰

The question emerges over again: can Lebanon become a safe home to all its communities and thus "give birth" to the Lebanese nation with a government that represents its particular national interests? A credible solution could be what Muhammad Mughaby

⁷⁷ Krayem: *op. cit.*

⁷⁸ Source: Information International in *I-Monthly*, Beirut, Issue No. 26, August 2004, p. 4.

⁷⁹ Jawad Adra: Corruption: The Lebanese Syndrome: Maintaining the System, Depleting the Resources, in *I-Monthly*, (Beirut) 25 October 2005, p. 4.

⁸⁰ Farha: *op. cit.*

suggests "The real and effective protection for the Maronites is the same as real and effective protection for all the religious communities of Lebanon, and lies mainly in the recognition of the equality of all Lebanese based on human rights and the protection of the civil rule of law. This alternative is still open but it may vanish before long."⁸¹

The existing division and dejection in the Christian community prompts many intellectuals to examine the causes, and to suggest solutions. One of them is Nasri Salhab, a sociologist, who in his book *The Maronite Question* subtitled *al-Asbab al-Ta'rikhiya li-l-Ihbat al-Maruni* (The Historical Roots of the Maronite Disenchantment) called for the Maronites to revise the past. If the Maronites took a critical look at themselves, Salhab wrote, they would see that the Phalangist ideology, built on the conviction of the superiority of the Christians, brought forth only destruction of both their community as well as the whole country. Consequently they have lost the moral guidance of Christianity and closed themselves off in a defensive and degenerate sectarianism.⁸²

Support for the FPM and the strengthening of Hezbollah after the 2006 war show a definite move towards putting together a cross-communal political coalition, however as the events in May 2006 showed, not all forces give consent to such a solution. Whether Sunnis and Nationalist Christians still have the resources to impede Hezbollah from accessing power will be decisive for Lebanon's future.

⁸¹ Mugarby: *op. cit.*

⁸² Salhab, Nasri: *al-Masa'la al-Maruniya*, Beirut: Bisan 2000, p. 11. ff.