

Muslim-Christian Cooperation and Conflict: Lessons from the Case Study of Lebanon

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Abstract

The small state of Lebanon has a history that can teach us a great deal about both the potential for conflict between Christians and Muslims but also about the possibilities for cooperation and accommodation between them. From 1943 (Lebanese independence) to 1975, relative sectarian harmony, however imperfect, characterized the realm of political interactions in Lebanon. Then, beginning in 1975, a horrible civil war, based (apparently) on the sectarian divisions of society, made Lebanon a synonym for civil bloodshed and national self-destruction.

In this presentation, I will argue that the standard explanations of Lebanon, both of its period of civil harmony as well as the explanations of its breakdown into civil strife, have been flawed and ultimately inadequate. I will present an alternative explanation of both Muslim/Christian cooperation as well as strife that helps to suggest new perspectives on the possibilities of ethnic-religious accommodation, whether it be Muslim-Christian or any other divide.

Introduction

Lebanon is a divided society. Although a small country, less than 130 miles long at its furthest north/south axis, it contains an extraordinary plethora of ethnic, religious and sectarian groups. Most broadly, and most importantly for our purposes here, it is a country divided more or less evenly between Christian and Muslim Lebanese.

Although a small country, Lebanon in its history has been a major example of two things: religious-sectarian harmony **and** religious-sectarian conflict. Lebanon has been famous, or perhaps the best word is infamous, for the horrible civil war which took place there in 1975 and 1976. The **apparent** divide in that civil war was Muslim versus Christian. Such a characterization is grossly inadequate, but it is nevertheless an appropriate starting point since that is the most common impression of that conflict.

At the same time, however, Lebanon has also been famous as an example of religious-sectarian harmony. Through almost all the years from 1943 (Lebanese independence) to early 1975, Lebanon was famous for its apparent religious-sectarian “harmony,” or at least lack of religious-sectarian conflict. Through almost all of those years, Lebanon’s many sectarian groups experienced very little **inter**-sectarian conflict. It was commonly regarded as a viable model of different religions and ethnicities living together successfully in relative peace and harmony. In their most benign self image, the Lebanese liked to call themselves the “Switzerland of the Middle East.” The relative political stability and harmony achieved by Switzerland’s ethnically, linguistically and religiously divided society—French speakers versus Italian speakers versus German speakers; Catholics versus Protestants—was not an inappropriate comparison for Lebanon’s relative stability within their similarly divided society. Lebanon’s subdivisions rival those of Switzerland in number. The Christian/Muslim divide is only the crudest overview of Lebanon’s fragments. Among the Muslims, there are significant numbers of Sunni and Shi’a

(12'er), with a third group, the Druze (an offshoot of the Shi'a branch of Islam). Although numerically smaller than these others, the Druze have always been important in the politics and history of Lebanon far beyond their numbers. On the Christian side, the Maronite Christians, a rite within the Roman Catholic Church, are the largest in numbers, with Greek Orthodox and Greek Catholic (distinct from Maronites) segments.¹ To these can be added significant numbers of Armenians. Mainly Orthodox Christians, the Armenians in Lebanon are refugee survivors of the genocide committed against the Armenians in the beginning of the 20th century. There is an even larger segment of Palestinians in Lebanon as well. They are also refugee survivors, some Christian but mainly Sunni Muslim, who fled from their homes in former Palestine in 1947-1948 when the state of Israel was created.

A further parallel exists between Switzerland and Lebanon. Whatever the form of governance Lebanon and Switzerland share, however difficult it is to characterize, what is obvious is what it is not: neither have been, or are, authoritarian or dictatorial states. Both achieved their goals of relative internal stability in divided societies with a **type** of democracy. I emphasize that the Lebanese and Swiss version of democracy is one that most people would not recognize nor immediately comprehend. It is not a version of America's separation of powers model of democracy, nor is it the parliamentary (or more accurately, "majoritarian") model of the UK and most other industrial democracies.

Indeed, Lebanon's type of democracy is most different from, in some senses the exact opposite of, a parliamentary/majoritarian style of democracy.²

Now most people would have little problem with the value judgment that "democracy," of whatever form—non-dictatorial government—is morally and politically preferable to dictatorial government for internally divided societies. That may be. However, I will return at the end of my comments to argue that the parliamentary/majoritarian model of democracy is potentially the most dangerous threat to an internally divided society like Lebanon.

More immediately, the major task that needs to be discussed first is to examine the nature of the period of Lebanese religious-sectarian harmony and, on the other hand, the nature of the period of her civil war.

Lebanon in Conflict

Although chronologically in the wrong order, it is best to start the analysis of the politics of the Christian/Muslim divide in Lebanon with the civil war period of 1975-1976. Although the actual divisions of the war were complex and not simply Christian versus Muslim,³ it was nevertheless

¹ For an extensive overview of the religious-sectarian divisions of Lebanon, see Kamal Salibi, *The Modern History of Lebanon* (New York, Caravan Books, 1999) pp. xi-xxvi.

For the background on the Armenians and Palestinians, see David Gilmour, *Lebanon: The Fractured Country* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984), 23-4, 86.

² For the classic discussion and research on different forms of democracy, especially those appropriate for internally divided societies, see Arend Lijphart *Democracies in Plural Societies* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1980) and Lijphart, *Democracies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

the case that many people were murdered for no other reason than their religious identity. At the height of the war, Lebanese with Muslim or Palestinian identity cards caught at the innumerable roadblocks set up by the Christian militias could be murdered on the spot or dragged off to be murdered elsewhere. Lebanese with Christian identity cards caught at Muslim checkpoints could be murdered as well. Much worse even than this were individual episodes such as the “Black Saturday” massacres of Oct 1975, where Christian militias stormed through downtown Beirut, capturing and murdering any Muslims they could find. Such scenes are the nightmare image of “religious war” at its worst.

For all the points that one might pursue from these observations, the one that I wish to focus on here is the following. The basic distrust and fear of “the other” which seemed to motivate such strife did not appear out of nowhere in 1975. It existed as a **potential** long before those events. Once it got started, it became clear that it was almost impossible to stop, at least by the actions of any Lebanese. The Lebanese central government was the least likely candidate to be able to stop the fighting, as we shall see, and everyone else with any military capability within Lebanon was almost by definition part of the problem.

Everything I have said so far is by way of introduction to the following. Given this clear potential for horrible strife, for which we have in hindsight indisputable evidence, the basic

³ This horrible internal war was not simply Christians versus Muslims. The complexity of clearly identifying the sides in the war was great. Foreign journalists and news persons at the time could almost be forgiven for giving up trying to understand the complexity and simply describing the conflict in the simple but inaccurate framework of Christian versus Muslim. One side was almost exclusively Christian, indeed almost entirely Maronite Christian. This Maronite Christian sector was dominated and led by the so-called *Kataib* or Phalangist party, a party originally established in the 1930s modeled on, and inspired by, the German Nazi party. Before the war, it was simply one faction among many in the Maronite Christian community. One consequence of the war was that the *Kataib* came to dominate the entire Maronite Christian sector.

The side opposing the *Kataib* was another story altogether. They called themselves the Lebanese National Movement (LNM). Its members or constituents were made up not only of Sunni and Shi'a and Druze, but also a significant number of Christian Lebanese. The participation of Christians in the Lebanese National Movement came mainly through their membership in the non-sectarian parties of the political left : groups such as the Arab *Ba'ath* Socialists, the Lebanese Communist party and the Arab Nationalist parties (mainly the “Nasserite” parties inspired by former president of Egypt, Gamal Abdul Nasser). In these groups, Christians and Muslims (and, for that matter, Sunni and Shi'a and Druze) united for common action politically and, even more noteworthy, fought together during the war, with all that that implies. That is, Christian rank and file, foot soldiers, fought with Muslims and accepted orders from those in higher command that were Muslim. Muslim rank and file, foot soldiers, fought with Christians and accepted orders from Christian commanders. To a significant degree, the Lebanese National Movement was modeled on, or reflected the same ideological goal of non-sectarian based political organization, as the Palestinian National Resistance Movement of the time. The Palestinians, however unsuccessful in attaining their ultimate goal of achieving a Palestinian state, were extraordinarily successful in building a “national front” for Christian and Muslim Palestinian unified action.

Thus the complex reality of the Lebanese civil war: one coalition made up of groups whose members were Christian (Maronite, Orthodox, etc), Sunni, Shi'a and Druze fought against forces that were almost exclusively Maronite Christian. See, for example, Tabitha Petran, *The Struggle Over Lebanon* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1987), 16-18; also see the issue of *MERIP* (Middle East Research and Information Project, now publishing under the title of *Middle East Report*) of spring 1977, “The Lebanese National Movement.” For a detailed history of the civil war itself, including the “Black Saturday” massacres, still the most objective source is Kamal Salibi, *Crossroads to Civil War: Lebanon 1958-1976* (London: Ithaca Press, 1976).

A brilliant political novel (based on true characters and events) that pinpoints the essence of the war as a conflict, not of two different religions, but of two different ideological visions of a future for Lebanon, is Etel Adnan's *Sitt Marie Rose* (Post-Apollo Press, 1978). For a firsthand account of a Western journalist coming face to face with a Leftist militia whose rank and file were Shi'a but whose officers were Christian, see Jonathan Randal, *Going All the Way* (New York: Viking Press, 1983), 68. Randal is one of the journalists in need of being forgiven. He reports, in the most firsthand of experiences imaginable, coming face to face with a militia looting his apartment. This militia was made up of Christians and Muslims, united in their ideology and actions in the civil war. Nevertheless, Randal still uses the phrase just a paragraph earlier, the “Christians and Muslims are at it again.”

question that should be asked about Lebanon is **not** what caused the civil war. The most important question is rather the following: given the potential for religious-sectarian strife that existed, how **exactly** did the Lebanese achieve and maintain the relative internal stability and harmony that existed for decades prior to 1975? Observers of Lebanese politics, as well as the Lebanese themselves, have of course proffered explanations. However, essentially all of them fail under logical scrutiny to be adequate explanations.

We need to consider the standard explanation of Lebanese sectarian stability and to make clear its inadequacy. An alternative model will then be elaborated which not only adequately explains the precise nature of religious-sectarian stability in Lebanon from 1943 to 1975, but also allows us to pinpoint exactly how and why the system fell apart when it did.

The Explanation of Lebanese Stability that did not Explain

The standard explanation of Lebanese politics in its relatively stable period is as follows. Lebanese were divided by their basic religious-sectarian identity into united, corporate entities. Thus the Sunni Muslim population was a politically and emotionally united entity, with Sunni Muslim Lebanese leaders acting to promote, protect and, if need be, defend the interests of the Sunni Muslim population Lebanon in general. Similarly, the Maronite Christian Lebanese population was a united entity, with Maronite Christian leaders pursuing the common, corporate interests of the Maronite community as a whole. The Shi'a Muslim, the Druze, the Greek Orthodox and other communities were similarly organized and united. Overall, the population was more or less evenly divided between the Christian sects and the Muslim sects, in about a 6 to 5 ratio (see below). We can call this the "sectarian model" or the "united sectarian model" of Lebanese politics.

When the Lebanese gained their independence from France in 1943, why did this potentially explosive religious-sectarian mix **not** break up into civil war? The answer almost universally given to this question is the nature of its so-called "National Pact."⁴ This was an unwritten agreement worked out in 1943, mainly between Maronite Christian leader, Bshara Khoury, and Sunni Muslim leader Riad Solh. The general drift of this formula for sectarian stability had the outward characteristics of what we would call today a power-sharing structure. The president of Lebanon would be a Maronite Christian (always); the prime minister would be a Sunni Muslim; the Speaker of the parliament would be a Shi'a Muslim; the foreign minister would be a Greek Orthodox Christian, and so on. With this formula, each religious-sectarian community was thus expected to be content, or find minimally acceptable, a situation in which one of their members held one of these high positions. Now it is quite true that this system was in place and coincided with relative stability for the next three decades. One trouble with believing that this arrangement was the cause of stability is that it was still in place, still operating, when Lebanon experienced the internal war of 1975-1976. However much it may

⁴ Most books written on the politics of modern Lebanon give a description of the characteristics of the National Pact. See, for example, David Gordon, *The Republic of Lebanon: Nation in Jeopardy* (London: Croon Helm, 1983), chap. 2.

have been a necessary condition for stability, it was clearly not a sufficient condition. The structure of the National Pact had not changed but war happened anyway.

Even putting aside the problem that the National Pact structures were in place but somehow powerless to stop the fighting that began in 1975, it is the case that these arrangements were simply never a convincing model for religious-sectarian harmony. It is worth examining more closely a few details that are often incorrectly assumed about this system. With its “power in different places” structure, the Lebanese system approximated a type of “separation of powers” format, very vaguely comparable to the US constitutional format. However, the separated powers of Lebanon were **never** a “checks and balance” system at all comparable to the theory (if not the practice) of the American system. The powers of each sectarian institutional office were not equal. They did not balance. And there was clearly not any formal or institutional format for the **checking** of one power by another, not even of the checking of the strongest political institution (the president) by a few or even all the rest of the power holders.

To this consideration should be added the other major aspect of the National Pact structures. The membership of the Lebanese parliament was always to have a Christian majority. This permanent stipulation was based on a census conducted by the French in 1932 which determined that Christians in general at that time (Maronite, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholics, etc.) constituted 6/11^{ths} of the population, while Sunnis, Shi’a and Druze constituted 5/11^{ths}. Thus all parliament total numbers (which changed periodically) were multiples of 11 (99, 110, etc.). If the demographic percentages of Lebanon’s sectarian changed over time, as they almost certainly did, the actual population of Lebanon would be irrelevant. The Christian sector would retain political dominance, regardless.

Let me summarize the nature of this political formula, which has been accepted as the reason, the cause, of religious-sectarian stability in Lebanon. It was a system in which the most important power position, the president, was always to be a Christian, no matter what demographic change might take place in the country, no matter how qualified and popular some individual from some other group might be, all this with no real constitutional or political check on the power of the president by any other institution.

What about the Lebanese parliament? Could the parliament act as a check on presidential (i.e. institutionalized Christian) dominance? The second major component of the National Pact was that the parliament would always have a Christian majority, again no matter what demographic change that might take place over time. If Christians always voted as a Christian block and Muslims voted as a Muslim block (precisely the implications of the “united sectarian model”), then Muslims would be condemned to a permanent political minority. If Lebanon ran its affairs “democratically” in the simple sense of deciding policies by majority rule, the Muslims could look forward to an institutional arrangement where “Muslim” interests (the interests of the whole of the Muslim community) could and most probably would be permanently ignored, permanently violated. “Muslim” rights could be and probably would be ignored if not violated, with the certainty that no institutional check on the majority was available to stop this from happening.

Upon this critical review, it should be clear that the National Pact was never a formula for religious-sectarian harmony. How could any Muslim leader ever agree to such a formula, if Muslim leaders acted in the interests of the Muslim community as a whole? How could they accept institutionalized minority status without some check on majority power?

Just over 200 years ago, at the dawn of the democratic trend in world politics, an intelligent if soft spoken American political thinker addressed exactly this problem of democracy: if governments decide policies based on majority rule, who will protect the minority? If a majority rules without check, then the rights and interests of the minority will be without effective protection. As James Madison understated this problem: the majority “cannot be expected to sympathize sufficiently with its [the minority’s] rights.”⁵ Even if the Lebanese Muslims had never read James Madison, they could nevertheless recognize the threat of majority tyranny in any democratic government where political majorities acted without effective check on their power.

The Lebanese *Za'im* and the State Structures of Lebanon

A. The Lebanese *Za'im* and the *Za'im* structure of Lebanese Politics

Given that the formula of the National Pact was never adequate as an explanation of Lebanese stability, and in any case still operated when the system fell apart in 1975, what is or was an explanation of the surprisingly stable religious-sectarian dimension of Lebanese politics? Many observers of Lebanon have tended to throw up their arms at this point and simply declare that Lebanon made no sense.

But there is another framework to pursue before giving up like this. It focuses on the exact nature of the political power holders of Lebanon and the exact nature of their political power. The Lebanese referred to them as *za'im* (plural *zu'ama*). In academic and journalistic references to them, they are almost always called “sectarian leaders.” And they **were** sectarian to the degree that their followers, their political clientele (in Arabic, *zilm*), were invariably the same sect as themselves. Thus essentially all the followers of a Sunni Muslim *za'im* would be Sunni Muslims as well. All the followers of a Maronite Christian *za'im* would be Maronite and so on. Bshara Khouri was, for instance, a major Maronite *za'im* with his traditional base of Maronite followers in the Mount Lebanon region. Riad Solh was a major Sunni *za'im* whose power base was in Sidon, based on generations of his family’s political preeminence there.⁶

⁵The minority that Madison saw threatened by majority rule was the minority of the rich. The majority which might act tyrannically, in Madison’s estimation, were the poor who may well decide to pass laws redistributing wealth; thus infringing on the (property) rights of the rich minority. In his less soft spoken and perhaps more cynical moments, Madison put the problem this way: the primary responsibility of good government has been “to protect the minority of the opulent against the majority” of the poor. See *The Founding Fathers: James Madison A Biography in His Own Words* ed. Merrill Peterson (New York: Newsweek, 1974)

Although these are different kinds of minority and majority groups, the Madison focus and statement of the problem is just as, if not more, appropriate for analyzing societies divided on religious, ethnic, linguistic or racial lines.

⁶ The most accurate description of the *za'im/zilm*, leader versus supporter or follower relationship comes from the work on political clientelism in political anthropology. The “patron-client” model stresses a notion of political leadership and power which is not based solely or even primarily on the coercive power of the political leader/patron. It is much more of a two way street. The leader/patron provided many goods for his followers (jobs, help with education expenses, help with medical expenses, etc.) and the clientele/followers respond with loyalty to the *za'im*, a loyalty that is most often quite sincere, emotional and long lasting.

But their “sectarian-ness” did not carry any further. The clientele of each *za'im* was geographically distinct. This typically corresponded to distinct neighborhoods in the cities or distinct lands and villages in the rural sectors of Lebanon. To a very real degree, each *za'im* was a leader **only** of his subgroup within the broader sect. In **his** neighborhoods, or in **his** rural villages, he was “boss” or “patron” (these other names being perhaps figuratively better translations of *za'im*). Outside his neighborhood (his “turf,” to use another image which captures the idea well), he was **not** a leader, **not** someone whose political authority or influence was recognized or appreciated. This was most especially true in other neighborhoods or villages whose populations were the **same sect** as themselves.

This last point may sound wrong or at least counterintuitive. But it begins to reveal the true nature of political power in Lebanon during the period. Political power in Lebanon was entirely “people power,” if you will.⁷ A *za'im* had political power precisely because he was the leader of, and maintained the loyalty of, his political clientele. For a Sunni *za'im*, for example, to try to expand his political clientele (to expand his political power), this could happen only by extending his power and influence into other Sunni neighborhoods or other Sunni villages. Since there were essentially no political “vacuums,” that is, no Sunni concentrations that did not already have an existing *za'im* leader, this meant that any attempt by a Sunni *za'im* to expand his territory, to expand his political clientele, ran smack into another Sunni *za'im* who would use every and all means to stop this theft by another of **his** political power, **his** political base. Indeed, any such attempt by a Sunni *za'im* to expand his power, to expand his political base into other Sunni neighborhoods would result in what might be called (not inaccurately) a “turf war.”⁸ This same segmentation **within** sectarian group was characteristic of the Maronite, Shi'a and other populations as well.

Historically in Lebanon and elsewhere where this phenomenon has appeared, the economic power base of these various leaders was either control over land or, in more recent times, control over trade, commerce, industry or all of these in the urban environment. Based on these things, they could and did provide jobs, protection, welfare and other services which assured them the political loyalty of their followers: thus, the “people-power” basis of *za'im* political power referred to in the text.

Michael Young describes his meeting with Walid Jumblatt, a latter day *za'im* of the Druze community in the following manner: “[Jumblatt] . . . gave a great deal to the Druze, but demanded near complete obedience in exchange . . .” Young appears to think that this classic statement of patron/client ties is unique to Jumblatt. It is perfectly applicable to any or all of Lebanon’s political *zu'ama*. See Michael Young, *The Ghosts of Martyrs Square* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 40.

For a discussion of political clientelism from many case studies around the world, see S. Schmidt et al. *Friends, Followers and Factions: A Reader in Political Clientelism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977); on the *zu'ama* of Lebanon explicitly, see, *inter alia*, A. Hottinger, “Zu'ama in Historical Perspective,” in *Politics in Lebanon*, ed. Leonard Binder (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1966).

⁷ Political power was **not** based on holding office in government nor even by the ability to influence those who are in office, as is the case in so many other societies. Indeed, it was the reverse, if anything. Taking or holding any office in government was determined entirely on the type and extent of “people power” a *za'im* possessed. With very few exceptions, positions in government were to be had only for a *za'im* or someone who had the support of a *za'im* or acted on his behalf.

⁸ There is a clear implication behind this discussion and the image of “turf war” invoked here that should be made explicit. For any *za'im* to maintain control over his neighborhoods and clientele in defense against some other *za'im* of the same sect trying to expand his territory, each *za'im* needed to have his own “armed forces.” Such “armed forces” would most often look like, and be described as, gangs and street thugs by outside observers. For the people in the “protected” neighborhoods, however, these characters were “heroes” and noble warriors. The leaders of such gangs or heroes even had their own distinct name: *qabaday*. The *qabaday* were not independent actors. They were the “lieutenants” of each section’s *za'im*.

Yet another image that helps to understand the *za'im* structure of the society is to think of each *za'im* district as a mini-state in itself. The *za'im*, with his civilian and military lieutenants, basically provided many if not all of the functions of government, from welfare to “defense.” See *inter alia* Michael Johnson, *Class and Client in Beirut* (London: Ithaca Press, 1986).

Indeed the typical power contest in these circumstances will almost always be conflict, or potential conflict, **within** the Sunni community, **within** the Maronite community, within the Shi'a community: **not between them**. For a Sunni *za'im* to try to expand his clientele into a Druze or Greek Orthodox or Maronite neighborhood, this would be a complete non-starter. It obviously would not work, at least not as long as the assumptions of this structure held. Thus the typical power contest among the politically powerful leaders of Lebanon, the *zu'ama*, was **intra**-sectarian conflict (conflict of Sunni versus Sunni, Maronite versus Maronite and so on). Contests over political power **between** religious groups, that is, between Muslims and Christians, would be rare to the point of being extremely unlikely. Most especially, the emergence of broad united coalitions of "Christians" or of "Muslims," would be all but impossible, given these structures that made them rivals and enemies in normal times.

The implications of the structure I have just described were quite profound. Lebanon was not free of internal conflict in its normal, day to day affairs. However, the kind of conflict that was most likely to arise, if conflict did arise, was **within** sectarian groups: Sunni versus Sunni; Maronite versus Maronite, and so on. **Inter**-sectarian conflict would be rare, at least any initiated by a *za'im*, given that there would be no political gains (no clientele or neighborhoods realistically to be had) and only costs to any such move.

Thus, **inter**-sectarian "harmony," (that is, lack of conflict) was a direct consequence of the self-interested pursuit of power, or defense of their powers, by the *zu'ama* of Lebanon. They did not act with the motivation to reduce **inter**-sectarian strife; nevertheless, their self interested acts produced a "common good" of inter-sectarian harmony.⁹

Did this really work? Did the self interest of each *za'im* consistently stand in the way of sectarian solidarity? The answer is yes, for the years 1943 to 1975. This was surprisingly true despite hypothetical "worst case" scenarios such as the following. What happened if some leader, a Maronite *za'im*, for instance, called for political unity among all Maronites to promote their common interests? This might come in the form of an attempt to create a single party for all Maronites. What if that Maronite *za'im* tried to win support for this party (and of course his leadership of that party) by stressing that there was a "Muslim threat" (real or imagined) to Christian interests. How would other Maronite *zu'ama* react? This would in essence be a call for each other Maronite *za'im* to give up his individual power, pay the costs individually, for a "common good," for the interests of all Maronites as a whole.¹⁰

According to the model we have presented, each Maronite *za'im* faced with this call would refuse to submit voluntarily, refuse to give up their own power voluntarily, for any such "common good." The only exception for any individual *za'im* would be if **he** became the leader of such a

⁹ The specific argument here is a type of "hidden hand" argument comparable to that of Adam Smith's discussion of capitalism: purely self interested actions will produce a "public good" (in capitalism's case, the greatest amount of material wealth), even though that is not the reason or motivation of the individual actors.

¹⁰ The language of this discussion draws on the field of game theory, the collective action problem and especially the insights of the n-person "prisoner's dilemma" model for insights into the potential problems of providing public or common goods through the voluntary actions of rationally self interested actors; see Mancur, *The Logic of Collective Action* (New York: Schocken Press, 1971); Russell Hardin, *Collective Action* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1982); Brian Barry et al. *Rational Man: Irrational Society* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1982).

broad Maronite front. That is, he would not be losing but gaining power. Otherwise, it would be a threat to the power and control of the political domain of each individual *za'im*. Any such broad “Maronite party” would mean loss of power, loss of control of their constituencies for each of these Maronite *zu'ama* and this is precisely why each *za'im* would never let this happen as long as they were powerful enough to stop it.¹¹

Similarly, any attempt to build **any** political party that crossed *za'im* boundaries based on any broad ideology or common interest found itself stymied by *za'im* opposition. When the Lebanese Communist Party, for example, attempted to organize industrial workers across these boundaries, they failed for the most part.¹² This was due, not only to *za'im* direct opposition, but to the basic fact that the loyalty to their *za'im* of each individual worker remained the most important (and effective) political/economic connection in his life, something he or she simply could not dare to jeopardize. And this was just as true for lower middle class, middle class and even upper class Lebanese for anyone hoping to build a broad class-based or ideologically defined party for Lebanon.

For Lebanon during these years, potentially the most powerful ideological alternative for a mass based political party or front was Arab Nationalism, or at least a Lebanese version of Arab Nationalism. Lebanese Arab Nationalism as a principle of political solidarity had the potential of unifying Lebanese across not only *za'im* boundaries, but across sectarian ones as well. To the degree that Arab Nationalism emphasized common language, common culture and, most importantly, the common struggle against direct imperialist control of their countries in the past and against the neo-imperialist struggles of their contemporary affairs, it worked to overcome locally based loyalties or “parochialisms.” It implied in theory, and worked in practice as, a significant threat to the political power of each and every *za'im*. For all its popularity, however, it failed to create a common Lebanese Arab Nationalist party or front in Lebanon until the time of the civil war.¹³

¹¹ The above example is not hypothetical. What has been described here is by and large the story of the Phalangist/*Kataib* party and its failed efforts through all the years of Lebanese religious-sectarian stability to build what amounted to a single Maronite party. The political opposition that stymied the efforts of the party's founder, Pierre Gemayel (a Maronite *za'im*) was neither primarily the state nor the Muslim segments of the population. It was all the other Maronite *zu'ama*. When the *Kataib* finally did achieve political dominance in the Maronite community during the civil war, it was literally over the dead or wounded bodies of the Maronite *zu'ama* (or their families) who had opposed them for years. Cf. Tabitha Petran, *The Struggle over Lebanon* (New York: Monthly Review Press), 245-6.

¹² The Lebanese Communist Party, as a “party of the proletariat,” indeed had trouble recruiting among Lebanese industrial workers. No *za'im* would ever let this happen among their working class constituents. However, for one group in particular, the *Za'im/zilm*, patron/client bond was especially weak: the Shi'a Muslims who migrated from rural areas to Beirut looking for work. In what was and continues to be a world phenomenon, poor from the rural districts individually find their way to the cities looking for work. They tended to create and inhabit poor, often shanty-town, neighborhoods on the periphery of cities. In Lebanon, this was especially true for Shi'a Muslims coming from their traditional residences in rural South Lebanon, the rural central Bekaa valley, etc., to Beirut. Almost by definition, their links and loyalties back to their original Shi'a *zu'ama* became overextended and weak, thus making Shi'a the most likely to be open to, and in need of, political movements like the Lebanese Communist Party (LCP) that worked outside of and challenged the *za'im* structure. By the time of the civil war, the LCP rank and file was heavily Shi'a. See Augustus Richard Norton, *Amal and the Shi'a* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), 33-36 *infra*; also Walid Khalidi, *Conflict and Violence in Lebanon* (Cambridge: Center for International Affairs Harvard University, 1979), 42.

¹³ The basic logic of the Arab Nationalist ideology – united we will be strong but divided we will remain weak – was so popular and so self evident that many *zu'ama* could not simply ignore it or take a completely negative stance towards it. A fairly common strategy for a Sunni or Shi'a or Druze *za'im* was to declare himself to be the most ardent supporter of Arab Nationalism. Such declarations were typically followed by proposing himself as, therefore, the most appropriate leader of the entire

B. The Lebanese Zu'ama versus the Lebanese State

This brings us back to reconsider the Lebanese state in relation to these effective power holders in Lebanon. Did the one-sided deal of apparent unchecked Christian dominance look any better from the perspective of Lebanon's Muslim *zu'ama*? Indeed, was there a common perspective towards the state of all *zu'ama*, whether Christian or Muslim?

It turns out there was. Just as I have described the threat to *za'im* power and control in their neighborhoods as potentially coming “from below,” from some attempt to organize the Lebanese masses in some broad political front or party, so also a threat to their power and control could come “from above,” from the Lebanese government. One does not have to look very much further beyond Lebanon's borders to observe instances of governments where independent political power is **not** dispersed but rather monopolized and concentrated at the center in the governmental institutions. Whether such governments are described as dictatorial, authoritarian, military-run, or simply highly centralized, they are a clear counter example to the Lebanese model.

No Lebanese *za'im* needed to be particularly astute to recognize that a great, if not the greatest, threat to their independent power might come from a central government that managed to become too strong.¹⁴ Crucially, this was as true for Christian *zu'ama* as it was for Muslim. If the state could fulfill and replace the patronage roles that *zu'ama* had monopolized over their followers, then the patronage base for their power would be eliminated and their power broken. If the government could provide roads, electricity, schools, medical care and/or jobs directly to its citizens—rather than all these things being provided or obtained for his constituents through the mediation of each *za'im*—then the basis for the profound loyalty of the rank and file to the *zu'ama* would erode and disappear.

Again, this was as true for Christian *zu'ama* as it was for Muslim. All of this points us, I believe, in the proper direction of understanding what can be called the real consensus, the real “national pact,” underlying Lebanese political institutions. It helps explain why the actual forms of Lebanese “democracy,” with its apparent bias in favor of Christians, did not in the end matter in any essential way to the political interests of Lebanon's effective power holders, the *zu'ama*.

The one thing that all the Lebanese *zu'ama* could and did agree upon was that they wanted the central government to be weak. It would not have power to link directly with citizens, even to provide “positive” public services such as roads, schools, etc. Any such government effort (to the small degree that it had any financial resources to do so) to provide public goods to citizens was only acceptable if it was mediated through the local *za'im*. If the government failed to even try in

movement; the last being a sine qua non of his own involvement. See Michael Johnson, *Class and Client in Beirut* (London: Ithaca Press, 1986) p.30, also p.131. These same motivations and strategies in regard to claims of loyalty to Arab Nationalism worked themselves out at the interstate level as well among Arab state leaders. See Malcolm Kerr, *The Arab Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971). On the general phenomenon of the dominance of Arab Nationalist ideologies, see Bassam Tibi, *Arab Nationalism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981) passim; Majid Khadduri, *Political Trends in the Arab World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1970) chapters 2,8; B.J Odeh, *Lebanon: Dynamics of Conflict* (London: Zed Books, 1985), 91-93.

¹⁴ The establishment of a direct link between government and citizen, unmediated by local power centers, is not simply a characteristic of dictatorial governments. The most typical particular form of modern industrial democracies is a unitary government (i.e. not “federal,” not with locally somewhat independent regional governments) ; see W. Shively, *Power and Choice* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2001) chapters 3-5; and Lijphart, *Democracies*.

certain areas (as was true for decades in many rural areas, especially the Shi'a districts of south and central Lebanon), then this was minimally acceptable to the local *za'im* in that whatever benefits were provided to the people, all of it came from or through him, and thus reinforced his hold on their loyalties.

Perhaps more obviously, the state could be a direct threat to the independent local power of each *za'im*. In general, military governments, especially military dictatorships, would have the incentive and the means to destroy any locally based power. The Lebanese army began its life weak in 1943 and remained weak through to the civil war period and long after. It did essentially nothing. But in the system we have described here, “doing nothing” was exactly what it was supposed to do. Most importantly, it was never used, and was never supposed to be used, to maintain “internal order.” This last phrase would be recognized by all as a euphemism to describe a central government attack on one or more *zu'ama*. From the perspective of the major political actors and power holders of Lebanon—the *zu'ama*—a weak, do-nothing army and thus a necessarily weak central government was exactly the kind of state that was minimally acceptable.¹⁵

We are now in a position to understand why the so-called “National Pact,” with its institutions so one-sidedly biased toward “Christian” interests and against Muslim interests, was not a significant problem for Muslim acceptance and participation. It was simply the case that the government, however constituted, would never be a threat to the interests of any *za'im*-based, local Muslim community. Such a government might completely neglect Muslim interests in terms of the provision of jobs and public goods in their districts. This was acceptable. What this weak government could not do was eliminate the middle man power of local *zu'ama*.

Less obviously, the “*za'im*-logic,” if you will, holds true just as profoundly for the *za'im* leaders of the Christian community: Maronite, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, etc. The possibility clearly existed for an incumbent Maronite Christian President to use the extra powers of his office to extend his personal power to Maronite communities other than his own, at the expense of other Maronite *zu'ama*.¹⁶ The consensus of Lebanese *zu'ama* was that they all wanted a weak central government and especially a weak Lebanese army (or at least one that faithfully did nothing all the time): this was true for all Lebanese *zu'ama*, whether Christian or Muslim.

The government was thus constituted **not** to be a threat to Lebanon's power holders. This is a negative perspective. Was there any more positive benefit of the existence of the government, again from their perspective of both Muslim and Christian leaders? There was. Participation in the government was potentially a source of extra patronage, especially in terms of government jobs for

¹⁵ When the then Commander in Chief of the Lebanese army, Fouad Chehab, refused to commit the Lebanese army to quell “domestic disturbances” in 1958, that is, when the army refused to do anything, Chehab and the army were hailed as heroes by all except the Lebanese President Chamoun. Chamoun of course had tried to use the army to consolidate his power against his internal Lebanese foes, Muslim and Christian. Thus, the Lebanese army did what the real consensus of Lebanese *zu'ama* wanted: the army did nothing. See Fahim Qubain, *Crisis in Lebanon* (Washington: Middle East Institute, 1961) 81-83.

The Lebanese army apparently took their assignment to do nothing so much to heart that when Lebanon was invaded by foreign powers—by Israel in 1978, 1982 and again in 2006 and arguably by Syria in 1976 – the Lebanese army was nowhere to be seen, as far as this author has ever been able to determine.

¹⁶ This threat would be most clearly recognized if a *za'im* government office holder tried to hold office too long, beyond “his turn.” See discussion below.

their constituents. If a *za'im*, or his own selected delegate, was a member of parliament or, better, a minister in charge of some ministry, then he would have control over giving jobs or government contracts or other perks to his own constituents. Instead of having just a factory or land or a trading house as the basis of power and influence, the *zu'ama* who participated in government were able to use the offices of state as an added means of patronage for their followers and thus a strengthening of their individual powers.¹⁷

Holding office in government was thus an added perk for each *za'im*: it was not necessary for his basic power base, but it certainly added to his basic ability to provide patronage for his followers. The one assumption that was necessary to maintain this “positive” outcome was that no individual *za'im* would hold any government office for too long. If one particular *za'im* did, then he would be denying patronage opportunities to other *zu'ama* and, indeed, potentially building a long term base of extra resources to extend his political support to new areas that his rivals could not match. Now, since the major offices from president to ministers to the Speaker of the Parliament were assigned according to religious sect, this meant that those most upset by any president or minister in power trying to retain that power “too long” would be members of the president’s or minister’s own sect. In particular, the office of the president was the only major office with a set term of 6 years. The Lebanese constitution had a provision that no president could run and serve for two terms (12 years). Clearly, this was a provision to allay the fears of all *zu'ama*, but especially of Maronite *zu'ama*.¹⁸

Now, from all that we have said, it is possible to understand the nature of the political crises that **did** arise in Lebanon from 1943 to the early 1970s. They were not sectarian crises in anything like the common understanding of the term. The major crises that threatened the Lebanese Republic prior to the civil war of 1975 were precisely crises where the central government became a threat to *za'im* power. Either a sitting Maronite president tried (unconstitutionally) to serve a second term, thus threatening all *zu'ama* but especially Maronite *zu'ama* (1951 and 1958) or the central government had developed a special police force (called the Deuxieme Bureau) which acted directly to undermine *za'im* power (1970).

The coalition of political leaders who joined together in each of these instances was made up of Sunni, Shi’a, Druze **and** Christian *zu'ama*, exactly what one would predict, given the present analysis. For the standard interpretations of Lebanon (i.e. it is simply Muslims versus Christians, especially in any kind of crisis), the reality of what took place is entirely inexplicable: the coalitions are invariably described as “strange,” “unlikely,” “baffling” and so on.¹⁹

¹⁷ This use of public office by *zu'ama* to provide benefits only for their own followers was extremely common if not universal. It was a kind of “corruption” that was endemic to the system but, if you will, a kind of benign corruption. Each *za'im* would use government office to benefit his constituents. His constituents would be very unhappy if he did anything else. And by contrast with what you would expect from the “united sectarian model” assumption, the *za'im* would have no incentive and instead, objections from all angles if he distributed government perks to co-religionists outside his own following.

¹⁸ By contrast to the set term for presidents, prime ministers and all their cabinets would come and go, more or less like the governments of the French 3rd and 4th Republics. The typical cabinet and prime minister “government” in Lebanon lasted less than a year. Saab Salaam’s prime ministership lasted from early 1970 to spring of 1973, an extraordinarily long time during a period of extraordinary turmoil but this was the exception, not the rule.

¹⁹ Two of these, in 1951 and in 1958, were crisis situations which arose precisely when incumbent presidents either changed the constitution so that they could run for and serve a second 6 year term in office (Bshara Khury in 1951) or seemed about to change the

Thus, Lebanon had its problems in the years 1943 to 1975. But the **potential** problem of conflict fought along the lines of the sectarian, Muslim-Christian division of the society was never the major one. Not until 1975.

Summary of the Conditions for Inter-Sectarian Harmony

Let us summarize. Each *za'im*, in his own self interest, would do his best to block any large sectarian alliances in which that individual *za'im* might find himself in a secondary position compared to a single top leader of the sect. A *za'im* may have presented a public stance in favor of sectarian solidarity, but in real terms no such alliance would be acceptable unless he himself was top leader. If all of them made such self-interested calls, then the only effective outcome would be that they would each remain as top leader of their own political constituency, a condition of de facto political fragmentation within each sect.

On the other hand, for the Muslims and for many Lebanese Christians, an alliance that called for Lebanese Arab National unity, that cut across sectarian boundaries (and thus, *a fortiori*, across *za'im*-boundaries) might be the most popular political ideology in theory. It may perhaps be publically proclaimed by individual *zu'ama*. But this cross-sectarian, cross-*za'im* type of unity would run straight into the same obstruction that befuddled unity among the Maronites: the obstruction of each *za'im* wishing not to be swept away in some broader ideological movement, be it nationalist or leftist/socialist.

Thus **inter**-sectarian conflict was limited and endlessly undermined by *za'im* self interest; **intra**-sectarian conflict was fairly common.

An Adequate Explanation for the Conditions Leading to the War of 1975-1976.

We have thus come to the point of understanding the nature of the sectarian stability that Lebanon managed to achieve from 1943 to 1975. It was based on the internal divisions within each sect, centered on the political bosses within each sect jealously maintaining control and power within their individual domains. Each *za'im* acted, motivated by his own self interest. Those self interested acts, however, managed to produce a common or “global” good—overall sectarian stability—which was not the motivation for their actions.

As long as the *zu'ama* of Lebanon remained powerful, relative sectarian stability would survive. There were costs for this stability. United action for **any** common needs for the Lebanese as a whole would be blocked by *zu'ama*, just as they blocked common sectarian action

constitution to serve a second term (Camille Chamoun in 1958). In both these instances, the opposition which arose against these power grabbing moves was made up of Muslim and Christian *zu'ama*. Given the analysis presented so far, it is obvious that Maronite *zu'ama* had the most to fear and the most to lose from a single Maronite president's power grab. They would be outflanked and outgunned among their own constituencies by this single extraordinarily powerful Maronite *za'im* and each one of them would have been denied their chance at a turn, however brief, at taking over the presidency and controlling its extra patronage opportunities.

The common fronts in opposition to Khoury in 1951 and to Chamoun in 1958 were thus composed of both Christian and Muslim *zu'ama*. This is exactly what the present analysis has led us to expect. However, for the standard analyses of these events, the assumption that religious-sectarian groups act as a “united sectarian (or political) front,” most especially in times of crisis, predicts exactly the opposite of what took place. Instead of recognizing that the evidence disconfirms their theory and assumptions, they simply declare the actual, cross-sectarian, alliances to be “strange,” “unlikely,” “baffling;” Lebanese political actions “make no sense.”

or common “nationalist” policies. In particular, the Lebanese government would remain weak, unable to do any good or bad for the country as a whole, due to the self interest of each *za'im* standing in its way.²⁰

Finally, we are in a better position to understand the cause or, better, the changed circumstances that led to the civil war in 1975. We now know where to look. The potential for sectarian and/or ideological strife which existed only as a potential, became reality in Lebanon **only when the *za'im* structure broke down**; only when essentially all the *zu'ama* had lost significant power by the late 1960s and early 1970s. The complete story of how this took place is discussed in proper detail elsewhere,²¹ but the basic factors should be no surprise. Each Lebanese government, for the variety of interests each promoted, all pursued a policy to weaken the *za'im* class of Lebanese politics. The *zu'ama* had recognized the threat to their power from the central government from the beginning. By the 1970s (basically the aftermath of the 1970 crisis),²² the central governments had succeeded in weakening them to the point where they could not fend off the challenge “from below,” that is from the ideological parties that had all through this time attempted to unite Lebanese across *za'im*-boundaries: the *Kataib* party for the right wing Christians; the Leftist/Nationalist parties for the rest of the Lebanese.

Thus the “success” of the two major ideological movements in Lebanon—The *Kataib* for most of the Maronites and the Lebanese National Movement for essentially everyone else—was the death knell for the internal ideological and sectarian stability of Lebanon. With the *zu'ama* swept aside in both camps in Lebanon, the political logic switched to what I termed at the beginning of the paper the “threat” of majority rule democracy for internally divided societies. As has been implied in the discussion of the *Kataib* and the Maronite camp, they represented at best less than 30% of the population, probably less than 20%. The Lebanese National Movement (LNM) and its ideology were either minimally acceptable or actively supported by the rest of Lebanon. If a “proper” democracy arose at this point, as was the slogan of the LNM, then it was precisely this logic of majoritarian democracy that was such a fundamental threat to the Maronite community, at least those who adhered sincerely to the *Kataib* line that stressed this. In a very real sense, they chose to fight rather than accept “democracy.”

Conclusion: Madison and Muslims

In the beginning of this paper, I argued that Lebanon’s previous appearance of having a democratic form of government based on its peculiar “National Pact,” was at best irrelevant in explaining the relative sectarian harmony of 1943 to 1975. At worst, its locked Christian majority in the parliament and locked assignment of a Maronite to the presidency should have

²⁰ The central government’s actions might not all have been bad policies. Sometimes the extension of government power was for “bad” reasons, as the policies of Khoury and Chamoun. However, sometimes it could be argued that the government acted for “good” reasons. This was arguably true for the “reformist” efforts of the Fouad Chehab regime (1958-1964) and that of his successor, Charles Helou (1964-1970). None of these efforts, whether “good or bad,” but which all had the effect weakening the *zu'ama* was intended to create the conditions for civil war in 1975. Thus civil war was another unintended consequence of actions, just as sectarian stability had been.

²¹ See Barry Preisler, *Lebanon: The Rationality of National Suicide* (Ph.d. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1987).

²² See footnote 19 above

been a prescription for religious-sectarian disaster. The only thing that saved Lebanon from this outcome was the fact that the government was so weak that its decisions, reflecting whatever majority ruled at any given time, simply did not matter to, did not threaten the interests of, the significant political actors of Lebanon and the communities they specifically represented: the *zu'ama* and their followers, whether Muslim or Christian.

I have argued here that the religious-sectarian harmony Lebanon managed to maintain happened independently of the National Pact and the pseudo-democratic institutions that went with it. I presented the case that it was based on the self interested acts of the “sectarian leaders,” the *za'im* class of leaders. If that is a correct analysis, and I believe it is, what hope is there for a democratic future for Lebanon? Except for one or two vestiges of *za'im* style leaders, they do not exist in today's Lebanon and therefore cannot fulfill their role of unintentionally producing sectarian peace.

What form or structural variation of democracy might at least in principle provide “democratic” institutions which were not at the same time a threat to political minorities? I mentioned James Madison earlier as the political theorist most singularly concerned with the threat to political minorities inherent in simple majority rule government. Although Madison's major emphasis is very regularly missed or ignored, his solution was precisely the separation of powers, with checks and balances system underlying the theory, if not the practice, of American institutions. What are the “checks” of his system supposed to do? The checks are there to check political majorities.

Although Madison arguably asked the right question about the need to have institutional checks on majorities, his solution has not been popular among internally divided states in the world. This is mainly because it has so seldom worked to protect minority interests.²³

What other alternatives exist? The Lebanese are working on it. If unchecked majority rule is a problem, but a government “of the people, by the people, for the people” is nevertheless the overall goal, then the government must create popular rule but with effective institutional powers reserved to political minorities to be able to check, to stop the policies, of the majority if those policies threaten the fundamental interests of the minority. This kind of democracy exists although it is rare. It is called “consensual” or “grand coalition” style democracy. Its fundamental feature is minority veto power: that is, the minority can stop or veto the actions or policies that the majority wants to pursue.²⁴

I believe that this is precisely the nature of the democratic debate that has gone on in Lebanon in recent years. Ironically, the language and vocabulary of James Madison are being used in the debate. Even more ironically, it has been the idiom employed primarily by Hizbullah's

²³ Briefly, the logic of the institutional check on the majority is that the political minority must be able to retain control over at least one of the branches of government with its institutional checking power over the other branches. The flaw in this system from the perspective of any political minority is that it is entirely possible that a single political majority could control all three branches of government. This situation has been fairly common in US constitutional history and those majorities have not been famous for checking themselves to protect political minority (i.e. party out of power) interests.

²⁴ See references to Lijphart above; there are serious costs to such a system, most notably that the government may not be able to get **any** policy pursued. However, as many Lebanese might agree, a weak, do-nothing government may well be preferable to the horrors of civil war.

leader, Hassan Nasrallah, who has condemned “majority tyranny” and the need for the Lebanese to govern by consensus.²⁵

The Lebanese have learned their lesson about democracy the hard way. But it may well be the case that they have learned the right lesson.

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²⁵ See Barry Preisler, “Islam and Democracy: The Case of Hizbullah in Lebanon,” in *Terrorism and Global Insecurity*, ed. Klint Alexander (New York: Linton Atlantic Books, 2009). This paper was first presented at the Oxford Roundtable in the spring of 2008.