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## Confessionalism in Lebanon: Reflection and an analysis of issues

Laura Kisthardt

John Carroll University, [kisthardt1@gmail.com](mailto:kisthardt1@gmail.com)

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**Confessionalism in Lebanon: Reflection and an analysis of issues**

**Laura N. Kisthardt**

John Carroll University

Senior Honors Project

Spring, 2013

## **Part I: Introduction**

From June 22<sup>nd</sup> to July 3<sup>rd</sup> 2012 I traveled to Lebanon through a fellowship with the National Council on US Arab Relations along with nine other students from across the United States. We traveled to Lebanon in order to gain a better understanding of the political, economic, and social situation, in the country. During our visit we met with many different individuals: writers, politicians, non-profit workers, students, professors, and more. The fellowship also required each student upon returning back to the United States to share with others about what we learned during our time in Lebanon. These insights that I gained during my visit to Lebanon served as the spark for my Senior Honors Project. This project is a more in depth research into topics I learned about during my study trip to Lebanon compiled into lecture notes for future presentations.

Although there has been no official census since 1932, according to the International Religious Freedom Report 2011, the major religious groups in Lebanon's population are: 27% Sunni Muslim, 27% Shia Muslim, 21% Maronite Christian, 8% Greek Orthodox, and 5% Druze. Confessionalism is responsible for how all of the top political positions are delegated, as well as number of seats in Parliament. Confessionalism is defined as the blending of religion and politics through apportioning government positions based on individuals identifying with a religion, or confession. In Lebanon, the President must be a Maronite Christian, the Prime Minister a Sunni Muslim, and the Speaker of Parliament a Shi'a Muslim. Lebanon uses confessionalism in an attempt to manage religious divisions and avoid violence in the country, which culminated in the Civil War from 1975 to 1990. Politically, the central government is very weak because confessionalism makes it hard for political parties to reach agreements. Political parties are generally along confessional lines which exacerbates the issue of reaching agreement. Recent

developments among political parties show that there may be some cross-sectarian alliances and parties forming, but the main confessional divide remains intact. The weak central government has forced the Lebanese to rely on themselves to solve their issues and they have created a strong non-profit sector to tackle issues such as low literacy and youth involvement in society. In addition, the expectations that the Lebanese have for the government, to provide resources and make changes for example, are very low which creates an environment where change is unlikely to come.

## **Part II: History**

While in Lebanon, our delegation was fortunate enough to visit several incredible historical sites, such as Byblos and Beiteddine. The places that we visited tell a story about the ancient history of Lebanon.

Byblos is one of the oldest continually inhabited cities in the world, estimates range from 5,000 to 7,000 years old. Byblos is a symbol for the influence of international trade in Lebanon. In 1200 BC, the Greeks gave the name Phoenicia to the coastal region of Lebanon and also gave the name Byblos, or Papyrus in Greek, because the city was important in the papyrus trade. Byblos reminds us what Beirut was like before modernization took place and many of the historical sites of Beirut were lost. For example, Byblos ancient ruins still include souks, marketplaces, where historically all the shopping and trade would have taken place.

Beiteddine, meaning house of faith, is a beautiful palace located in the mountains about 30 miles southwest of Beirut. Construction began in 1788, but the palace was not inhabited until 1830. Upon completion, Beiteddine was the residence of the Emir who ruled over the area as a

part of the Ottoman Empire. Today it is used as the summer residence of the President, as well as hosting many artistic exhibitions and performances open to the public. The colorful mosaics, rounded domes of the bath houses, and spacious courtyards transport visitors to another time. The beauty of Beiteddine has survived the Ottoman rule, the French Mandate, the 15 year Civil War, and most recently Israeli invasion in 2006. The war and destruction surrounding the beautiful palace has taken its toll on the contents. It is estimated that up to 90% of the palaces original decorations and furniture have been destroyed or lost over the years. However, the architecture remains and stands as a testament to Lebanese virility.

Lebanon's vast and rich history faced a crisis in the past century. Recent history in Lebanon can be summarized in a quote from Thomas Friedman's book From Beirut to Jerusalem, "Instead of the state growing out of the nation, the nation was expected to grow out of the state" (Friedman 99). Lebanon was not allowed to mature organically into a modern nation state, but instead forced into the physical and structural confines of the Western imposition on the Middle East. Because of this forced nation-state it is beneficial to look back at how Lebanon's history shaped its future.

In A Concise History of the Middle East Arthur Goldschmidt Jr. and Lawrence Davidson examine the complexity of the historical issues in Lebanon through the angle of religion (Goldschmidt & Davidson 325). The religious angle is the most obvious perspective of the conflict between Christians and Muslims. The Maronites, a branch of Catholicism, have been the predominant Christian group in Mount Lebanon since the 9<sup>th</sup> century. The Maronites were the major power in Lebanon, even before the 1943 National Pact, which formally granted the Maronites the upper hand in political power. Maronites had gained power in Lebanon because they became prosperous from silk production and trade with Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> and late 19<sup>th</sup>

century (Long 235). By the time of the Civil War in 1975, the Maronites held power disproportionate to their actual population because the Maronite population had not been growing as rapidly as the Muslim population. To this day there has not been an official census in Lebanon since 1932. There has not been another census because both sides, Muslims and Christians, know that the population balance has shifted so drastically that neither side will agree to a census because it could unbalance the delicate political power relationship in Lebanon.

According to Rania Maktabi in her detailed analysis of the 1932 census entitled “The Lebanese Census of 1932 Revisited – Who are the Lebanese?” an article from the British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, the 1932 census counted 351,197 Maronites which equaled 33.5% of the population, the biggest group of any religious sect at the time. Sunni Muslims were 195,305, which was 18.6% of the total population. Shia Muslims were 166,536 and 15.9% of the total population. The Druze population was 62,084 and only 5.9% of the total population in Lebanon (Maktabi 235). All population statistics since 1932 have only been estimates.

The 1943 National Pact was an unwritten agreement between Christians and Muslim leaders, specifically Bshara al-Khoury, a Maronite who would go on to be independent Lebanon’s first President, and Riyad al-Solh, a Sunni Muslim who would go on to be independent Lebanon’s first Prime Minister (Ghosn & Khoury 382). The National Pact had four main outcomes, all of which had a significant impact on the later Taif Agreement in 1989 at the end of the Civil War. The first major point of the National Pact was the agreement that Lebanon was a “neutral, independent and sovereign entity having an Arab character” (Sorenson 13). Arab character is significant because many people often accuse the Maronites as trying to distance themselves from the Arab identity of Lebanon. The second agreement in the National Pact was that Lebanon agreed to not seek unity with Syria and would not have special ties to France in

particular or the West in general. The third and fourth points of the National Pact had the most significance for the future Taif Accord. The third and fourth points provided the formula of Christian and Muslim representation ratio in government of 6:5 and that the specific offices of President, Prime Minister, and Speaker of the House were reserved for members of the Maronite, Sunni and Shia sects, respectively.

The official French Mandate covered Syria and Lebanon, showcasing how tied together these two countries are. Historically, there was no divide between the two countries. Lebanon and Syrian territories were under Ottoman rule for almost 400 years. However, after World War I the Western powers divided up the Ottoman territories, with France taking control of Greater Lebanon, present day Lebanon and Syria. France originally intended to create a Christian state in the Middle East, but the Maronite population in Mount Lebanon was too small, so they added bits and pieces from surrounding areas, including Sunni and Shia populations in Lebanon (Held 305). This piecing together creates the multitude of perspectives we see in Lebanon today.

The Maronites had come into such thriving power with help from the French. During the French Mandate period of 1920-1943, the French colonial powers were the ultimate authority in Lebanon. French colonial history shows that the French typically put a minority group in power positions in the country in order to maintain colonial rule. Putting the Maronites in charge in Lebanon helped the French maintain their presence because the Maronites were happy to receive such power and therefore supported the French presence remaining. This French colonial power technique of empowering minorities to rule over majority groups can also be seen in Algeria and Syria. The power imbalance along religious lines set the stage for the Civil War.

Thomas Friedman introduces the historical tribe-like power balance that is common in the Middle East (Friedman 87). Tribe-like alliances come in various forms. For example, the tribe-like groups can be actual tribes, like families, or friends from a neighborhood, or a specific religious sect, or some combination of associations. These tribe-like associations bind all of their members together in a “spirit of solidarity, a total obligation to one another, and a mutual loyalty that takes precedence over allegiances to the wider national community or nation-state,” (Friedman 87). Friedman sees this tribe-like mentality as a key factor in the Lebanese people’s response to the Civil War.

Lebanese identity is similar to Friedman’s tribe-like associations. Historically, the Lebanese are known for their “identity crisis.” Most people primarily identify by their religion and, since most last names have religious associations, their last name connect everyone to a religious identity. Identity decisions, influenced by socio-economic status, also include whether individuals speak French, English, or Arabic, or what combination of the three, since all three are predominant in different areas of Beirut and Lebanon, although Arabic is the official language. Geographic location in Lebanon can also influence the identity of families. For example, the south of Lebanon is heavily Shia Muslim, identifying themselves as more conservative and supporting Iran and the Syrian regime, and the coast is heavily Maronite, identifying themselves as sophisticated businesspeople descending from the Phoenicians and supporting the West. Influential Sunni Muslims are known for their political and financial connections with Saudi Arabia and are primarily located in urban areas, like Beirut, Sidon, and Tripoli. Another large religious community identity is the Druze. The Druze is a very unique religious community that is primarily found in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. The Druze are known for their commitment to



nationalism, even though they are a smaller community than the other three, they played a large role in the Lebanese Civil War.

The Lebanese Civil War was essentially an identity crisis. Lebanon was not unified as a country and had no national identity. The Lebanese Civil War lasted from 1975 to 1990 and the war “resulted in more than 144,000 killed; 184,000 injured; 13,000 kidnapped; and at least 17,000 missing. In addition, about 175 towns were partially or completely destroyed, and over 750,000 Lebanese were internally displaced. The physical damages in the country were estimated at \$25 billion” (Ghosn & Khoury 382). The numbers are overwhelming and difficult to comprehend, but begin to paint a clearer picture as to why the Lebanese people still discuss the Civil War every day.

The official end of the Civil War was declared in Saudi Arabia by the surviving members of the 1972 Parliament, “The Taif Accord, also known as the Document of National Reconciliation, was signed on October 22, 1989 in Taif, Saudi Arabia and ratified by the Lebanese Parliament on November 5, 1989” (Ghosn & Khoury 383). The Taif Accord provided a “new power sharing agreement” for the Lebanese Parliament so that power would be more equally divided between Christians and Muslims. The Taif Accord also outlined the withdrawal plans for all foreign forces and disarmament of militias (Ghosn & Khoury 384). This part of the Accord is seen as less successful than the others since Israeli forces did not withdraw until 2000 and Syrian forces did not withdraw until 2005. Almost idealistically, the Taif Accords called for “the gradual abolition of confessionalism” and secularization has not taken place at all (ibid).

While our delegation was in Lebanon, we met with over twenty Lebanese professionals and discussed various topics in each meeting, but in every single meeting we discussed the

impacts and lasting effects of the Civil War. We often discussed the topic of the “amnesia” related to the Civil War because of the blanket amnesty that was granted to everyone involved. Faten Ghosn and Amal Khoury look at the issue of “amnesia” related to the Civil War in their 2011 article “Lebanon after the Civil War: Peace or the Illusion of Peace?” from the Middle East Journal. Ghosn and Khoury state that reconciliation efforts have been unsuccessful primarily because of the lack of a clear victory on either side, or as commonly phrased by the Lebanese people, “no victor, no vanquished” (Ghosn & Khoury 384). The Civil War in Lebanon was neighbor fighting neighbor, but at the same time “others” fighting “others.” The Civil War impacted everyone, but average civilians blamed everything they could on outside forces. For example, many people we spoke with in Lebanon place the majority of the blame for the start of the Civil War on the Palestinian refugees and also blame the Israeli and Syrian interventions for the extent of the physical and structural damage to Lebanon and the Lebanese people.

The role of foreign powers throughout Lebanese history cannot be ignored and has figured prominently into the country’s violent and tragic political struggles. The proximity and involvement of regional and international actors is important to keep in mind when considering all aspects of Lebanese society. Indeed, it is a common theme in Lebanon to place blame for the nation’s hardships solely in the hands of these many foreign agents, and the truth for this is undeniable. However, this should not absolve the Lebanese government from forging initiative for the country’s future.

The 2005 elections were a turning point for Hezbollah gaining 14 seats in Parliament. This escalation of power was seen as a threat by Israel. Relations between Hezbollah and Israel became more hostile as a result of the 2005 elections. On July 12, 2006 Hezbollah launched a surprise attack on Israel. Israel responded with bombing much of southern Lebanon. There was

no clear winner or loser in the 2006 war, but Hezbollah held their own and gained credibility in Lebanese politics.

### **Part III: Politics**

The confessional system in Lebanon dates back to the 1860's when a council was elected based on sectarian allocations in the population in order to end violence between the Druze and Maronites (Harris 41). In order to manage violence between religious sects, the government in the 1860's allocated positions based on religious "confessions" or how politicians identified religiously. This decision in the 1860's serves as the foundation for the current confessional system today. The Ottomans ruled over Lebanon from the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century until the Empire was dissolved in 1915 during World War I. The Ottomans introduced the millet system into Lebanon, which was also based on confessionalism. The millet system is alternately known as "personal" law. After the Ottomans, the French took over control of Lebanon and Syria with the French Mandate which officially lasted from 1920 to 1943. During both Ottoman and French rule the confessional system was upheld in various ways. The French rule over Lebanon exacerbated the religious divide because disagreement among the native Lebanese population was beneficial for the French to make Lebanon easier to control, as often occurs with colonial powers and native populations.

After the French left Lebanon, the country flourished for a brief period. Lebanon was commonly known the Switzerland of the Middle East between the late 1940's until the 1960's. Also, Beirut was often called the Paris of the Middle East. Lebanon was a haven of rest for the elites of the world a brief period of time. But this grandeur did not last long with the Civil War ravaging most of the country.

Major influencers in Lebanese politics come from other Middle Eastern countries, like Israel, Syria, Iran and Saudi Arabia. There has always been a Western influence in Lebanese politics, but currently the regional influencers are playing a larger role. Currently, there are two main alliances in the Lebanese government: March 8 and March 14. These two groups were formed during what is known as the Cedar Revolution of 2005. The Cedar Revolution was a series of protests following former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri's assassination on February 14, 2005. Hariri's assassination was a turning point in Lebanon because the Lebanese people rose up against Syrian presence in Lebanon. Syria had maintained a physical presence in Lebanon for over 30 years, since the beginning of the Civil War in 1975. In the days and weeks following Hariri's assassination there were many protests at and around Martyr's Square, primarily by those who were anti-Syrian. On March 5<sup>th</sup> Bashar al-Assad, the President of Syria, made a speech before the Syrian Parliament which addressed the protests in Lebanon (Young 50). In his speech, Assad said that "the cameras should zoom out" to show that the anti-Syrian influence protests were small, in Assad's opinion (ibid). The alliance of March 8, which was pro-Syria, came to be known for the protest that took place three days later organized by Hezbollah at Riad al-Solh, a square in downtown Beirut, and was the largest demonstration since Hariri's assassination (Young 51). The protesters on March 8<sup>th</sup> had two primary objectives which were outlined by Hezbollah leader, Hassan Nasrallah: "to break the momentum of the Independence Intifada by showing that the other side, the side ignored by the foreign media, could gather more people [and] to publicly 'thank' Syria for what it had done in Lebanon," (Young 51).

The March 14 alliance is the anti-Syrian influence in Lebanese government. On March 14<sup>th</sup> 2005, nearly a week after the pro-Syrian demonstration on March 8, the largest group ever gathered for any reason in all of Lebanon's history descended upon Martyr's Square, according

to Young, in order to show Syria how much the Lebanese people truly hated the Syrian influence, “In truth, March 14 was a manifestation not so much of Lebanon’s liberalism, but of how its sectarian thermostat could kick in to defend a pluralistic order that, in turn, safeguarded its liberal instincts; for in the end very little about the day was new, and that was its significance,” (Young 53).

While the March 14 coalition was able to gain substantial public support in assembling thousands in Martyr’s Square, leading to the removal of Syrian forces from Lebanon, the country would find it difficult to escape its past when conflict with Israel again erupted at the 2006 invasion. A combination of frustration with March 14’s ineffective governance, corruption, and Hezbollah’s Syrian and Iranian-backed expulsion of Israeli forces led to greater public support for a movement to oppose March 14, and the eventual formation of a coalition government dubbed March 8 incorporating AMAL, Hezbollah, the Free Patriotic Movement, and other parties.

Today the political landscape has evolved into a battle for power between March 14, seeking to regain electoral seats and control of the government, and the March 8 group, hoping to remain in power and seeking greater political consolidation. Regional supporters of both groups continue to meddle, with Saudi Arabia maintaining close ties and financial support to Sunni leaders such as the Hariri family, allied to the March 14 movement. Iran and Syria, for their part, continue to provide financial and ideological backing to Hezbollah, which dominates the March 8 coalition and increasingly monopolizes both its support and its position within the Lebanese government.

The current President is Michel Suleimen, an Independent. Suleimen was elected as President in 2008 after sectarian violence in May of the same year initiated by Hezbollah, according to Young in The Ghosts of Martyr's Square. Before Suleimen was elected, the President at the time Emile Lahoud attempted to illegally renew his term in 2004 when it was originally ending (Kerr 13). Syria encouraged Lahoud to renew his term because they were worried about maintaining their influence in Lebanon (ibid). Lahoud's renewal passed, but when it expired in 2007, Syria's actions had led to a domestic conflict between March 8 and March 14 over who the next president would be. When the two camps could not agree on a candidate for President it became clear that an Independent candidate was necessary. Suleimen was a somewhat popular commander in the Lebanese army before his role as the President allowing him to be a successful compromise in the disagreement between March 8 and March 14. Najib Miqati, a member of the March 8 alliance, was Prime Minister from June 2011 until he recently resigned in March 2013. Miqati resigned amidst infighting and a political deadlock within his party leaving the country in a fragile political state due to constantly rising tensions that the conflict in Syria will spill over into Lebanon.

While in Lebanon, our delegation met with Simon Abi Ramia, a Member of Parliament and head of the commission for Youth and Sports. Abi Ramia was a part of the famous Lebanese diaspora, he lived and worked in France for 23 years; then returned to Lebanon in 2007. An idea that was touched on toward earlier in this paper is the concept of blaming neighbors instead of accepting blame. Abi Ramia fell into this trend by explicitly blaming many problems in Lebanon on Syria and Israel.

Abi Ramia informed us that the goal of the Parliament is to make laws and examine the work of the government. He said that he is not directly involved with the people, in terms of

direct aid. He is very involved in a social aspect with the people of his district. Abi Ramia shared that prior to speaking with us in the past two days he had attended seven funerals and weekends are filled with weddings, baptisms, and other various celebrations. When he first came to office Abi Ramia did not want to spend time on these social things because he wanted to focus on actual policy making. However, he claims that his constituents were upset and that the Lebanese society does not accept avoiding these social functions because of the importance of family and community in Lebanese culture. Therefore, Abi Ramia's weekends and free time are filled with social events.

The budget for the Ministry of Youth and Sports is only \$2-3 million in Lebanon. Abi Ramia argued that Lebanon should spend more money on this ministry because he believes sports cross sectarian lines and more youth sports groups and even adult sports groups would help unite the people on a different level than religion.

Two current political news issues in Lebanon are fear of the violence in Syria spilling over into Lebanon because of the relationship of the two countries and protests in response to draft legislation relating to elections.

The Al-Jazeera World program entitled "Lebanon: Sibling of Syria" examines the relationship between Lebanon and Syria. The opening of the video says that "Whenever it rains in Syria, the Lebanese have to open their umbrellas." Syria and Lebanon have been connected since their creation as modern nation states. Before we even traveled to Lebanon, there were many discussions and fears about whether the violence in Syria would spill over into Lebanon. While we were in Lebanon, we witnessed every person we talked to share an extremely real fear that violence could envelope their country. In October 2012, a Lebanese Security Minister

specializing in Syrian Intelligence was assassinated in a bombing near Sassine Square. This bombing was only 200 yards from the hotel where our delegation stayed during our visit to Lebanon. The fear of violence coming into Lebanon from Syria, which had become almost normal, grew exponentially during the weeks immediately after the bombing. March 8 and Hezbollah support the Syrian regime. There has been some debate about whether there have been weapons exchanges between Syria and Hezbollah at the Northern border between Lebanon and Syria.

In late February 2013 a controversial draft law gained international news attention when a joint Parliamentary committee supported it. This law if passed into legislation would require Lebanese citizens to vote for members of their own sect. Supporters of the draft law argue that it would protect their communities and ensure fairer elections. Opponents state that it would “further entrench sectarianism in a sharply divided country” (New York Times 2/20/13). The draft law gained internet fame when the Onion, a comedic newspaper, claimed they could not create a headline about the story because it was already something the rest of the world would interpret as a joke. There were several protests in Beirut in late February. The next election is supposed to take place during the summer, but debates over election law are creating major political problems.

#### **Part IV: Palestinian Refugees**

A major humanitarian issue in Lebanon is the treatment of Palestinian refugees. The Palestinian refugees in Lebanon have the worst living conditions compared to other Palestinian refugees in Jordan, Syria (pre-Syrian revolution) and the Palestinian Territories. There are twelve



official refugee camps in Lebanon. The camps have ranging populations, one as small as 627 registered refugees and another as large as over 50,000 registered refugees. All inhabitants of the camps face abject poverty, overcrowding, improper infrastructure, and lack of access to education, employment opportunities, and adequate healthcare. There are also unofficial dwellings outside the camps which generally face even worse conditions than the camps themselves.

The primary organizations responsible for providing “assistance, protection and advocacy” for the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon is the United Nations Relief Work Agency, commonly referred to as UNRWA ([unrwa.org](http://unrwa.org)). The Palestinian refugees are the only unique population in the world to have their own UN agency. UNRWA was founded in 1948 after the Arab-Israeli conflict. It is completely funded from donations by UN member countries and receives no funding from UN general funds (*ibid*). Many criticize UNRWA’s insufficient support and advocacy for the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. However their funding has been significantly diminished, “in 1975 UNRWA spent an annual average of more than \$200 per refugee, today these figures have dropped to around \$70 per refugee,” (Ibrahim 84).

UNRWA operates sixty eight schools in the twelve camps in Lebanon, serving over 32,000 students ([unwra.org](http://unwra.org)). Schools for Palestinians are so overcrowded they run double shifts (Schenker 68). A lack of access to quality education is considered one of the primary reasons why the road to success is nearly impossible for a young Palestinian living in Lebanon. UNRWA does not operate any kindergarten education centers; however there are other aid agencies, like ANERA, whose goals include operation of pre-schools and kindergartens.

There is a debate within the development and aid community about the actual population of the refugees in the camps. Bill Corcoran, President of ANERA (American Near East Refugee Aid), has said that there are only about 250,000 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. However, UNRWA says that the number of refugees is near 500,000, nearly double Corcoran's number. Corcoran believes that ANERA's statistic is more accurate because they have done head counts in the camps with other aid organizations. Corcoran attributes the inconsistency to the UNRWA relying on the number of registered refugees.

UNRWA runs 28 primary health centers across the twelve camps. The healthcare provided by UNRWA is the primary source of health care for the Palestinian refugees. Doctors see as many as 80 patients each day (Ibrahim 86). Many of the medical issues faced by those living in the camps are the result of the lack of infrastructure, like proper sewage, and poor building materials.

Unemployment is a major issue for Palestinian refugees living in Lebanon. According to UNRWA, 53,000 of the approximately 120,000-strong Palestinian labor force are employed. In the south (i.e., Saida and Tyre), up to 81 percent of all refugees live in "abject poverty." Out of all of the country's UNRWA operates in Lebanon has the highest number of "special-hardship cases," i.e., the poor of the poor, some 30 percent of the Palestinian population (Schenker 68). Historically, it has been nearly impossible for Palestinian refugees to have any meaningful employment aside from working in the service industry, like repairmen, mechanics, maids, and dishwashers. Until 2005 Palestinian refugees were legally restricted from nearly all job categories. Palestinian refugees were also required to obtain work permits which cost up to \$1500, 75% of which was paid for by employers, creating further disincentive for employers to hire Palestinians. In 2005 "then-prime minister Fouad Siniora established the Lebanese-

Palestinian Dialogue Committee (LPDC), a ministerial-level group working in collaboration with UNRWA, which was tasked with discussing and coordinating government policy on the Palestinian residents” (Schenker 70). However this Committee seems to do more goodwill measure than an actual working committee because, according to reports, in 2008 only one Palestinian requested a new work permit and in 2009 there were no requests (ibid).

If one reason had to be named for why the Palestinians are disregarded in Lebanon, it can boil down to confessionalism. Keeping the balance in the population is so important in Lebanon. The Palestinian refugee population is primarily Sunni Muslim. As indicated before the current Sunni Muslim population is 27% of the total population. Currently, the Sunni Muslim and Shia Muslim populations are about equal. Therefore the Shia Muslims do not want the Palestinian refugees to gain citizenship because it would make the Sunni Muslims more powerful. Maronite Christians, who currently comprise 21% of the total population, obviously also do not want the Palestinian refugees to become Lebanese citizens because they would even more overpower the Christian population. Some scholars have cited that the few Shia Muslim and Christian Palestinian refugees that did exist have already been granted Lebanese citizenship, but it is important to keep in mind that these are small numbers.

Legally, the Lebanese government says that it does not support the Palestinian refugees receiving Lebanese citizenship because it would negate their “right to return” to a Palestinian state if one was created in the future. However, most scholars agree that this argument is not very strong. Culturally, many Lebanese still believe and blame the Palestinians for starting the Civil War.

One of the reasons that the Palestinian refugee situation has been stagnant for so long is because there is a “blame game” going on between UNRWA and the Lebanese government. Salvatore Lombardo, the director of UNRWA affairs in Lebanon said in a June 2010 meeting of the LPDC, “I should highlight that UNRWA continues to entrust the particularities on how those rights will be granted to the hands of the Lebanese government and its parliament” (Schenker 70). However this contradicts what he had said only a few months earlier when confronted about why the situation for Palestinian refugees was so much worse in Lebanon in particular, “their lack of access to socioeconomic rights, the right to work especially” implying that the issue is with the Lebanese government’s restrictions (ibid). When another UNRWA representative was asked about this contradiction she stated that UNRWA is in a difficult place because they cannot challenge the government for not holding up their part of the bargain or else UNRWA will not be allowed to do any of its work in Lebanon and could be forced to leave.

### **Part V: Women’s Rights**

Women’s rights in Lebanon is a special topic because Beirut is considered one of the most modern, Westernized, and liberal cities in the Middle East where women are free to wear whatever they want and go wherever they please. Although the surface may seem that women are succeeding in Lebanon, under the surface there are many issues which women face in their daily lives. These issues are generally not addressed by any government agency and are only gaining traction through the assistance of non-profit and international non-governmental organizations.

While in Lebanon, our delegation learned about many unique women’s rights issues that I had not been aware of before. Our first meeting that related to women’s rights was with Youssef

Fawaz, the Executive Director of Al-Majmoua, a micro-credit loan agency with locations across the entire country of Lebanon. Al-Majmoua, meaning “the group”, was originally created in 1994 as a program of Save the Children. The program was so successful it became its own independent non-governmental organization during 1997-1998. Primarily Al-Majmoua loans to women to help them start small businesses, as hairdressers, seamstresses, or food processing. Al-Majmoua loans indiscriminate of political affiliation, religion, or citizenship, loaning to Palestinian refugees and Lebanese citizens. The women who benefit from loans from Al-Majmoua are those who generally would be unable to get a traditional loan from a bank because they do not have any collateral or the loans are just too small of an amount for a traditional bank. Today Al-Majmoua has 16 offices across Lebanon and approximately 32,000 clients (<http://www.almajmoua.org/>).

Although Al-Majmoua works throughout the entire country, Fawaz shared with us that one of the struggles they face working with primarily women is that in the south of Lebanon the Shia Muslims are extremely conservative and will not let male employees meet with groups of women. Al-Majmoua currently employs over one hundred women, but still has a difficult time finding enough women for their staff in order to accommodate meetings with women across the country.

Near the end of our time in Lebanon our delegation met with Princess Hayat Arslan who is in charge of the National Committee for Lebanese Women. Ms. Arslan is a pioneer for women’s rights in Lebanon. Arslan has organized three conferences, one in 2004 and two in 2006, to lobby for a quota for women in the new Lebanese electoral law. She implemented a training program in 2004 called “Women Empowerment” that targets potential female political leaders. Also, Arslan participated in an exchange program for Lebanese Women in Political

Leadership organized in 2001 by the US State Department Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs Office of Citizen Exchanges.

The biggest confessionalism issue connected to a major issue for women's rights in Lebanon is that women are not allowed to pass on their citizenship to their children. The reason citizenship is not passed through the mother is because politicians do not want Lebanese women to marry Palestinian men and create a path to citizenship for the Palestinian people. This is a confessionalism issue because most Palestinian refugees are Sunni Muslims and allowed citizenship to them would upset the delicate balance between confessions. Women's inability to pass their nationality to their spouses and children affects the entire family. Spouses and children must continuously secure residency and work permits that enable them to live and work legally in Lebanon. The children are considered residents, not citizens, and are denied access to free public education.

Confessionalism plays a role in women's rights because there are different laws for different religious sects and each set of laws deals with issues like rape, divorce, and abuse differently. There are different written laws for Muslim, Christian and secular, but also the social treatment is different as well. There are religious courts for each affiliation which religious officials believe sufficiently defends women's rights. Women however disagree and believe that the general Lebanese courts need stronger influence to defend women's rights. In Lebanon, rape is against the law and punishable by up to five years in prison. However, many women do not come forward if they are the victims of sexual assault because they are afraid of the scandal. One organization that is working to help educate women is the Lebanon Family Planning Association (LFPA). LFPA was found in the early 1970's in Beirut and today works across the entire country of Lebanon. Their website lists many outreach and education programs to help empower women

to report if they are the victims of sexual assault or domestic violence. According to the current laws, domestic violence is not against the law in Lebanon. There is hope that this will change in the future, “Draft legislation banning domestic violence was considered by the cabinet in 2009, backed by women’s rights NGOs, but has been stopped in parliament by certain political parties that are blocking the adoption process” and there are several NGO’s that are still working to pass the legislation banning domestic violence (UNICEF 2011 Report).

One of the most important things to recognize about women’s rights issues in Lebanon is that they are so frequently pushed aside by bigger issues. Sectarian discord has kept the women’s issues from gaining momentum. After Independence in 1943, during the Civil War from 1975 to 1990, after the Cedar Revolution in 2005 and again during the war with Israel in 2006, women’s rights issues were pushed aside during all of these conflicts (Freedom House 2010). In 2007 women made up 27% of the workforce in Lebanon (ibid). As of the 2009 elections there are only four women in Parliament. There were previously six in 2005, but two women relinquished their seats in order for their younger sons to run (ibid). Since the Lebanese Parliament’s inception, nearly all women elected to Parliament have a close male relative who was a prominent political leader. The lack of independent women elected to office shows the struggle of women’s equality in representation. In 2008 many women’s rights NGO’s in Lebanon proposed legislation which would have mandated a 30% quota for women in Parliament (ibid). This legislation was unsuccessful, but when I met with Ms. Arslan she said that they are still working towards a quota for women.

A report from the UN stated that one of the main obstacles when it comes to women and the law in Lebanon is that although the law may be written for equality, reality and how the law is

enacted is different from what is written.

## **Part VI: Conclusion**

The future of confessionalism in Lebanon is unwritten. The United States should seize the opportunity to build better relations and cultural understanding between Lebanon and the United States as a way to promote secular democracy in the country. The Lebanese diaspora is already a very powerful political entity outside of Lebanon. Thanks to technology the Lebanese people can remain connected and influential in their homeland, all the while promoting secularization.

The Lebanese diaspora in the United States constitutes the largest population from any Arab state, with roughly 500,000 citizens. As I learned throughout numerous discussions while in Lebanon, the diaspora has a major influence within their homeland of Lebanon. Those who emigrated from Lebanon during and after the Lebanese Civil War are a key source of income for the Lebanese economy, through both direct investments and tourism. Although Lebanon is one of the smallest Arab countries, its influence in the United States is extensive. Many of these individuals of the diaspora occupy positions of influence and maintain close ties with their respective communities. It is in the interest of the United States not to alienate and disillusion its largest collective Arab population.

Among many others, two notable Lebanese-Americans are Philip Habib and Khalil Gibran. Philip Habib born in Brooklyn in 1920 to Lebanese Maronite Christians, Habib was a career diplomat. Habib helped negotiate an end to the Vietnam War and played a direct advisory role during part of the Lebanese Civil War from 1979-1982, specifically negotiating frequently with Israel. Khalil Gibran was born in northern Lebanon in 1883 and as a child he immigrated to



the United States with his family. Gibran is a world famous artist and poet, writing in both Arabic and English. Gibran's most popular book is *The Prophet*.

According to US Census Bureau data, the number of Lebanese immigrants coming into the United States before 1970 was 11.6 million. This was the early wave of immigrants who were primarily Christians leaving Lebanon because of the growing Muslim population. The number of immigrants from 1970-1980 is 23.2 million, double the earlier rates of immigration. The number starts to grow because of the increasing tensions in Lebanon before the start of the Civil War in 1975. The largest period of Lebanese immigrants into the United States was from 1980-1989, during the peak years of the Civil War, when 33.6 million Lebanese people immigrated to the United States.

Lebanon has historically been a playground for internal and external forces, "Current U.S. policy toward Lebanon centers on containing Iran's sphere of influence while maintaining security and stability in the Levant. As regional actors like Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Syria compete for influence in the region, Lebanon has become the staging ground for a proxy war that exacerbates historic sectarian tensions and holds hostage the functions of state institutions" (CRS Report 2). The future for Lebanon looks like they will continue to play host to a number of external influences, with the US most likely becoming more hands on in Lebanon.

In conclusion, this paper has examined the roots of confessionalism in Lebanese history. The history of Lebanon shows how confessionalism will not change overnight. We have examined how confessionalism plays a role in Lebanese politics today. The Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon have been impacted by confessionalism through the services provided to them and their lack of acceptance within the country. Women's rights have often taken a back seat to

issues of confessionalism because of conflicts and partisan debates that emerge. I believe, along with most of the individuals I met with in the country, that the future of Lebanon as a developed country in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is in eliminating or at least diminishing the role of confessionalism.

Lebanon is located in a geopolitical landscape that is essentially one of the most important areas relating to U.S. interest. With Israel to the south and Syria to the north, Lebanon is directly in the middle of a strong U.S. ally and a strong Iran ally. This tactical location means that Lebanon can be a launch pad for both stability and violence. Considering the United States' unique relationship with Israel and its diplomatic ties and obligations to support Israel in military initiatives, it would be favorable if the U.S. instead promoted peace in the region. Historically, Syria has maintained, until 2005 in the Cedar revolution, a stronghold on Lebanon. It is essential that the United States support Lebanon's maintenance of sovereign control over Lebanese territory. Another occupation by Syrian forces in Lebanon could be detrimental to American foreign policy.

Lebanon is also the only democratic state in the Levant, though this democracy may be fragile. With the United States mission to promote global democracy, this is arguably the most important country where American interests can be pursued. It is essential for the United States to maintain democratic tendencies in Lebanon in order to preserve and encourage stability in the region.

As an element of this mission towards a more stable Lebanon, the United States must also keep a close eye on the growth of Hezbollah from an insurgent group to a powerful Iran and Syrian supported political party with a strong base in the region. As the most powerful non-state actor in the world, Hezbollah has the capability to restart hostilities between Lebanon and Israel,

independent of Lebanese government permission or objection. This is the type of scenario that could undo years of diplomatic work. The United States should focus on both strengthening the leadership of the Lebanese Armed Forces and work towards assisting the Lebanese government in the peaceful disarmament of Hezbollah, advocating a move from bullets to ballots in the political discussion.

Hezbollah is a driving force for confessionalism in Lebanon and the United States must tread lightly when acting in Lebanon. The United States should continue diplomatic relations with Lebanon and continue to support the Lebanese diaspora in their active role in Lebanese politics in order to diminish or extinguish the role of confessionalism in Lebanese politics.

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