LEBANON’S “SOCIAL MOSAIC”: THE (RE)MAKING OF IDENTITIES
AND THE IMPACT OF LIBERAL EDUCATION (A PRELIMINARY STUDY)

by Olivia Kay Mote

This paper explores how competing religio-political identities are articulated at the sub-national level and operationalized in the Lebanese public sphere. I consider the question of identity in the context of Lebanese consociationalism, as the absence of a coherent national identity has been interpreted as a primary obstacle to the adoption of a more integrative politics. In an effort to shed light on selected points of conflict between Lebanon’s sects, I offer a focused comparison of Maronite and Shi’i identity programs in historical context before considering the implications of diversity for the nature and function of power-sharing arrangements as well as for the consolidation of the nation. Finally, I discuss the results of a preliminary research project conducted with a sample of Lebanese university students. I am interested here primarily in how a “liberal” university education may or may not impact students’ articulations of religio-political identity and, ultimately, their political decision-making.
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AND THE IMPACT OF LIBERAL EDUCATION (A PRELIMINARY STUDY)

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Introduction

This project is motivated by a question which I consider fundamental to the goals of a university (particularly liberal arts) education: *What is the impact – immediately, but most importantly in the long term – of university education on an individual’s articulation of her/his identity (here, religious, political, and religio-political identities)* and on her/his political decision-making? The present paper represents the first phase of a wider research project which will explore higher education’s impact on students’ political perceptions and involvement and on the ways in which religious and religio-political identities are conceived and operationalized in the public sphere. Although in a coming stage of the project I hope to compare the impacts of American and Lebanese educational models, the focus of this paper – as the foundation of future research – will be on the formation and activation of Lebanese religio-political identities at the sub-national level and in historical context. In considering how sub-national (here, sectarian) identities compete for the right to define the character of the Lebanese state, I hope to describe the context within which Lebanese university students – the next generation of Lebanon’s social and political leaders – are (re)formulating their identities, defining their religious and political commitments, and becoming directly involved in the political process.

Today’s Lebanese university students are coming of age at an arguably unique juncture. After nearly a century of quotated confessional politics (defined below), the balance of power between Lebanon’s most prominent sects continues to shift away from the hegemony of a shrinking Maronite minority and toward a Hizbollah-dominated Shi’i constituency. The

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1 In this paper, religio-political identity is assigned the straightforward definition of an identity which is informed by both religious and political convictions/commitments. More specifically, religio-political identity should be understood here as a form of identification through which individuals and groups operationalize their religious commitments (broadly and variously defined) in the political sphere. In Lebanon, religio-political identity assumes a sectarian character such that co-religionists typically prioritize their distinct sectarian identities in the public space. For example, Sunni and Shi’i religio-political identities are differentiated and imply divergent political programs, despite the fact that Sunnism and Shi’ism are branches (sects) of the same religious tradition. The same is true of Maronite and other Christian sects to an extent, whose historical experiences and, more specifically, access to resources of power, have varied. This is to say nothing of the religio-political identity of the Druze, a sect often considered to be an esoteric, heterodox expression of Islam but defined by insiders in different terms, or of other religious minorities in the state.

2 This label is borrowed from Imad Salamey and Rhys Payne, “Parliamentary Consociationalism in Lebanon: Equal Citizennery vs. Quotated Confessionalism,” *The Journal of Legislative Studies* 14, no. 4 (December 2008), 451.

significance of demographic change in Lebanon is enormous, as it directly calls into question the legitimacy of a fairly rigid political quota system based on outdated statistics. This quota system, variously labeled confessionalism or consociationalism (effectively interchangeable terms in the Lebanese case), is defined here as “institutionalized separatism on a sectarian basis in the parliament, the cabinet, and the administration” – or, to borrow from another theorist, “government by elite cartel designed to turn a democracy with a fragmented political culture into a stable democracy” and comprised of “four main political tenets: a grand coalition, a mutual veto, proportional representation and segmented autonomy.” In the Lebanese case, government representation is awarded according to a modified interpretation of 1932 census data, and because reconfiguring existing proportions would severely undermine an elite with shrinking constituencies but entrenched interests, attempts at another census have been blocked. The current one-to-one ratio for Muslims and Christians in parliament has long been thought to be at odds with Lebanon’s shifting demographic reality.

Despite its statistical shortcomings, the Lebanese consociational model is intended to function as a compromise between the state’s eighteen officially recognized religious sects. However, the practice of confessional politics has effectively guaranteed that Shi'i ascendance is interpreted by the once-dominant Maronites as achieved at their own expense: although Lebanese politics operates according to a fixed quota system, any shift in power which increases

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786.stm (accessed July 2011). For a brief but straightforward discussion of the Maronites’ history and political role in Lebanon, see the BBC article cited here. For an insider account see, for example, “History of the Maronites,” Our Lady of Lebanon Maronite Catholic Church, http://www.mountlebanon.org/historyofmaronites.html.

4 The spelling of Hizbollah varies according to the conventions of transliteration one follows. Throughout the thesis I opt for the spelling typically used by the Carnegie Middle East Center, but I leave alternative spellings included in quotations as they are found in the original documents.


8 Ibid.

9 U.S. Department of State, Background Note: Lebanon.

10 Salamey and Payne, 453. However, the CIA puts the count at only seventeen. See Central Intelligence Agency, Middle East: Lebanon.
the likelihood of eventual reapportionment of government representation is naturally seen to undermine the remnants of hegemony the Maronite community has retained post-Ta’if.\textsuperscript{11} Such a shift in power, even in a presumably zero-sum environment, might not be considered so problematic if Maronite and Shi’i political programs were not seen to directly compete – indeed, conflict – with one another. But given that, on the one hand, much of the Maronite community continues to support the consociational status quo (for reasons which will be discussed below) while, on the other hand, Shi’i Hizbollah in particular has repeatedly called for a transition to secular government, the rise of Hizbollah has been perceived as a threat especially to those Maronites who are convinced that the party’s secularist demands are a cover for their true intentions of imposing an Islamic state on Lebanon once they are in a position to do so (i.e. when government representation comes to accurately reflect Lebanon’s demographic reality).

The special status of Lebanon’s Maronite and Shi’i communities makes them the focus in much of the present analysis: in their explicit contest for power, many of the key themes in the wider debate over Lebanon’s national character – and its future political trajectory – are highlighted. The ways in which the Shi’is and Maronites (particularly the elite of each sect) navigate their differences have broader implications for the future of the Lebanese state, as a community reluctant to relinquish yet more of its power to a group it considers its competitor digs in its heels for the long haul. Simon Haddad argued a decade after Ta’if that if the profound sense of grievance on the part of the Maronites goes unchecked, Lebanese politics could reach a virtual impasse.\textsuperscript{12} Another decade later, the following characterization seems to hold: “Muslim fears concern sociopolitical grievances and complaints, often legitimate ones about political under-representation and economic under-privileges. Christians’ fears, by contrast reach much deeper, even existential proportions, concerning questions of survival, freedom and dignity.”\textsuperscript{13}

For its part, while Hizbollah is now considered by many observers to be the most powerful political player in Lebanon, the prospects for intersectarian cooperation are further

\textsuperscript{11} For a brief discussion of the Ta’if Agreement and its significance, see Chapter One. For a detailed analysis of the Ta’if process published soon after its implementation was scheduled, see Augustus Richard Norton, “Lebanon after Ta’if: Is the Civil War Over?” *Middle East Journal* 45, no. 3 (Summer 1991): 457-73. Note that the agreement was reached in 1989, but was not put into practice until the constitution’s amendment in September 1990. Norton, “Lebanon,” 461.


\textsuperscript{13} H.C. Malik in Haddad, “A Survey,” 473.
complicated by the party’s embroilment in two national conflicts: the alleged involvement of Hizbollah operatives in the 2005 assassination of then-Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and the dispute over whether or not the party has the right to maintain the only armed militia left in Lebanon in the post-civil war era. In the latter case, Hizbollah has been able to justify its armed status in the name of resistance to Israeli incursion, and in the alleged absence of an effective Lebanese military. As a survey of popular media will demonstrate, this argument has not only been accepted by much of the party’s support base, but also by non-Shi’i Lebanese who nonetheless acknowledge the weakness of the state’s military in the face of Israel, and who are aware of the fact that Hizbollah has indeed been the only armed force which has been successful in standing up to its neighbors to the south. But concerns over Hizbollah’s political and ideological commitments have been exacerbated by the party’s refusal to recognize the legitimacy of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, the international body charged with investigating the Hariri murder and bringing its perpetrators to justice. In defiance of the coalition which has rallied behind that effort, Hizbollah’s leader, Hassan Nasrallah, has publicly insisted that the international tribunal represents another instance of imperial meddling in Lebanese domestic affairs and that its findings are therefore illegitimate. It is important to point out that university students are anything but shielded from these ongoing debates, as will be demonstrated in Chapter Three of this paper. Indeed, today’s students not only bear witness to a contest for Lebanon which has arguably intensified in recent years, but they are being drawn into the political process in direct and indirect ways.

14 Hariri’s assassination was followed by popular protests collectively referred to as the Cedar Revolution, which “result[ed] in the historic withdrawal of Syrian troops [from Lebanon] in April 2005.” For a discussion of the Cedar Revolution’s political content and its wider impact, see Vanessa E. Shields, “Political Reform in Lebanon: Has the Cedar Revolution Failed?” The Journal of Legislative Studies 14, no. 4 (December 2008): 474-87.


At an even more fundamental level, the experience of a fifteen-year-long civil war and the persistence of deep, relatively unmediated social divisions in the decades that have followed have succeeded in convincing many more Lebanese of the bankruptcy of the confessional model than were convinced in the decades leading up to the war’s outbreak in 1975. Consociationalism has been understood by academic and lay observers alike to guarantee the ongoing primacy of sectarian identity in the public sphere, of sectarianism as the modus operandi of political life. Indeed, as Paul Salem noted in an analysis broadcast on public television in February, “What we do have is a divided country, unfortunately, among different sectarian communities, Christians, Sunnis, Shia, Druze, who very much feel their political identity is tied to their community rather than to the country in general.”17 Yet many others remain committed to confessionalism as the only practical means of securing peaceful coexistence for Lebanon’s incredibly diverse (and, in many ways, competing) population. It is in this atmosphere of heated contestation over the basic identity of the Lebanese state that university students are (re)formulating their religious convictions and elaborating their political commitments.

The Lebanese case, then, presents analysts a somewhat unique opportunity. On the one hand, the historical trajectory of the Lebanese nation-state mirrors that of its neighbors in the region. Modern Lebanon exists thanks to a redefinition of boundaries by the victors of the First World War, and the experience of French mandatory rule throughout the interwar period unites the Lebanese with their neighbors through a shared colonial legacy (the impact of which remains visible in Lebanon’s political and broader social spheres). In many ways, the Lebanese experience represents somewhat of a microcosm of the wider region.18 On the other hand, Lebanon’s tremendous religious diversity and its consociational system – premised on the supremacy of sect and ostensibly installed to mediate the state’s diversity in a politically functional way – make it distinct. The historical dominance of Lebanon’s Christians, particularly the Maronite sect, also sets the state apart from the Muslim-majority Arab states. Indeed,

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17 PBS NewsHour, “Lebanon Uneasy as Assassination Tribunal Proceeds,” Chapter 4, August 3, 2011 (originally aired February 3, 2011), http://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=42511. Salem goes on to explain that, “in Lebanon, all the communities are afraid. The Christians are afraid of the Muslim communities. The Sunnis are afraid of the Shiite community. The Shiites are afraid of Israel and the U.S. The Druze community is afraid of everybody.”

Lebanon was originally created as a homeland for the Maronites (with whom the French Catholics sympathized), “‘the only Christian Island in this Muslim Sea’”\(^{19}\) of the Arab East.

Lebanon’s experience is therefore instructive for the ways in which it does and does not compare to that of its neighbors. Although the state claims a tiny share of the Middle Eastern landscape, its size belies the significant political impact events there have had – and continue to have – on the region. Lebanon has historically been the site of proxy wars (a characterization Samir Khalaf and others have even offered for the Lebanese civil war, or at least its later stages\(^{20}\)), and developments in Lebanon are closely watched by its neighbors and monitored by the international community. The state’s political role in the region therefore extends far outside its own geographical reach. Beyond Lebanon’s status as an important Middle Eastern site of political (and sometimes military) contestation, the state also serves as an instructive case study for the role of religion in politics in a broader context. Relationships which are implicit elsewhere are made explicit through the practice of confessional politics, while at the same time relatively novel forms of political interaction have emerged through the Lebanese experiment with consociationalism.

It is Lebanon’s fascinating experiment with mediating religious diversity through confessional political channels that has captured the imagination of academics for decades. But in the contemporary environment of arguably deepening social divisions even in what have been considered some of the world’s best-integrated states, thoughtful analysis of the Lebanese case – perhaps now more than ever – contains lessons for an international audience. Lebanese religio-political history speaks to the impact deep and persistent social divisions can have on the body politic. Although it is impossible to answer the “what ifs” of Lebanese socio-political history – particularly, what if consociationalism had been abandoned for an alternative model in the aftermath of the civil war, or even in advance of that conflict? – the decades-long practice of non-integrative politics appears at least to have contributed to (if not indeed directly produced) the tense and ultimately dysfunctional political atmosphere of the contemporary period. A


system which is premised on rigidity cannot (by definition) respond effectively to dynamism, whether that dynamism takes the form of demographic or other varieties of social transformation.

Here then we might learn some profoundly important lessons from Lebanon’s next generation, the university students of today who will become tomorrow’s social and political leaders. We have an opportunity to study the impact of university education on students’ religio-political identities and political decision-making in circumstances which are ripe for creative, innovative forms of engagement. Conventional wisdom holds that a university education – particularly one rooted in the liberal arts model – can succeed in liberalizing students in the traditional sense of the word: students can become “flexible” and can develop “intellectual tolerance… defined as the ability to accept and deal with new and conflicting ideas, tolerate their ambiguity, and be critical of them.”

Thus students begin (or continue) to critique the status quo as they are exposed to new ideas in an atmosphere of true diversity (a degree of diversity many students are encountering at university for the first time in their lives).

As the analysis in the following chapters should demonstrate, it would appear that sufficient stimuli are present in Lebanon’s twenty-first-century religio-political atmosphere to further encourage students to commit themselves to the goal of substantive political change. In the Lebanese case, then, we have an opportunity to explore the impact of education on identity and decision-making when all the conditions are “right,” i.e. conducive to supporting the goals of liberal education in the sense that the embrace of new ideas has become a near-necessity in the eyes of many. The implications of such a study are increasingly relevant for academics who desire to impact their students in ways that contribute to the latter’s development of intellectual tolerance, critical reasoning, and creative engagement in dealing with the socio-political problems of our present and future. As Magdol puts it in her 2003 study of sociology courses’ influence on students’ views, “whether college courses have an impact on student values – an issue critical to teachers, administrators, students, and parents – is important because of a long

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22 The question of shifting authority structures is also pertinent – perhaps even central – to a conversation about education’s potential impact on long-term social change, and I hope to take up the topic in a future phase of this wider project. We have already begun to see an evolution in generational relationships of power and authority in the Arab world (and beyond) in a climate of increasingly open access to information, expansion of channels of communication, technological penetration of the youth population, et cetera. It is conceivable that a qualitative and lasting change in patterns of identity formation and political behavior could result.
tradition of defining a liberal education as one that expands students’ horizons by exposing them to new ideas. If this expansion is in fact a goal, then it is important to assess how well we are accomplishing it.”

In this paper I tackle the initial stages of the wider research project I outlined in the opening paragraphs of this introduction. To better appreciate the circumstances in which today’s university students are immersed (and to which the politically engaged among them must respond), we should first turn our attention to relevant conceptual and practical relationships in historical context. Thus in Chapter One, I explore the nuanced relationship between religion (specifically sect) and politics in Lebanon. The organizing theme of this paper is religio-political identity – the dynamic processes of its construction and reconstruction in a context of sub-national competition (the theme of Chapter Two) and particularly in the university environment (as will be addressed in Chapter Three). But in the first chapter I will focus on what the literature suggests is a fundamental problem of the Lebanese “social mosaic”\textsuperscript{24}: the absence of a coherent national identity which can effectively transcend sectarian cleavages. For Roschanack Shaery-Eisenlohr, “nationalism replaces the sovereignty of God with the exclusive sovereignty of a ‘people’ over a clearly demarcated territory, but religious language, identifications, and imagery often play prominent roles in how the imagined community of the nation is fashioned and delimited.”\textsuperscript{25} In Lebanon, the secular and the pious\textsuperscript{26} are fused through sub-national strategies to define – imagine – the nation, but the project remains incomplete.\textsuperscript{27}

In this atmosphere of great diversity, then, the question of identity is key – particularly because the competition of/between sub-national identities has been interpreted as an (if not the) obstacle to the embrace of a more integrative politics in Lebanon. It is arguably the absence of a

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Halim Barakat, “Social and Political Integration in Lebanon: A Case of Social Mosaic,” \textit{The Middle East Journal} 27, no. 3 (Summer 1973): 301.
\item See Shaery-Eisenlohr, beginning on page 533, for “how pious movements operate and create national identities within the realities of the nation-states era.”
\item It will not be possible to debate here the appropriateness of a national identity model for Lebanon. Suffice it to say that while it has been assumed by many scholars – including academics of Lebanese origin – that an absence of national identity is problematic, a number of other researchers question whether an ideal of the nation patterned on Western historical experiences should even be applied to non-Western states. I bypass this debate in favor of a more selective engagement with the literature because the limitations of a thesis project require some degree of tunnel vision. I believe the great number of scholars arguing from the perspective that national identity is an important but contested category in Lebanon sufficiently justifies my focus.
\end{itemize}
shared sense of national community that raises the stakes of competition at the sub-national level, and this competition in turn further fuels social disintegration via a cycle that has persisted in Lebanon for decades. In Chapter One I will provide historical context for the chapters that follow by first introducing relevant themes from the pre-civil war literature, emphasizing in particular Halim Barakat’s characterization of Lebanon as a “social mosaic.” I will then turn to Kamal Salibi’s work to pose the question of history and its relevance in the contemporary construction of sub-national and national identities. I will also consider the ways in which historical narratives are themselves constructed within webs of power relations, as dynamics of power always inform to some degree the perceptions of Self and Other (the main characters of historical narrative as well as of the identity programs which both precede and follow).

Chapter Two is comprised of a comparative analysis of Maronite and Shi'i identity programs, which are simultaneously sub-national in character yet compete for the right to define the Lebanese national community, particularly the character of the Lebanese state. The focus of this second chapter follows naturally from the first in the sense that competing identity programs are both informed by divergent readings of history and in turn influence how each community interprets and articulates a distinct historical narrative. In introducing the comparative analysis, I emphasize the ways in which both religious and religio-political identities are constructed. Referring to an identity’s constructedness implicitly highlights the dynamic nature of such a label, which is defined and redefined in “conversation” between Self and Other.

I feature the Shi'i and Maronite communities in the comparison to the exclusion of Sunni and other Lebanese communities for reasons which I have outlined above. Additionally, at a superficial level, focusing on only two sub-national cases results in a more straightforward comparison. But at a more substantive level, the Maronites and Shi'is – whose identity programs are premised on competing readings of their shared history – represent Lebanon’s historically (in the case of the Maronites) and contemporarily (in the Shi'is’ case) most powerful communities. Their interpretations of history and the programs of identity those interpretations imply also diverge in ways which are particularly significant for the future of Lebanon. In the dominant narratives of the Shi'i and Maronite communities we have two clearly differentiated visions of the model Lebanese state, and those visions compete to capture the devotion of Lebanon’s educated youth.
I should note that, in comparing Maronite and Shi‘i identity programs, I will necessarily be restricted to painting a broad, over-generalized picture of each narrative, substituting a relatively singular perspective for the incredible diversity of experiences and attitudes within each of these communities. The comparison is intended to serve both as an illustration of how the competition to define Lebanon’s identity plays out in real and profound ways among the Lebanese people, as well as a more detailed context for the preliminary data presented in the following chapter. As I will explain in Chapter Two, I am comparing to emphasize difference over sameness. However, in admitting that my focus is on the ways in which Maronite and Shi‘i identities compete instead of on the points at which they might overlap, I do not intend to discount the significance of similarity or difference. The divergent narratives I highlight have dominated political discourse for much of the post-Ta‘if period and continue to fuel contemporary debates, as will be discussed throughout the rest of the paper. Furthermore, the main points in the debate between Shi‘is and Maronites capture much of the wider mood of Lebanon’s contemporary religio-political environment.

In presenting the Maronite element of the comparison, I will also contemplate whether the ethnic dimension of the Phoenician myth of origins (the narrative I highlight here) might represent a denial of the Arab self on the part of Maronite Christians who are at pains to distinguish themselves from their Arab Muslim compatriots in ways which transcend religious and broader cultural differences. The “problem” of ethnicity is taken up by Philip C. Roeder in his essay on national revolutions in the post-communist world. I will borrow from Roeder’s analysis extensively in the second part of this chapter, focusing on the obstacle demographic diversity poses to the nation’s consolidation as well as on the nature of power-sharing arrangements, of which consociationalism is a quintessential example.

In Chapter Three, I present the findings of a preliminary research project I conducted near the campus of the American University of Beirut (AUB) in March 2011. Two main questions motivated this research. The first is the question of the impact of university education on students’ perceptions and (ultimately) political decision-making, and has been discussed in detail above. The second is derived from an assertion made by Dr. Nafhat Nasr which helped to organize this entire project. In a conversation we had in the summer of 2010 about the discrepancies in the quantitative and qualitative literatures on Lebanon, Professor Nasr explained
that while the Lebanese take great pride in their identity as Lebanese citizens (a fact to which recent survey literature attests\textsuperscript{28}), when pressed on the question of what it means, precisely, to be Lebanese – to be a member of the Lebanese national community – each person will answer differently, and typically in ways which contradict her/his peers, particularly her/his out-group peers, i.e. those Lebanese who belong to different sub-national/sectarian communities. The question, then, is whether indeed the substance of Lebanese national identity has yet to be coherently (let alone universally) defined. Nasr would argue in the affirmative here, as would many other analysts of the Lebanese case. If the adoption of a more integrative politics could help foster the development of a shared sense of identity, it is important to consider how the religio-political commitments of today’s university students might evolve to facilitate substantive change along those lines.

The question we are ultimately presented with is how permanent is the status quo? The confessional model which has defined Lebanese politics for nearly a century was to be phased out according to the stipulations of the Ta’if Agreement in the years following the civil war, yet in many ways consociationalism has become further institutionalized in the post-war years in both theory and practice. Indeed, many find it difficult to envision peace in Lebanon without the continuation of the very quota system they find problematic. Confessionalism has therefore come to represent a sort of “known evil” for many Lebanese. But how will the next generation of Lebanon’s leaders – the future players in government who are currently pursuing a university education at institutions like AUB – respond to the increasingly tense religio-political environment they will inherit? Are the shifts in attitude regarding the confessional system which are noticeable among many students a product of their liberal education?\textsuperscript{29} And if so, will the impact of that education – for many, a liberalizing effect in the basic sense of the word – be permanent? Will it impact the political decision-making of Lebanon’s future leaders in the long term? At its current stage, my own research can only suggest possibilities for the future, it cannot offer definitive answers – first, because of the tiny sample of students I interviewed and, second, because at most I can approximate here the short-term impact of the university environment on students’ perceptions based on students’ own responses to interview questions. I can say little

\textsuperscript{28} See, for example, the 2010 Arab Public Opinion Poll or the Arab-Barometer Survey. 
\textsuperscript{29} Throughout this essay I will continue to use the phrase “liberal education” as defined by Magdol, i.e. to signal the openness to new ideas such an education is intended to foster. See above.
about the future beyond speculation. But by beginning to probe for the answers to the wider questions outlined above, we might at least begin to contemplate the ways in which liberal education can have a formative impact on the dynamic construction and operationalization of identities in the Lebanon to come.

In presenting the research findings in the third chapter of this paper, I suggest some tentative possibilities for where the Lebanon of the future – the Lebanon of my own generation of university-educated students – might be headed. In doing so, I hope not only to demonstrate the wider significance of the project, but also to reconfirm the value of the liberal arts experience in an environment of dwindling funding for traditional liberal arts curricula. The generation of Lebanese students coming of age in my own time has lived through numerous armed conflicts and continues to reside in the shadow of the civil war’s legacy. It is possible that a shift in attitudes among some of the AUB students featured in Chapter Three is nothing more than the temporary effect of living in an intensely diverse, cosmopolitan environment, a result of intellectual stimulation which will in all likelihood end upon students’ completion of their degrees. But it is also possible that among the university student population there are those who have become (and are becoming) truly committed to a different vision of the future, whose experiences in the liberal arts environment of AUB have been meaningful in ways which transcend questions of grade point average and job placement.
CHAPTER ONE

A nearly infinite amount of ink has been spilled in the analysis of the Lebanese case, and for good reason: the Republic of Lebanon, once referred to as “the Arab world’s symbol of toleration and compromise” (before the relatively unexpected onset of the fifteen-year civil war in 1975),\(^\text{30}\) boasts of arguably the most democratic tradition in the Middle East. Its specific religio-political configuration – variously termed confessionalism or consociational democracy\(^\text{31}\) – is unique in the region and beyond. Roughly the size of the U.S. state of Connecticut\(^\text{32}\) but manifesting remarkable diversity, the territory serves as home to a complex demographic comprised of a variety of Muslim and Christian sects which exist together in what one observer has labeled a “social mosaic”\(^\text{33}\) – a mosaic which is arguably the legacy of Mount Lebanon’s historic role as a refuge for religious minorities in the region.\(^\text{34}\) In providing the context for Chapters Two and Three, I will consider the implications of the social mosaic characterization, highlighting themes of the pre-war literature before considering what has been labeled an even more fundamental weakness of Lebanese political society, the absence of a national identity which can capture the allegiance of each of Lebanon’s sects.

**Pre-War Perspectives on Lebanese Confessionalism**

The modern state of Lebanon was born in the interwar period, when the French – given authority by a League of Nations mandate – carved the territory out of “Greater Syria” as a “homeland”\(^\text{35}\) for the Maronite Christian community. The Maronites enjoyed a position of political hegemony at the helm of the fledgling state despite the presence of sizable “minorities” and, in fact, the Maronites’ own absolute minority status. Although the Republic of Lebanon achieved formal independence from the French in 1941\(^\text{36}\) (the Lebanese date their achievement

\(^{30}\) Cleveland and Bunton, 373.
\(^{31}\) Refer to the Introduction for a definition of the Lebanese political model.
\(^{32}\) Barakat, 301.
\(^{33}\) Ibid.
\(^{34}\) See Khashan and Salibi, to take but two examples of authors who cite this widely held view.
\(^{35}\) If the language here is reminiscent of another “homeland,” it is no coincidence: a parallel was drawn by a number of Maronites between the plans for a Christian Lebanon and the modern state of Israel as a homeland for the Jews. See Asher Kaufman, “Phoenicianism: The Formation of an Identity in Lebanon in 1920,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 37, no. 1 (January 2001).
\(^{36}\) Cleveland and Bunton, 230. Lebanon in fact had to struggle for independence from the French for some time after 1941, but its independence was “formally recognized” in that year.
of substantive independence to 1943\textsuperscript{37}), the legacy of the French mandate continued to color Lebanese socio-political life, not least through the consociational spirit of the constitution drafted in 1926 under French tutelage\textsuperscript{38} and reconfirmed in the National Pact of 1943. Ussama Makdisi, writing in the mid-1990s, characterized the National Pact as follows: “itself a result of elite compromises, [it] essentially legitimated a system of patronage and a division of spoils among the elites of the new nation-state, thus betraying the inability to locate a genuinely national base.”\textsuperscript{39}

In Makdisi’s estimation – writing with the advantage of a retrospective lens – the primary question of Lebanese consociationalism was “how to integrate the masses into the new nation without opening the realm of back-room politics.”\textsuperscript{40} Yet in the early years of the Republic the Lebanese (on the whole\textsuperscript{41}) enjoyed relative peace and prosperity. However, in 1975 “the sectarian cooperation that had characterized Lebanon since independence collapsed in a wave of communal violence, and the state that had been the Arab world’s symbol of toleration and compromise was plunged into a bloody civil war that lasted for fifteen years.”\textsuperscript{42} Was this “collapse” totally unforeseen, or were there early warning signs of the coming breakdown? Astute observers writing in the pre-war\textsuperscript{43} period emphasized two primary themes: first, Lebanon’s lack of social integration\textsuperscript{44} and, second, the tenuousness of a stability premised on a very delicate internal balance of power. In reference to the former point, Barakat applied the phrase “social mosaic” over and against the label of pluralism,\textsuperscript{45} arguing that the fundamental

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{40}Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{41}Although the calm of the early decades after Lebanon’s independence have often been portrayed as evidence of consociationalism’s initial success, the period was not without conflict and, as will be discussed in Chapter Two, not all of Lebanon’s sects enjoyed equal access to the prosperity of those post-independence years.
\item \textsuperscript{42}Cleveland and Bunton, 373.
\item \textsuperscript{43}To be clear, “pre-war” will refer in this paper to the period preceding the Lebanese civil war.
\item \textsuperscript{44}Barakat, 301.
\item \textsuperscript{45}In Barakat’s essay, “‘pluralistic’ and ‘mosaic’ are considered two forms of heterogeneous societies. Pluralism… refers to harmonious relationships of several interest, religious, and/or ethnic groups within a unified social order. In a pluralistic society, there is consensus on fundamental principles and provisions are made for a fairly balanced participation of the several groups of which it is composed and, thus, for fairly balanced distributions of rewards and powers. A society is pluralistic inasmuch as it allows for the participation of all groups so that no one group, or an alliance of a few of them, can possess monopoly of rewards nor dominate others and dictate to them what they should do” (emphasis added), 301-2. For a definition of a mosaic society, see below.
\end{itemize}
absence of social integration in Lebanese society negated the possibility of Lebanon being truly pluralistic. In addressing the latter position – Lebanon’s fragile internal balance of power which could be considered analogous to the balance of power between states in the international system – Hudson pointed to the inherent instability of the Lebanese state, which in the period under consideration allegedly functioned more as an instrument for achieving particularistic goals than as a true compromise. It is clear then that at least some academic observers had serious questions about the long-term stability of the confessional system years before the war began, and despite what were perceived as its relative merits.

However, while Hudson points to confessional Lebanon’s “regularity of institutionalized instability” – which he attributes to the power-sharing arrangement brokered between the state’s most powerful sects – he also argues that, contrary to the assertions of many in the West, democracy is not the byproduct of prior stability but instead, in the case of Lebanon, is itself the primary “guarantor of stability” in the state’s internal balance of power. According to the author, democratic values were prioritized by Lebanese political leaders, who recognized that – in an environment of immense diversity and competing perceptions of nationhood and national identity – their interests were best served by working through democratic channels. While Barakat emphasized the correlation between confessionalism and the direct undermining of an integrative national politics, and therefore of the pluralistic society which that author understood to be a basic requirement for healthy democratic government (see below), Hudson – writing in a 1966 essay on Lebanese electoral politics – did not find a strong negative correlation between the practice of confessional politics and the degree of electoral competitiveness. In fact, in tracing electoral participation from Lebanon’s independence to the mid-1960s, Hudson found rates of participation to be on the rise. He also noticed a shift toward greater diversity in the demographics of electoral participation. This is significant because Hudson takes high levels of political competitiveness to be an indicator of the effective democratic functioning of the state. Although Hudson’s enthusiasm was qualified, he concluded that political

46 Ibid.
48 Ibid, 252.
49 I will return to the question of the nature of power-sharing arrangements in Chapter Two.
50 Barakat, 309.
52 Ibid, 185.
competitiveness had become “institutionalized” by the time of publication and that “this in turn supports the basic argument that the electoral mechanism has facilitated the operation of the balance of power in Lebanese politics. It suggests that the mechanism has succeeded remarkably well in maintaining an equilibrium of local forces in all parts of the state.”

Indeed, Lebanon’s special status as a “symbol of toleration and compromise” has been credited by a number of authors to its confessional political makeup, and the perceived ability of that consociational model to provide the framework within which workable political solutions to the state’s vast diversity could be negotiated. Saba Habachy argued in a 1964 essay that the uniqueness of the Lebanese case could best be understood via an analysis of the Lebanese constitution, which was composed with French assistance under the mandate in the mid-1920s (as was mentioned above) and the basic premises of which were refined but reinforced by the unwritten National Pact of 1943. Habachy pointed to two unique features of the constitution (including its post-1926 amendments): the predominance of French influences, both direct and indirect, and the “delicate balance among various Lebanese religious denominations and ethnic groups” which that constitution promoted. The language of a “delicate balance” is reminiscent of Hudson’s characterization of several years later. Habachy explains that while political representation was premised on sectarian affiliation in Lebanon, each individual member of the Chamber of Deputies – the state’s 99-seat legislature – was ideally understood to be representative of and responsive to the needs of the entire nation. Although Habachy did not go so far as to hold up Lebanon as an example for the region, he did offer a relatively positive assessment of the Lebanese model, even given its flaws. He offered the following evaluation in closing his essay: “With all its shortcomings and complications, the Lebanese Constitution has proved more durable than all the short-lived successive constitutions which have been tried and found wanting in other countries of the Middle East… it has served Lebanon well over a period of more than thirty-five years.” He goes on to assert that the constitution’s durability “is a

53 Ibid.
56 The question of sect versus ethnicity will be explored in some detail in the following chapter.
57 Habachy, 599.
58 Ibid, 601.
59 Ibid, 604.
tribute to the political wisdom of the people of Lebanon whose frequently heated arguments and disputes are more than redeemed by their deep attachment to the cause of freedom.”

Yet, despite his overall optimism, Habachy describes the role of religion in the Lebanese political system as “unfortunate” and “divisive.” According to the author, “it is a political miracle that such a complicated and outmoded system of government could work.” Hudson, then, was not alone in his ambivalence when he wrote five years after Habachy’s essay was published. In the critiques of Habachy and Hudson the conflict of the mid-1970s is foreshadowed, and the seeds of what would later be perceived as consociationalism’s “bankruptcy” are evident. Although Habachy praised Lebanon’s political culture and the devotion of the Lebanese people above all to freedom, he also succeeded in highlighting a number of internal weaknesses which, nearly fifty years later, remain fundamental sources of debate.

Barakat, in his own 1973 essay (published just two years prior to the start of the war), was considerably less optimistic than Habachy. The former emphasized Lebanon’s “mosaic” character, providing the following definition: “A mosaic society… is defined here as composed of several groups whose relationships are regulated by provisions making for the introduction of some system of checks and balances among these groups without, however, being accompanied by a consensus on fundamental issues facing these groups” (emphasis added). This same lack of national consensus was implied by Hudson’s balance of power argument, which understood Lebanese politicians to work together not necessarily in the pursuit of goals held in common, but because cooperation was the most effective means by which particularistic goals could be served. The absence of a national consensus – in other words, of the foundations of a national identity – will be considered in the second part of this chapter.

Barakat claimed that “the dominant cleavage in the Lebanese society is religious rather than tribal, regional, ethnic, or even economic” – although I would add that a number of such cleavages overlap, as will be demonstrated in Chapter Two. One of Barakat’s central assertions was that “non-separation of religion from the state and legitimization of confessionalism” were

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60 Ibid.
61 Ibid, 601.
62 Ibid, 602.
63 Cleveland and Bunton.
64 Barakat, 302.
65 Ibid.
primary contributing factors to Lebanon’s status as social mosaic versus pluralistic society.66 The author understood this fact to be to Lebanon’s detriment, arguing that the confessional model was largely to blame for a lack of national unity or political stability in the republic.

The themes highlighted in this sample of pre-war literature seem to suggest what might have been expected: observers of Lebanese consociationalism came to different conclusions about its long-term viability based on how they evaluated the merits of a balance of power system versus the implications of the absence of an integrative political approach which might promote national unity over sect-focused particularism. But one point seemed to be settled: the confessional model institutionalized – prioritized – sectarian divisions within Lebanese political society. The degree to which this was seen as problematic depended in part on how any given author may or may not have seen the scales tipped. For some observers, the balance of power arrangement provided for by confessionalism safeguarded the interests of sectarian communities with sometimes competing interests, loyalties, and conceptions of group (national) identity. Consociationalism could be seen as a sort of lowest common denominator, as the most viable (if fragmented) level of cooperation possible within an immensely diverse population. In this view, democracy functions precisely because the state apparatus is itself weak and no one group, regardless of its size, can completely dominate (“capture”) the system at the expense of all others.67 Sectarian identity is understood here to be one among a number of criteria for political leadership, but not necessarily as an obstacle to democracy.68 Yet for others, the balance of power represented an impediment to integrated politics as well as to the type of pluralism which functional democracy was seen to require.

The basic difference between the authors surveyed above seems, then, to hinge on their evaluations of the effectiveness of such a consociational arrangement in mediating the competing claims of a multi-sectarian society in the long term. Yet the critiques offered in each essay foreshadow the coming conflict, even when an author seems fairly convinced of confessionalism’s ability to render stable the political system. That there would inevitably be an eventual breakdown is not directly prophesied by any of the authors considered here; however, important sources of the system’s instability were recognized by confessionalism’s detractors and neutral observers (if not supporters) alike. The pre-war literature therefore offers useful

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66 Ibid, 304.
68 Ibid, 252.
commentary on the state of political affairs prior to 1975, and provokes questions about the
nature of a political model designed to mediate competing interests in a multi-sectarian society
without necessarily seeking to integrate those agendas into a coherent national program. I will
return to the question of the nature of consociationalism (and of power-sharing arrangements
more generally) in Chapter Two, but first I would like to explore the theme of identity more
directly.

National versus Sub-National Identities in the Lebanese State

The 1989 Ta'if Agreement – which marked the close of fifteen years of war in Lebanon (a
conflict connected to regional disputes but fought on religious grounds between the state’s
Christians and Muslims) – ostensibly provided for the deconfessionalization of Lebanon in favor
of a more integrative political model. But in reality Ta'if effectively reinforced confessionalism,
not least by re-legitimizing sectarian politics through adjusting the Christian/Muslim ratio in
government instead of abolishing it.\footnote{For an analysis of the Ta'if Agreement’s incomplete implementation, see Michael C. Hudson, “Trying Again: Power-Sharing in Post-Civil War Lebanon,” International Negotiation 2, no. 1 (1997).}
The fallout from Ta'if has been significant, as will be discussed below, as the Maronites in particular perceived themselves to have been
disenfranchised by the political shake-up accomplished through reapportionment of government
offices. The deep sense of grievance which resulted has been discussed in an earlier section. But
beyond the question of practical politics, it appears the agreement also did little “to knock down
the psychological barriers which divide Lebanese from one another”\footnote{Norton, “Lebanon,” 457.} – arguably because the
mode through which the Lebanese relate to one another socially and politically was not
fundamentally altered.

In the decades since Ta'if many Lebanese have rallied around the call for
deconfessionalization, but each community is motivated by somewhat different goals and, in
fact, many of Lebanon’s political elites in particular continue to be served by the consociational
model of government and have a vested interest in its survival. If voting patterns are any
indication, the Lebanese more generally are ambivalent about confessionalism: as a number of
students remarked during our interviews, many in Lebanon still continue to vote for their own
sect’s elites and for those with whom their leaders have built coalitions, to the exclusion of
outsiders and regardless of whether or not these elected officials actually serve them in tangible
or material ways. Perhaps this is because few see any other option: even after Ta'if, “electoral and personal status laws were regulated by religious affiliation such that to be Lebanese meant to be defined according to religious affiliation. There could be no Lebanese citizen who was not at the same time a member of a particular religious community”\(^1\) (emphasis added) – and, by and large, it remains the case that all politics flows through religious (specifically sectarian) channels.

It is within this context that today’s Lebanese interpret their shared history and formulate/maintain competing claims to Lebanese identity and to the character of the Lebanese state. In exploring the ways in which divided societies – here, the Lebanese – come to terms with their diversity in the pursuit of consolidating the nation, it is clear that an underlying theme is the problem of identity – the construction, maintenance, and articulation of identity in the socio-political sphere. More specifically, the Lebanese context raises the question of how a national identity can be formulated in an environment of competing sub-national identities which are both confessional in nature and involve direct political implications often in conflict with those of other confessions. While it would be difficult, if not impossible, to argue that a “pure,” universally accepted national identity exists among the citizens of any modern state, the absence of a coherent national identity has been seen as particularly problematic in Lebanon; indeed, for many it is the central obstacle to the adoption of an integrative (and therefore more functional) politics.

While much of the pre- and post-civil war literature speaks eloquently on the question of identity, of particular interest in this second section will be Salibi’s evaluation of the root causes of the Lebanese population’s failure to transform itself into a truly national community. The text discussed here was first published near the close of the civil war period, but will serve both as a reflection of what became (or had already become) a dominant mode for academic analyses of Lebanon and as a more focused effort at explaining the source of Lebanon’s perceived problems. Salibi points to the fact of competing conceptions of Lebanese national history as an as yet insurmountable obstacle to national unification across sectarian lines, thereby seeking to explain how defining Lebanese history has been to a significant extent the preserve of the Maronite

\(^1\) Makdisi, 25.
The focus on competing histories serves as a tangible marker of competing identities, and therefore grounds our discussion in the concrete experiences of the Lebanese, who by Salibi’s description have effectively waged a cold war over the right to define membership in the national community. The focus on history (specifically, the construction of historical narratives) also facilitates the application of elements of Anderson’s theoretical framework regarding the development of nationalism. Although Anderson has been criticized by area specialists for his relative inattention to certain parts of the globe, his language of the “imagined community” remains useful in a discussion of religio-political identity. But first I will tackle the question of identity’s basic definition.

Given the focus of this material on how individual sects have sought to take part in the active (re)imagining of the national community, if often according to conflicting “rules,” I will shift back to an analysis of the Lebanese as a national body. In the process, I hope to summarize the foundations for understanding quantitative research addressing the Lebanese case. The assertions of the quantitative research have evolved over the last decade and a half such that more recent data calls into question the assumptions of the qualitative literature discussed above. However, as I will argue in the following section, such contradictions are restricted to more of a superficial level than what we might at first be led to believe. Thus, after engaging some of the exemplary quantitative studies, I hope to explain – again, through an analysis of the literature and of more informal commentary on the Lebanese “predicament” – how what appear to be contradictions on the surface might in fact accord well with earlier observations. More specifically, I will argue the possibility that, while it appears the Lebanese identify as Lebanese before they identify with their sect or with their wider religious community, the substantive content of a Lebanese national identity has yet to be defined, and is in fact directly informed by religious/sectarian convictions.73

Although I included Lijphart’s description of confessional politics in the Introduction, I will concentrate here on the definition offered by Hudson: “Confessionalism is institutionalized

73 As was indicated in the Introduction to this paper, I am indebted to Nafhat Nasr for elaborating on this observation.
separatism on a sectarian basis in the parliament, the cabinet, and the administration”74 (emphasis added) – and, by extension, in the wider population. According to Hudson’s characterization, confessionalism by definition presents an obstacle to truly national engagement, to the collective act of defining national identity. In the confessional contest for power, as well as in the ongoing sectarianization of politics, it appears that existing sectarian commitments are reinforced. If access to power is restricted through the channels of a confessional elite, the average Lebanese is encouraged to think in sectarian terms even in reference to her/his engagement with the nation. Although full sociopolitical integration is little more than an imagined possibility (as was admitted above), it remains a fact that heterogeneity does not in itself require the persistence of frequent cycles of physical violence (although the question of psychological violence, especially in “dealing with” minority populations in a heterogeneous society, is its own problem that will not be dealt with here). How might individuals (often unwittingly) participate in perpetuating a flawed politics through the mediating factor of religious identity?

As Telhami and Barnett remark, the attention to identity as a centrally important category in Middle Eastern politics has waxed and waned over the last several decades, often in response to competing theoretical approaches within the wider practice of political science which have variously sought to emphasize the systemic features of politics or the nation-specific features of political behavior. And this is to say little of the “fate” of religion in such analyses, which has at times been equated to an expression of any given other form of power or, conversely, has been afforded the exaggerated responsibility of explaining virtually every nuance of Middle Eastern political trajectories.

In the introduction to their edited volume on identity and foreign policy in the region, the authors grapple with the problem of defining identity as a conceptual category. The following excerpt from their discussion is particularly relevant:

Although many definitions of identity exist, most begin with the understanding of oneself in relationship to others. Identities, in short, are not only personal or psychological, but are also social, profoundly influenced by the actor’s interaction with and relationship to others. Through interacting and participating in an institutional context, the actor ascribes to an identity. Similarly, national and state

74 Hudson, “Democracy.”
identities are formed in relationship to other nations and states; those corporate identities are tied to residents’ relationships to those outside the boundaries of the community and the territory, respectively. State identity can be understood as the corporate and officially demarcated identity linked to the state apparatus; national identity can be defined as a group of people who aspire to or have a historical homeland, share a common myth and historical memories, have legal rights or duties for all members, and have markers to distinguish themselves from others. In this view, the nation and the state are analytically distinct...  

I excerpt the passage above, despite its length, because of how succinctly it addresses a number of themes essential to a conversation about religio-political identity in Lebanon. The authors manage to define identity on a basic level without detracting from its multidimensionality. In reference to the institutional context mentioned by the authors, it is important to highlight the layers of institutional frameworks in Lebanon, some of which compete for the loyalty of Lebanese as citizens of the state but also of religious (or religio-political) communities. Sect, not a hypothetically neutral citizenship, allegedly functions as the channel through which demands are expressed and mediated on the political stage.

Particularly illuminating is the distinction drawn by the authors between state and national forms of identification. Although often treated as interchangeable categories, Telhami and Barnett highlight what defines the two as analytically separate. As we will see later, there appears to be a disconnect between the act of taking pride in one’s Lebanese nationality and the ability to communicate a generally agreed upon understanding of what being Lebanese entails. Is there a breakdown between state and national identifications in Lebanon, where one marker of identity has been consolidated despite the relative weakness of the other? I will return to this thread in Telhami and Barnett’s text later in the paper. For now it will suffice to reiterate that religious, particularly sectarian, identities are in competition with state and/or national identities in Lebanon. We would also do well to note the reference of the authors to a shared sense of national territory as homeland, as well as references to myth and memory, as these themes will reappear in subsequent discussion.

According to Salibi, the basic character of the Lebanese state has long been a point of contention among Lebanon’s communities. For example, the assertion of the Christian,

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75 Shibley Telhami and Michael Barnett (Ed.), Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002).
particularly Maronite, community has been that “the Lebanese Republic under the National Pact [of 1943] was actually a secular state.” The author portrays the Lebanese Christians as historically engaged in a battle to preserve Lebanon’s unique status in the Middle East as a state in which Islam was/is not the law of the land. However, Salibi maintains that there were not only competing “bids” to enforce varying secularisms, all within the context of a non-secular politics (at least in terms of how the academic literature tends to define secularism, which is admittedly a contested category), but that most of these elite efforts were motivated purely by politics and were insincere at best.

More generally, Salibi highlights competing efforts to define Lebanese national history on the part of Lebanon’s major sects. The author argues that Lebanese political history was a “preserve” of the Christian (Maronite) and Druze communities, while social, developmental, and cultural history was shared between all of Lebanon’s communities. According to Salibi, the reality of conflicting histories was reflected in school textbooks. On a basic level, the educational institution serves to establish the contours of how citizenship will be interpreted and experienced in the future. The school can instill a sense of social solidarity and offer definition to membership in the national community; consequently, a “schizophrenic” approach to history is manifested in the experience of citizenship and the understanding of national identity. More than twenty years after Salibi wrote, the Lebanese state still does not sanction a primary- or secondary-school history textbook, or recognize an official history more generally. In her 2007 monograph entitled, “Lebanese Historical Memory and the Perceptions of National Identity through School Textbooks,” Mary C. Wilson argues that “how a nation remembers the history of its identity also shapes its future. National identity in Lebanon remains a contentious issue across many spheres of society and its citizens often hold competing memories of ‘what we were.’”

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76 Salibi, 197.
77 Ibid.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid.
80 Ibid.
81 Ibid, 216.
Salibi referred in the late 1980s to the act of constructing a national history as an “effort of imagination,” arguing that the problem of Lebanon’s competing histories is that not a single version is sufficiently convincing to a majority of the population; indeed, in his estimation each history has been intimately tied to the sect of the elites which produced it.\(^3\) I would argue that the competition to define Lebanon is a manifestation of the gulf between sects but that, on the other hand, the failure to agree on the content of a shared national history serves to perpetuate existing religio-political divisions, such that each trend goes hand-in-hand with its counterpart. Salibi points to debate over history as representative of the weak foundations for a shared Lebanese identity.\(^4\) In his view, historical fictions are a “luxury” of homogenous or socially and politically unified states, and Lebanon is not one of those “lucky” states with such an experience of social homogeneity.\(^5\) In light of Anderson’s own argument about the emergence of nationalism, we might argue that Lebanon cannot afford to develop historical myths – or to perpetuate them – unless they can equally “flatter” (in Salibi’s words) all communities with a political stake in the country.

The imagination of a shared history and of the nation (the latter of which, at a fundamental level, “signifies a cultural and political bond, uniting in a single political community all who share a historic culture and homeland”\(^6\)) must therefore begin by engaging with the actual historical foundations of modern Lebanon: the imagination of a national identity must be rooted in what is true and what is truly common in the Lebanese heritage if that identity is to have salience. For Salibi, “Lebanon today [in 1988] is a political society condemned to know and understand the real facts of its history if it seeks to survive.”\(^7\) Additionally, “the question of religion is central to the rethinking of Lebanese history” and, of course, of Lebanese identity.\(^8\) It appears little has changed since Salibi published those words, at least in some sectors of socio-political life. In this context, we might look at the investigation into Hariri’s 2005 assassination as both an opportunity to uncover a truth of Lebanon’s shared history and as an illustration of how divided the Lebanese community remains on issues of enormous political

\(^3\) Salibi, 206.  
\(^4\) Ibid, 216.  
\(^5\) Ibid, 216-217.  
\(^6\) Anthony Smith in Telhami and Barnett, 9.  
\(^7\) Salibi, 217.  
\(^8\) Ibid, 223.
importance. The necessity of the tribunal’s investigation and the divisions it has exacerbated were variously testified to by the students I interviewed at AUB.

We might also consider the degree to which outsiders – particularly academics – have actively played a part in both the perpetuation of sect-specific historical myths and in the rediscovery of common (if differentiated) threads in the broader Lebanese narrative. There is a permeable barrier between the world of academia and the world which it (sometimes distantly) addresses, and while the work of specialists is seldom widely circulated, many of the dominant themes of the literature have been offered true definition by the Lebanese academics who themselves bridge the gap between two worlds. Additionally, and for good reason, many of the questions posed by the literature are presumably the same questions with which the Lebanese population is itself grappling. Much of the university student population of Beirut is politically aware and attuned to the implications of contemporary debates in Lebanese society. An AUB student with whom I often conversed during my stay on campus during the summer of 2010 – a student who in her relatively short lifetime has already lived through six armed conflicts by her own count – was cynically aware of the fact that Lebanon’s sects are actively in competition with one another, proposing goals for the future while at the same time contesting the stated intentions of competing elites.

The Quantitative and Qualitative Literatures in Dialogue

It is interesting to note, however, that as late as the 2010 Arab Public Opinion Poll, and despite whatever expectations we might have about the impact of conflict during the formative years of the younger generation, age appears to have little impact on measures of national pride, the prioritization of the national over the religious/sectarian, et cetera. But what else does the Poll suggest about today’s Lebanese? Although the Lebanese civil war – which quickly devolved into what Khalaf has called “uncivil” violence\(^89\) – was resolved two decades ago, the qualitative literature demonstrates that sectarian divisions persist in Lebanon. These divisions become even easier to conceptualize if one looks at a map of modern Lebanon, which is essentially “color-coded” by sect.\(^90\) (It is interesting to note, in confirming the reality of sect-based social


\(^{90}\) See, for example, Salamey and Payne, 454.
segregation, that a number of students I interviewed at AUB referred to their home regions as of “one color” compared to the diversity of the campus environment.) Sect is said to have served as the primary marker of identity for the Lebanese since the post-World War One and independence periods, and arguably from the earlier Ottoman period. But does the Arab Public Opinion Poll corroborate these claims?

In fact, qualitative and quantitative research had supported the assumptions discussed above even a decade after the civil war was drawn to a close; however, an interesting trend has emerged in patterns of identification in Lebanon, as is evidenced by more recent quantitative studies. The 2006-2007 Arab-Barometer, a survey of sociopolitical attitudes drawing on a sample of Algerian, Moroccan, Jordanian, Kuwaiti, Lebanese, Palestinian, and Yemeni citizens, finds that the Lebanese manifest high levels of national pride (seen here as a marker of national identification), and that this pattern holds across sectarian lines.

More importantly, in response to the question, “Which of the following best describes you? 1) Above all I am a [nationality of country name]; 2) Above all I am a Muslim; 3) Above all I am an Arab; 4) Above all I am a Christian; 5) Other,” the Lebanese sample population overwhelmingly identified as members of their national community, not primarily as members of a religious (or ethnic) community. This trend held across sectarian lines: 82.72 percent of Christians, 68.48 percent of Sunnis, 88.49 percent of Shi’is, and 88.75 percent of Druze selected their nationality as the primary marker of their identity. Notably, while 16.28 percent of Christians marked their religious identity as primary and 22.18 percent of Sunnis did the same, only 5.56 percent of Shi’is responded similarly. Compare the results for Lebanon to those of the overall sample population (representing the total of seven countries): while 81.52 percent of Christians (most of whom were from the Lebanese sample) identified first with their nationality, only 25.88 percent of non-Lebanese Muslims did the same; instead, 68.10 percent of non-Lebanese Muslims prioritized their Muslim identity. 

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91 Salibi.  
92 See “Arab-Barometer: Public Opinion Survey Conducted in Algeria, Morocco, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Palestine, and Yemen, 2006-2007” (ICPSR #26581) for the survey instrument used in this study as well as a description of the study and the raw dataset.
The more recent Arab Public Opinion Poll – for which Telhami served as principal investigator – released in 2010 by the Brookings Institution\(^9\) illustrates similar patterns as are evidenced in the results of the Arab-Barometer. Again, comparing results from the Lebanese population to the wider sample is instructive. In response to the question, “When your government makes decisions, do you think it should base its decisions mostly on what is best for Muslims, what is best for your country, what is best for Arabs, [or] what is best for the world?” the wider sample responded at a rate of 39 percent to “what is best for Muslims” and 31 percent selected “what is best for your country.” Compare these results to Lebanese figures, which are only five percent for Muslims and 60 percent for Lebanon. Although the Muslim population is proportionally smaller in Lebanon than in the other countries surveyed (Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates), this difference cannot entirely account for the statistical distance between Lebanese and overall responses.

Results for the following question are even more directly relevant to our discussion: “Which of the following is your most important identity? Muslim, citizen of your country, Arab, [or] citizen of the world?” The wider survey population selected Muslim at a rate of 39 percent and citizen at a rate of 32 percent, while the Lebanese population responded at a rate of only eight percent to the first marker and at a rate of 55 percent to the second. Based on these results, it would appear that the Lebanese prioritize their national identity at a rate which is not only above the overall average, but which is second only to Jordan’s response rate of 58 percent. If Lebanon is such a deeply divided society, particularly along religion/sectarian lines, why do the Lebanese simultaneously manifest such high levels of identification with at least their state citizenship, if not the national community?

The distinction made in the final sentence of the preceding paragraph is perhaps the most important: here we are led back to the line Telhami and Barnett draw between state and national identities. Despite the sophistication of modern survey instruments, the two surveys mentioned (which arguably represent the best of their kind) fail to capture not only the substantive difference between state and national identifications, but also the substantive content of either.

\(^9\) A full PDF version of the 2010 Arab Public Opinion Poll report can be downloaded at the following URL: http://www.brookings.edu/reports/2010/0805_arab_opinion_poll_telhami.aspx.
So, in light of Telhami and Barnett’s differentiation between state and national identities, what might we infer from recent survey results? Here it is important to keep in mind that recent polling results contradict the findings of some earlier quantitative studies, which found that religious or sectarian identity remained primary among respondents. Worth mentioning by way of example is Hofman and Shahin’s 1983 piece, which “questioned whether group identification of Arabs in Israel and Lebanon tend[ed] to follow the more traditional pattern of religiously based communal entities or whether national loyalties ha[d] superseded the traditional pattern.”

The researchers found that communal identification – at least among high school students in Lebanon and Israel – was still stronger than national identification. Additionally, positive evaluations of the in-group appeared to come at the expense of out-group assessments, which remained relatively negative. Although there is the obvious fact that Hofman and Shahin’s study does not exclusively focus on the Lebanese case, as well as the problem of sample population (restricted to a particular age category), the use of the phrase “traditional pattern” points to the more general trend in the literature of viewing religious identity as both primary and as a primary obstacle to the development and consolidation of the national community. Many assign the label (sometimes almost an accusation) of “primordialism” to the tendency to identify with one’s religion or sect, presumably at the expense of one’s nation. But we are still left with the question of why the contemporary survey results conflict with earlier studies, as well as with the more important question of why recent results seem to contradict the general thrust of the qualitative literature.

In trying to “settle” the conflict between the quantitative and qualitative literatures, we should return to Nasr’s assertion that Lebanese national (as opposed to state) identity is an ill-defined, perhaps even empty category. This observation goes far in explaining why the results of recent studies appear to offer a contradictory message of national pride amid persistent religio-political divisions. Here again, Salibi’s observations might be useful in pointing to at least one fundamental difference in the perceptions (imaginings, in Anderson’s language) of the Lebanese national body. In Nasr’s estimation, until the Lebanese system is made to work to the satisfaction of its many communities, until the stability of the system is achieved, the eruption of new cycles

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95 Ibid.
of conflict is possible at any time. Nasr argued that if a formally institutionalized democracy is established which can resist outside pressure, Lebanon can evolve beyond the consociational model, transforming into “a polity rather than a society of different nations coming together in parallel for consociationalism.” The implication here is that Lebanon presently lacks an integrative politics which can succeed in bridging the interests of competing communities in the struggle for long-term stability (as has already been discussed).

It is worthwhile to note that, contrary to observers who treat Lebanon’s model as relatively unique in the international system, Nasr points to the underlying logic of sectarianism, referring to its practice as “a Middle Eastern, even global, disease” – at the very least, a disease of the developing world. But pointing specifically to the Lebanese Shi'i experience of political marginalization (at least in the official realm), Nasr insists that individuals will never develop loyalty to a system in which they feel they have no stake. Unless each of Lebanon’s sects is convinced that it has a fair share in the political system, members of these sects will never feel they have a stake in that system. In these observations we find the seeds of an explanation for why Hizbollah, for example, has been so successful in maintaining the support of the Lebanese Shi'i population, even when the political or military actions of Hizbollah have run counter to the preferences of important segments of its support base. For the consociational model to function effectively – even setting aside the goal of developing a truly national community – inter-sectarian cooperation is required on a deeper level than has already been achieved.

According to Telhami and Barnett’s categories, then, is it a state-focused identity which is given evidence by recent quantitative studies, or is it a national identity which the Lebanese manifest? Perhaps at a basic level there is a degree of identification with the state. What remains for the Lebanese, it seems, is to define the substantive cultural, but especially (religio-)political content of a Lebanese identity. Whether or not such an identity is presently being consolidated by the university population in Beirut is a question for the third chapter of this thesis.

96 Nafhat Nasr, conversation with author, Beirut, Lebanon, August 7, 2010.
CHAPTER TWO

This chapter treats Shi'i and Maronite identity programs in comparison to one another within the context of the foregoing conversation regarding history and identity. The Lebanese religio-political context offers a particularly compelling opportunity for comparisons at the sub-national level, and the key questions of this chapter are of a comparative nature: on what basis are the programs of confessional identity of the Maronite and Shi'i communities variously formulated, how do these articulations of communal identity translate into programs of Lebanese national identity, and in what ways do these two distinct programs come into conflict in the contest to define national belonging in Lebanon? I will proceed with an explanation of how the culturalist approach to the study of comparative politics will be employed in this chapter, and how Roeder’s specific focus on the problem of ethnicity fits into the wider culturalist analysis of Lebanese sub-national competition. I will then set Roeder aside temporarily to present the specifics of the comparison, and will return to Roeder before concluding the chapter by exploring the political implications of the comparisons – comparisons in the plural because, while I first consider the identity programs of the Shi'is and Maronites, I follow with a “secondary-level” comparison of Roeder’s conclusions from his analysis of post-communism to the Lebanese case. Ultimately I hope to demonstrate that, through a comparative analysis framed by the culturalist lens, we can better understand (if not explain, as understanding is the goal of the culturalist\textsuperscript{97}) the competing Maronite and Shi'i programs for defining Lebanese (national) identity in a twenty-first-century context of persistent religio-political divisions. We can thereby highlight points of overlap as well as divergence in these programs, recognizing possibilities for conflict as well as cooperation among Lebanon’s sects.\textsuperscript{98}

\textit{Method: Comparative Analysis of Religio-Political Culture and Ethnic Difference}

In an effort to better comprehend the ways in which competing identity programs compromise the possibilities for increased democratization and stability in the Lebanese state,


\textsuperscript{98} As noted above, I will focus on difference in the comparison. The question of similarity will be addressed only implicitly.
Maronite and Shi’i conceptions of shared history and identity will be compared. The comparative approach to the study of both religion and politics offers us analytical focus whereby we can come to appreciate not only the competing programs of religio-political and national identities among the Lebanese, but also the implications of such programs, which are quite significant in the complex and shifting social and institutional contexts of the Lebanese state. But within the broader framework of comparativism, it is the culturalist approach to scholarly inquiry which guides this chapter. The culturalist lens offers uniquely instructive insights into the particular questions with which this essay is concerned, as will be elaborated below.

Culturalism has been widely employed in the social sciences and humanities, including in the discipline of religious studies. I rely on the definition of culturalism as enumerated in Mark Irving Lichbach and Alan S. Zuckerman’s edited volume on comparative political theory because the authors featured there provide a clear outline of the culturalist’s methodological approach. However, the themes which are central to culturalism in comparative politics are generally the same as those of a culturalist approach to scholarship in religious studies. Here, the methods of humanities and social science scholars neatly overlap.

As Lichbach indicates in his own essay on the role of “Social Theory in Comparative Politics,” “the choice of a preconception or framework for ordering the chaos inherent in reality and hence for guiding empirical study is the fundamental analytical question.”99 Not only is the importance of theory highlighted here, but we are pressed to consider how the act of selecting a given analytical lens – which presupposes that we have not selected others – both presents opportunities for discovery and limits our ability to draw general conclusions. Opting for the culturalist approach in the comparison that follows (to the relative exclusion of other approaches) results in an emphasis on a particular set of themes which, while basic to the Lebanese case, are nevertheless not the only themes of interest in the Lebanese context. The sub-national focus of my comparison of identities has guided my selection of method. The culturalist approach is particularly well suited to the Maronite/Shi’i comparison because its focus is on precisely the theme which is central to the contest between these two communities: identity, which is constructed through an interpretation of history.

99 Lichbach, 244.
Lichbach offers James C. Scott’s work on a village in Malaysia as an illustration of culturalists’ interest in “the creation of identities and communities.”100 Indeed, throughout his chapter Lichbach emphasizes time and again that the core issue for culturalists is identity, a central point taken up in Ross’s essay on “Culture and Identity in Comparative Political Analysis,” another chapter in the same volume as Lichbach’s piece. According to Lichbach, “culturalists are methodological holists who think of norms as intersubjective or transindividual: The members of a group or community have common, mutual, or shared ideas, orientations, or ways of looking at the world. These values are found in all of society’s institutions – political, religious, economic, and social – and in society as a whole.”101 It should be noted here that Clifford Geertz offers a precedent for defining “religion as a cultural system”; for the purposes of this analysis, then, we are justified in treating religion as a category under the wider umbrella of culture. For Geertz, the ultimate goal of the scholar should be to “render accessible” the cultures of others.102 Geertz was interested not in determining the “ontological status” of cultural exchanges, but instead in explicating what “is getting said” in these exchanges.103 Lichbach himself goes on to explain that culture effectively “makes” statements about how the world is in fact, but also “involves common understandings about the way the world should be”104 (emphasis added). Thus culture represents a set of values which are collectively constructed, but which are internalized and “act” back on their adherents. Culture’s “common cognitions and conscience are constitutive of community. Hence, Scott… refers to the ‘moral logic of tradition’ in which custom, ritual, and norms define a community’s meaningful roles or expectations.”105

Here we might pause to consider the ways in which Lichbach’s outline of the culturalist approach bears directly on the Lebanese case. First, a clarification: Lichbach refers often to society in his essay, which could easily be taken to imply that we are addressing our cases at a national level. But, as Lichbach’s citation of Scott’s village-level analysis suggests, “society” as a label can apply to different levels of community, encompassing the national but also innumerable forms of the sub-national. The latter – or, more appropriately, the relationship of the latter to the former – is what is of interest in my own comparison. Each of Lebanon’s confessions

100 Lichbach, 242.
101 Lichbach, 246.
103 Ibid, 10.
104 Lichbach, 246.
105 Ibid.
represents to some degree a distinct community – or society – within a wider Lebanese “social mosaic”\textsuperscript{106} which is understood to lack meaningful integration at the level of the nation-state but which manifests a sectarianism variously understood as both functional and dysfunctional.\textsuperscript{107}

Indeed, if we are to take the vast literature on Lebanon seriously, sectarianism informs the operations of government at every level, but is perhaps the most significant obstacle which continues to complicate, even block, efforts at increased democratization and national integration. Each sect claims a relatively distinct culture – or, to avoid confusion, sub-culture – and an associated identity, and (setting aside the question of which emerges first, culture or identity) these sub-cultures and identities mutually reinforce one another such that distinct communities, each with their own set of social expectations which both resemble those of other sects but are also distinct from them, exist in the same national space.

That, by most accounts, each Lebanese confession, or at least each major sect, claims its own, relatively distinct, culture within the context of a wider Lebanese culture is an observation which is far from earth-shattering. Even well-integrated societies like those arguably found in the United States or parts of Western Europe still manifest perhaps countless cultural systems at the sub-national level. However, in Lebanon, the existence of entrenched sub-national cultural systems, in their seeming competition for dominance, is read explicitly as an obstacle to the consolidation of truly democratic government (or of any effective government), and of political stability more generally (as was discussed in Chapter One). In the context of institutionalized sectarianism – defined at the national level by a delicate power-sharing arrangement but trickling down to virtually all levels of the bureaucracy – most forms of political activity have the effect of reinforcing sectarian divisions instead of transcending them.

Thus Lichbach’s introduction to the method of the culturalist sheds some light on the problems facing Lebanon, as well as on the precise nature of the contest between Maronites and Shi’is which I explore in the comparative analysis that follows. While at a sub-national – i.e. confessional – level, “ideas, orientations… [and] ways of looking at the world” are shared, at the national level these cultural systems and their associated political programs often come into conflict with one another. Because of the nature of the institutional context within which Lebanese political elites operate, there is incentive to form coalitions with other religio-political

\textsuperscript{106} Barakat, 301.
\textsuperscript{107} Paradoxically, the functional elements often contribute to the overall dysfunction of the system.
parties, but that incentive is limited insofar as the goal appears to be the maintenance of power, not the transcendence of sectarian boundaries to the extent that confessionalism might be replaced by an alternative model. A significant amount of lip service is paid to the ideal of deconfessionalization in Lebanon, but by most accounts little progress has been made on that score, and while the Lebanese take great pride in their culture and nationality, when pressed on what it means to be Lebanese, answers beyond a superficial level tend to vary by confession. While the Lebanese understand themselves to share a culture – comprised of a common language, appreciation of a remarkable geography (including archaeological sites testifying to the territory’s civilizational achievements), and pride in the felt superiority of the Lebanese in terms of education, political freedom, openness and arguably even intersectarian cooperation – in fact each of these points (specifically language and history) is contested.

Importantly, while (national) cultural heritage is contested in Lebanon, Lichbach insists that culture is the foundation of individual and social identities, that “the self is really a ‘communal self’ developed in interactions with others,” and that “culture is… both outside and inside individuals: external, in that it is materially real and transmitted from the past; internal, in that individuals are socialized into it.”108 This brief passage is rich in its implications for Lebanon. First, the “communal self” of which Lichbach speaks, which in Lebanon is the sub-national, sectarian self, takes precedence – according to the literature – over the national self. Second, Lichbach’s classification of culture as both external and internal suggests that, despite its material reality, culture is ultimately the production of the collective imagination and activity of the community, a community which is composed of individuals who exercise their agency in various ways and in relationship to one another in particular institutional and social contexts. These individuals, by their direct and indirect participation in their given cultural systems, actively work to (re)produce culture, even as their given cultural systems “act” on them in ways that structure and limit their options for action. The phrase “transmitted from the past” is particularly important here as well: the past – or, more accurately, the interpretation or reimagining of the past – factors powerfully and directly into the formulation of competing identities in Lebanon, as will be discussed in the comparison of Maronite and Shi’i identity programs.

108 Lichbach, 247.
To return to a theme mentioned above, Lichbach cites Scott in asserting that culture is contested. While Scott’s focus is on class conflict, we might substitute “confessional/sectarian conflict” for class conflict in the following passage: “Class conflict thus turns out to be ‘a struggle over the appropriation of symbols, a struggle over how the past and present shall be understood and labeled, a struggle to identify causes and assess blame, a contentious effort to give partisan meaning to local history.’” The contest to define Lebanese identity and, more broadly, to clarify the identity/character of the Lebanese nation, is precisely a question of symbols’ appropriation – what, exactly, does the label “Lebanese” signify?; of the past and its relationship to the present – what is the history of Lebanon, and how does its heritage connect or disconnect it to the West or to the Arab East?; who is to blame for an ineffectual government – is the problem particular factions which are unwilling to cooperate, or is the real issue the institutional configuration of confessionalism itself?; and of defining local history or, more appropriately, histories, in partisan terms – to whom does a particular geographical space and its history belong? The construction and articulation of competing identities involves addressing each of these questions in what often turn out to be sect-specific ways.

The emphasis on the interpretive frame is essential here, as the different ways in which meanings are constructed out of elements of a shared – but differently understood – history involve countless acts of interpretation at the individual and communal levels. Given the challenge of analyzing the Lebanese case and its competing sub-national trends, it is important to remember that, for the culturalist, “understanding rather than explanation is… the goal.” While the culturalist approach might not explain every “why” of the Lebanese case, it offers a window into how history is interpreted by Lebanon’s competing factions, and how the articulation of a Lebanese national identity is dependent on those interpretations, or systems of meaning.

Before proceeding to a brief introduction of Roeder’s essay on ethnicity and the nation as it will be applied to the Lebanese case, it is important to clarify what will be the methodological goal of the Maronite/Shi’a comparison that follows. While I do not necessarily subscribe to this maxim in all contexts, this paper will take seriously Lichbach’s characterization of the

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109 Ibid.  
110 Lichbach, 250.  
111 Ibid, 251.
culturalist’s ultimate goal: “Comparativists should compare to establish sharp differences” (emphasis added). The focus here will be on difference rather than sameness, and on how that difference ultimately translates into the wider sphere of a politics infused with religion. I emphasize difference precisely because difference is what defines the religio-political divisions of a disintegrated Lebanese “social mosaic.” However, the overlap between student opinions will be highlighted in Chapter Three alongside a discussion of difference, as I attempt to demonstrate the possibilities for future cooperation for the next generation.

The final methodological dimension of this chapter focuses the question of culture (identity) on a particular sub-theme, that of ethnicity. Religion/sect and ethnicity overlap in the case of the Maronites for reasons that will be discussed below. Roeder, in an essay on post-communist democratic transitions entitled, “Peoples and States after 1989: The Political Costs of Incomplete National Revolutions,” explores the role of ethnicity and the nation in the consolidation of democracy. He argues that “the postcommunist experience reminds us that successful democratic transitions are improbable when national revolutions are incomplete.” He goes on to assert that “the theories reflecting on the first and second waves of democratization… often treated national integration as a necessary prior condition… The first state that successfully democratized had to resolve three problems – unify the people, establish stable political authority, and expand political participation to the population at large.” Accordingly, “the political ingredients of the modern nation-state are more effectively assembled one by one than all at once, and… political participation and equality should be the last, crowning achievement in the total process.” Essentially, the idea here is that “national integration must precede democratization.” I will consider below not only the ways in which one might understand the Lebanese state to lack this necessary national integration, but also how Roeder’s critique of power-sharing arrangements which effectively institutionalize the role of ethnicity in politics might apply to the Lebanese case, which Roeder himself cites in his discussion of power-sharing. Although Roeder sees ethnic diversity as the almost intractable obstacle to democratic consolidation, Lebanese sectarian diversity is a parallel to ethnicity in this analysis not only in terms of rough equivalence of effects, but also because religion and ethnicity

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112 Ibid, 254.
114 Ibid.
115 Ibid.
are directly linked in Maronite constructions of identity. Thus, confessional identity comes to be defined in *ethnic* terms through a particular interpretation of history and cultural heritage. Here again is demonstrated the centrality of the “culture question,” which is critical in Lebanese politics. But before proceeding to a comparison of the Lebanese case with the conclusions Roeder draws from his own case set, I will present the direct Maronite/Shi’i comparison, considering the ways in which *interpretations* (the culturalist’s currency) of history undergird the formulation and articulation of competing identities in the Lebanese state.

*The Contest for Lebanon: Maronite and Shi‘i Identities in Comparative Focus*

The historical narratives put forward by the Maronites and the Shi‘is of Lebanon not only conceive of their communities’ histories in distinct ways, but also (as we might expect) interpret the long string of Muslim-Christian interactions somewhat (and sometimes drastically) differently. For the Maronites, Lebanon represents a homeland tucked into the wider region, the Arab East: again, “we are the only Christian Island in this Muslim Sea.” Through the propagation of the Phoenician myth of origins (which will be outlined below), Lebanon’s Maronites have come to identify themselves not only as a religious community set apart from their Muslim (and, more generally, non-Maronite) peers, but with a distinctly non-Arab heritage.

Although the Phoenicians were an ancient people about which documentary and archaeological evidence has told us relatively little, the Phoenician myth of origins is anything but ancient. In fact, the development of Phoenicianism as an alternative cultural-historical narrative for the Maronites of Lebanon began in the late nineteenth century, and within a particular sociopolitical context. Despite the relative lack of evidence to support a historical – specifically, an *ethnic* – link between the ancient peoples of Phoenicia and the Maronite sect of today’s Lebanon, the Phoenicianist narrative found voice among authors, politicians and

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117 Note that the categories of author/scholar and politician have frequently overlapped. See below for an example.
118 Writing in 1990, Khashan provided the following example: “The Lebanese Front – the major Maronite political grouping [of the period] – regards Lebanon as part of the international, humanistic civilization; any attempt to change this reality will be dealt with forcefully. Lebanon, the Front advocates, is an inseparable part of Western civilization with its heavy emphasis on freedom of expression and individual liberties. [Michel] Chiha and [Charles] Corm consider the Lebanese part of the Mediterranean civilization. ‘Like Phoenicia, Lebanon is part of the world of classical Mediterranean civilization and can only live by immersion in it. But this vision is suffused with a Maronite romanticism; Lebanon is not only the heir of Phoenicia, it is the child of the Church, the only Christian country in Asia’ (Hourani 1962, 319).” See Khashan, “The Political,” 727. In his book, *Reviving Phoenicia: In Search of Identity in Lebanon*, Asher Kaufman refers to Corm, Chiha, and Sa'id 'Aql as among “a few Lebanese who stood out
laypeople alike, and remains salient into the contemporary period. This narrative is voiced in contrast to the evolving Shi'i narrative, which understands the respective roles of the Maronites and Shi'is in Lebanon differently (although it is useful here to point out that many non-Maronites today acknowledge the Maronite identification with the Phoenicians without necessarily passing judgment on the veracity of that claim). Below, I will attempt to outline the competing Maronite and Shi'i interpretations of Lebanese history and their concomitant programs for confessional and Lebanese identities.

In his recent essay, “Phoenicianism: The Formation of an Identity in Lebanon in 1920,” Asher Kaufman outlines the development of the Phoenicianist narrative of history. According to Kaufman, many Maronites, who dominated Lebanese politics from independence up to arguably the post-Ta'if period, have historically seen themselves as linked with Western civilization, and the Phoenicianist narrative serves the purpose of reinforcing this connection by asserting that it was the Phoenicians – to whom the Maronites are alleged heirs – who effectively founded Western civilization, influencing the Greeks and Romans through trade and associated cultural exchange. The French (particularly the French Catholics, who, as was indicated above, sympathized with the Maronites, their “Christian brothers in the Arab East”) played a vital role in contributing to the Phoenician myth of origins – for example, through excavations at archaeological sites – but it is essential that we recognize the ways in which Lebanese Maronites have themselves developed the contours of this narrative and have insisted on its foundational

more than others in their support of the Phoenician view of the past,” as “three of the Phoenician ‘preachers’… who shaped, to a large extent, the Phoenician narratives and, indeed, the Lebanese national identity(ies).”

119 For an insider account of the connection between the ancient Phoenicians and Lebanon’s Maronite sect, see Samir George Khalaf, “Phoenicia.org,” Phoenician International Research Center, http://phoenicia.org (accessed July 2011), specifically http://phoenicia.org/maronites.html. The site even features a poll asking visitors, “Phoenicians Today: Who are Phoenicians?” Voting options include “Lebanese,” “Some Lebanese,” “Lebs. & Neighbors,” Mediterranean, or “Others.” According to the “view results” link, 41 percent of voters (2403 people) consider the Lebanese to be today’s Phoenicians (http://htmlgear.tripod.com/poll/control.poll?u=shalim7&i=4&a=vote). See also “Maronite Phoenician Heritage,” Maronite History Project, http://www.maronitehistory.org/Maronite_Phoenician_Heritage (accessed July 2011). The site’s author refers to the Phoenicians as “the early Lebanese” and, in describing the connection between the Maronites and the ancient Phoenicians/Canaanites, argues the following: “The Maronite migrants who fled to the mountains of Lebanon did so for various reasons the most prominent of which was to escape persecution from Islamic rule. It is uncertain what percentage of Maronites migrated to Lebanon from northern Syria. But those that did must have included a substantial number of Canaanite/Phoenician origin. Some historians have asserted that the Maronites are Arab Christian tribes who migrated from Arabia either directly to the mountains of Lebanon or to Syria and later to Lebanon. These historians seek to deny any Maronite association with Phoenician ancestry” (emphases added).

120 Cultural but also ethnic heirs. See below.

quality in the imagination of their own distinct identity as the Lebanese heirs to the origins of Western civilization. The Phoenician myth of origins is not, as Kaufman is careful to remind us, a French importation, but is a possession of the Lebanese Maronites themselves, who have elaborated on this narrative in their desire to be seen as specially set apart, but also partially in response to a sense of concern, perhaps even fear, over the perceived designs of the Arab Muslims of Lebanon (particularly of the Shi'is in their connection to the Islamic Republic of Iran), as was suggested in Chapter One.

On one level, we might understand the effort to connect to such a cultural heritage as typical of other projects of historical imagining. Indeed, the parallel of Pharaonism, cited by Kaufman, demonstrates that those Lebanese who were living in Egypt while they contributed to the elaboration of Phoenicianism in the 1920s were very likely influenced by Egyptian efforts to establish their own connections to an ancient people who shared the same geographical space. However, the “adoption” of a Phoenician heritage, which involved/s the abdication of an Arab heritage, is also wrapped up in Maronites’ efforts to distinguish themselves from their Arab Muslim compatriots. The ethnic dimension of this project of identity formation – which Kaufman says was encouraged by developments in the Maronite church but was also elaborated in secular language (but by Maronite intellectuals) – is essential, especially in light of Roeder’s claims about the problem of ethnic diversity. Diversity here is redefined in Lebanon by the Maronite Phoenicianist narrative, such that religious and sectarian difference is translated into difference at an arguably even more basic level.

Of particular concern here are the implications of the adoption of the Phoenician myth of origins, as it could be argued that its propagation represents an outright denial of Arab identity and, therefore, an outright denial of an ethnic connection to non-Maronite Lebanese, particularly Lebanon’s Muslims. Through the elaboration of the Phoenician myth of origins the East/West dichotomy reasserts itself, but via the articulations of a community considered by much of the rest of the world to “belong” to the East. Many Lebanese Maronites employ the Phoenicianist narrative as a means of directly connecting themselves (but, crucially, not their Arab Muslim counterparts) to the foundations of Western civilization, excluding a connection with “The East” as traditionally defined. It might be argued that the assertion of the Phoenician myth of origins
represents a form of (self-inflicted?) epistemic violence,\textsuperscript{122} in that the Western “mode” is prioritized at the expense of Eastern, here Arab, ways of being and knowing. The myth effectively others the Arab self and whatever cultural-historical narrative might reasonably be connected to that self, particularly by Western outsiders whose opinions of the Arab East are informed by incomplete, if not outright biased, perceptions.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has encouraged readers to consider how the colonized come to absorb and internalize the discourse of the colonizer, to the point that markers of identity selectively highlighted by the colonizer become rallying points and, at a basic level, fundamental markers of identity for the colonized. From one analytical perspective, the Lebanese Maronite response to French and broader Western perceptions of the Arab/Eastern Other has been to grant the “colonizer” his critique, thereby ceding some degree of psychological and existential territory, and to instead differentiate the Maronite community as set apart from that Arab Other, thereby othering the Arab self in the name of prioritizing an identification with Western civilizational heritage. Perhaps in this sense the “subaltern” has adopted the language of the discourse (the colonizer’s discourse), therefore remaining within the discourse but “just” inverting it. Arab ways of knowing and experiencing are understood by outsiders as distinctly Muslim. The Maronite Christian here bows to that classification to some extent, does not fight the epistemic violence committed by the West against the Arab East, but instead devalues those cultural and linguistic practices which are connected to Arabness/Arab ways of being.

The Phoenician myth of origins in effect attempts to bypass a problem of which Spivak speaks: while for Spivak’s subaltern who is engaged in a virtually futile struggle to be heard the best-case scenario is that one might speak the discourse of the colonizer in one’s own voice, it could be argued that the Lebanese Maronite who subscribes to the Phoenician origins myth effectively denies her/his Arabness and therefore her/his subaltern position altogether, subscribing instead to a Western-centric civilizational narrative. It is within the liminal space at the borders of Other and Self that the self can become other. In this section I have explored a specific manifestation of the self-as-other “complex,” the construction of the Arab self-as-other by Lebanese Maronites. As a result of the decline in their historical hegemony, many Maronites have become increasingly concerned that the levers of the state will be captured by the Muslim

population, specifically the growing Shi'i contingent. Although Lebanon is considered an Arab country with only a five-percent non-Arab minority (composed mainly of Armenians, i.e. non-Maronites), much of the sizeable Maronite Christian population in Lebanon resists the Arab cultural/ethnic label. Given the profound identity crisis which the Lebanese have allegedly continued to face through the civil war and well into the post-war years (more than two decades), distinctly sectarian projects of identity construction which run counter to those of competing sects in Lebanon are important trends which speak to the possibilities of future reconciliation and/or conflict.

It is important to make clear here that the veracity of Maronite claims to a Phoenician heritage is not my primary concern, as the ethnic dimension of the myth and the ways in which religion contributes to the construction of such an identity are my main interests in this chapter. The term “myth” as it is used in religious studies scholarship is value-neutral and represents the rough equivalent of a story, but a story that has important implications for a community’s identity and/or speaks to that community’s history. Again, the factual dimension of that myth is not typically the question of interest; instead, scholars seek to explore how myths become “true” for a given community through lived experience. However, it is worthwhile to note that Salibi appears to demand honesty as a baseline requirement for the Lebanese moving forward. Although there have been efforts in recent years to draw an explicit ethnic connection between the ancient Phoenicians and the Maronites (and, interestingly enough, the Lebanese more generally), notably through genetic research, thus far it appears that Phoenicianism represents somewhat of an imagined sect-specific identity and is therefore an example of precisely the kind of “luxurious” elaboration which Salibi labels an obstacle to national unification.

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123 Central Intelligence Agency.
But the question of truth aside, what is of interest is the socio- and politico-historical context surrounding the moment of the Phoenician myth’s emergence as a salient point in the project of identity construction, of the foundation of an identity which, like all identities, is constructed through a process of collective imagination – imagination of history, of cultural connectedness, of peoplehood. Imagination for Anderson (or, in the language of culturalism, *interpretation*) of a shared history is central to the project of identity formation, but Phoenicianism is a narrative of distinct, not shared, history (in terms of its intentional disconnect from the wider population).

The *circumstances* in which it became important for the Maronite community to assert its distinctiveness were – and are – defined by a particular understanding of Lebanon’s historical trajectory, particularly the history of a Christian minority in a region dominated by Arabs and the religion of Islam. The emergence of the Phoenician myth as salient is a modern development and is tied to a number of factors, not the least of which appears (based on the literature) to be feelings of resentment and *fear* directed toward the Arab Muslim community as a result not only of a sense of historical grievance (related to the usurpation of political power), but also the experience of threat as Maronite political power continues to tangibly decline (especially post-Ta’if). Thus, the role of history is not circumscribed to a basic knowledge acquired through primary-school textbooks; instead, history continues to inform the efforts of the Maronites – and every other sect in Lebanon – to establish themselves not only as distinct, but also as *representative of what it means to be Lebanese* on a national scale. For many Maronites, Lebanon is a preserve of a Christian minority in the Arab East, heir to the foundations of Western civilization and intimately connected to contemporary Western civilization (versus Eastern or Arab history and civilization). These basic points suggest the continued circumstances under which such a distinct identity is perpetuated, and the *political implications* for Lebanon of such a narrative of distinctiveness that simultaneously prioritizes the felt needs of the sub-national community above those of the nation, but also purports to be *the* narrative of Lebanese identity above all others.

The experiences of the Maronite and Shi‘i communities of Lebanon are in some ways inversions of one another: while the Maronites historically enjoyed political hegemony and have only in the last two decades seen their power markedly decline such that the definition of the Lebanese state according to the Maronite line is seen to be in jeopardy, the *Shi‘is* of Lebanon had
relatively limited access to the levers of power until only recently, when the rise of Hizbollah and its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, has resulted in increased government representation as well as enormous regional and international attention.

The Shi'i population of Lebanon – which is presumed by now to represent the most populous community in the state – had not only been marginalized in Lebanese politics, but has been somewhat neglected by the academic literature, according to scholar Max Weiss. Weiss, in his 2010 study of Lebanon’s Shi‘is, sought to paint a more detailed picture of how sectarianism – as an operative mode of political discourse and action – developed according to its own logic within the Lebanese Shi‘i community, responding not only to dominant trends from within the Lebanese political system, but also to patterns more specific to the Shi‘i community. Weiss’s efforts simultaneously demonstrate the scholarly endeavor to color in details of an overlooked past and the relative shortage of such material even in more recent years, when popular and scholarly attention has sometimes focused on Hizbollah and its leaders (particularly Nasrallah, but also Sayyid M.H. Fadlallah, who did not officially associate himself with the party but nevertheless was seen as the spiritual father of its ideology) sometimes to the exclusion of the wider Shi‘i community or of alternative readings of Shi‘i identity/politics.

While Shi‘i history is assuredly not defined by Hizbollah alone, Weiss’s text in combination with references to Nasrallah – seen here as a representative of the wider Shi‘i community for the sake of convenience and space – will serve as the source of data on Lebanon’s Shi‘is, just as the Phoenician myth of origins and its proponents are seen to represent the Maronite community to the relative exclusion of other trends within the community. It is useful here to compare these narratives not only because of their stark differences, but also because of the powerful figures who have served as their representatives while simultaneously performing key roles in government. The narrative highlighted by Weiss and voiced contemporarily by Nasrallah represents, just like the Phoenician myth of origins, a powerful, if not singular, force in the Lebanese socio-political sphere.

Although Weiss focuses specifically on the question of “how… the Lebanese Shi‘a… [became] sectarian,” his text nevertheless illuminates important components of Lebanese Shi‘i

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identity as well as details of how the Shi’is understand their place in Lebanese history and within the wider region. As a result of historical experience, or at least an interpretation of that experience, many Lebanese Shi’is see themselves as victims of political aggression on all sides: from Maronites and others in their own country who would seek to disenfranchise them (including, more recently, the Sunni Muslims of Lebanon, with whom the Shi’is had previously enjoyed a cordial relationship128) and from the Israeli Defense Forces and, more generally, the Israeli government, which have levied severe retaliation on the predominantly Shi’i south of Lebanon (particularly on much-needed infrastructure) in response to what is seen on the other side of the border as Hizbollah’s provocations. (This is to say nothing of international “interference” in Lebanese affairs, which also adds to a sense of misunderstanding, manipulation, even victimization on the part of the Shi’i community.) Although most Palestinians are Sunni Muslims, not Shi’is, there seems to be a powerful identification of the Shi’is of Lebanon with a dispossessed Palestinian population, perhaps in part because of a shared sense of persecution, but also (perhaps more importantly) because it is the Shi’is of Lebanon who have suffered most at the hands of Israel’s military incursions linked to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict and Hizbollah’s role in allegedly defending the Palestinians’ rights.129 As Augustus Richard Norton explains, “the history of Lebanon and Israel has been entangled in violence since the late 1960s, when Palestinian guerrillas became a major presence in southern Lebanon. After Israel’s ‘Litani Operation’ was launched in 1978 to create a buffer zone from Palestinian attacks and terrorism, Israel became an effective occupation power.”130

But perhaps the issue of overriding importance to the articulation of Shi’i identity in Lebanon is the community’s sense of undue marginalization (which was mentioned above) and its desire to ensure that its share of political power matches its demographic position in the state.

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128 One of the recent debates dividing the Lebanese Muslim community centers on the Special Tribunal for Lebanon. For example, in reference to the issuing of indictments of Hizzbollah operatives for Hariri’s murder, Paul Salem explains that “this is not a complete game changer, but it does heighten tensions between the Shia and Sunni communities in Lebanon.” See Salem, “Lebanon After the Indictments: The Arab World’s Next Crisis?” (July 2, 2011), http://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=44915&lang=en (accessed August 3, 2011).

129 Interestingly, “for the past two decades or more, the rituals [of Ashura] explicitly cast Israel in the role of Caliph Yazid, the ‘Ummayad ruler whose authority was challenged by the Imam Hussein and whose army exterminated Hussein and his followers over 1,300 years ago. Indeed, the villains of Karbala, such as the much despised Shemr who decapitated the slain hero so that his head could be carried in tribute to Yazid in Damascus, are recollected in contemporary performance in order to allude to the Israeli army.” Norton, “Ritual,” 141.

130 Ibid, 141-2. Norton succinctly addresses the evolution of the Shi’i/Palestinian relationship in the same paper.
Although Nasrallah himself does not necessarily articulate this in the language of victimization, he nevertheless asserts that the role of the Shi'is in Lebanon should receive greater attention.

Long a point of contention between the Shi'i and Maronite communities is the degree to which Shi'i identity is defined by their connection not to the Lebanese state, but to regional powers such as Syria and Iran and, ultimately, to their religious sect, which is understood to asp principio to a particular religio-political configuration which is not seen as amenable to Christian designs for Lebanon. Here, the issue is whether or not the Shi'is intend to institute an Islamic government in Lebanon if ever they are afforded the opportunity. Indeed, a powerful connection to the Islamic Republic of Iran exists,\footnote{Norton differentiates between the Shi'i political party Amal, which is “align[ed] politically with Syria,” and “the Iranian-inspired Hezballah, which emerged following Israel’s 1982 invasion, [and] proudly concedes its fealty to the supreme authority, the ‘leader’ of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.” He continues, “Hezballah is increasingly the dominant Shiite organization, as signified by the shift in the orientation of many middle-class professionals who were an important support base for Amal but who have long tired of Amal’s patronage politics and corruption and now lend their support to Hezballah.” See Norton, “Ritual,” 142. In fact, political concerns over deep-rooted Shi'i connections to Iran date back to at least the early twentieth century: “The Ottoman rulers viewed the Shiites as dubious Muslims who were serving as a cat’s-paw for Persia, the Ottoman rival.” Norton, “Ritual,” 148.} and material support for Hizbollah – much of which is funneled to the Shi'i people through the wide social safety net that has been cast by Hizbollah and encompasses programs for education, social welfare, healthcare, and more – comes into Lebanon from Iran.

The fear on the part of Maronites (and other Christians), and in fact some Sunnis in Lebanon, has been that the Lebanese Shi'is will attempt to emulate Iran by forcibly installing an Islamic republic the moment they are able to assume a sufficient share of control over the Lebanese state. These fears have been used by some to justify the maintenance of the status quo, i.e. the confessional system as it currently exists despite its many and admitted flaws. Here confessionalism is seen as a means of protection, particularly protection of Lebanon’s Christians from Islamicization of the state. If Nasrallah’s more recent public statements are to be believed, there is not necessarily reason to believe the Shi‘i community of Lebanon would transform the state into an Islamic republic; however, perhaps especially because of the provision in Shi’ism that its adherents are permitted to hide their true intentions if openness would result in persecution, these fears persist. The connection of Lebanon’s Shi‘is to Syria has also been a tangible one up to the present, with Hizbollah accused of representing Syrian interests in
Lebanon. From the Maronite perspective, through alleged loyalty to Syria and Iran, the Shi’i community’s commitment to the sovereignty of the diverse Lebanese state is called into question.

But perhaps we should return again to history and its interpretation. Weiss opens his investigation of the Lebanese Shi’i community’s transformation by an anecdote about the “Metwellites” of Lebanon, a word used by outsiders (i.e. non-Shi’is) during the early- to mid-twentieth century to refer to Lebanese Shi’is. According to the Syrian interviewee in the anecdote, “‘the referent Metwellite did not have a religious connotation in a sectarian mindset. In popular parlance, it referred to people who lived in misery.’” But this speaks to the experience of the Shi’is in Lebanon, marginalized not only in the political realm, but also arguably the most impoverished of all Lebanese communities:

Railing against the continued marginalization of the Shi’i community in matters of political appointments in the government as well as the stubbornly scarce resources earmarked for Jabal ‘Amil (South Lebanon) and Biqa’ Valley [collectively home to the majority of Lebanon’s Shi’ites] in the state budget, [Shaykh Muhammad Jawad] Mughniyya cogently argued that criticism of government policy or social issues from the position of ‘the sect’ would always remain somewhat contradictory… “The Shi’i sect doesn’t believe in sectarianism, but if the Shi’a have a role in building this state then they must go out to play this role.”

Weiss continues,

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132 Regarding Syrian and Iranian connections during the post-war period, Najem writes: “Although Hizbollah had its own independent agenda, it must be recognised that it was, to a great extent, a client organisation influenced by its ostensible backer, Iran, and ultimately controlled by Syria, the dominant player in post-war Lebanon politics. Its freedom of action was, therefore, limited, particularly by Syria’s priorities in Lebanon.” Najem, 4007. More recently, it has been reiterated that Hizbollah is supported by Syrian power. See, for example, PBS NewsHour, “Lebanon Uneasy as Assassination Tribunal Proceeds,” chapter 4, August 3, 2011 (originally aired February 3, 2011), http://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=42511, which, in presenting the tribunal debate, also addresses the position of Hizbollah more generally. Indeed, Syria withdrew its forces from Lebanon in 2005, but continues to exert influence on its neighbor’s politics to an extent. See United Nations Security Council, 5172nd Meeting, Press Release SC/8372, “Syria’s Withdrawal from Lebanon ‘Historic Day’ for Middle East, Special Envoy Terje Roed-Larsen Tells Security Council,” April 29, 2005, http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2005/sc8372.doc.htm (accessed July 28, 2011), for the UN’s announcement of the withdrawal. Najem argues that Syria’s continued presence (interference) in South Lebanon after the Israeli withdrawal significantly inhibited the South’s “reintegration” into the Lebanese state, and the legacy of this lack of integration remains.

133 Weiss, 1.


135 Weiss, 2.
By the early 1960s, the Shi‘i milieu in Lebanon was in the process of gradually acquiring an ideological framework through which to launch social movements and to deploy political rhetoric that would articulate specific claims to sectarian rights and representation. Perhaps by mobilizing politically, by imbuing the term Métouali or Mitwali or Metwallite (or Matawila in the plural) – all various transliterations of what was then a more or less derogatory term referring to Shi‘i Muslims – with new meaning, by casting off the dead weight of reductive and inaccurate narratives of their history, the Shi‘i community could aspire to correct a whole host of social, cultural and religious misunderstandings.

Although Mughniyya was speaking in the 1960s, a similar sentiment is voiced by Hizbollah’s leader, Nasrallah, who in numerous public statements over the last thirty years has insisted that sectarianism is an unfit model for Lebanon, surely in part because that model has historically disenfranchised the Shi‘i population he purports to represent, but nonetheless a model to which the Shi‘is did eventually conform. Although Hizbollah’s ostensible focus – and indeed, the impetus behind its creation in the mid-1980s – has been and continues to be “the resistance,” the party in recent years has consented to direct (if still limited) participation in the Lebanese government, but that has not put a stop to Nasrallah and others’ critique of confessionalism. Paradoxically, then, the portrait Nasrallah paints of the Shi‘i community – one of Lebanon’s many sects – is of an identity premised on non-sectarianism. Already in Mughniyya’s speech we hear echoes of an anti-sectarianism among at least one important Shi‘a, a sentiment that was to develop in different ways in the coming decades such that contemporary calls for deconfessionalization are still voiced by Nasrallah and others.

However, while many observers speak only of Hizbollah when invoking the Shi‘i community of Lebanon, Hizbollah did not emerge onto the scene until the mid-1980s, a decade into the civil war. Weiss argues that “long before the political mobilization of the Shi‘i community under the charismatic influence of Imam Musa al-Sadr,”137 who “was instrumental in improving the lot of the ordinary Shi‘a in southern Lebanon while reducing the power of traditional Shi‘i elites,”138 and “decades before the radicalization of the Shi‘i community and its adhesion to two dominant political currents, Amal and Hizbollah, Shi‘i sectarian identity was fundamentally, albeit gradually, being transformed and reimagined.”139 Although a number of scholars have described the transformation in Shi‘i identity over recent decades according to

136 Weiss, 1.
137 Ibid, 3-4.
138 Norton, Hezbollah, 18.
139 Weiss, 3-4.
what Weiss labels a “‘mobilization’ or ‘radicalization’ thesis,” Weiss himself argues that it was under the French mandatory (for Weiss, colonial) state that Lebanon’s Shi’is became “more visible, more empowered, but also more sectarian, in ways that it had never quite been before.”¹⁴⁰ Thus, according to Weiss’s analysis, the narrative of Shi’i identity contradicts itself to some degree: while Nasrallah and others insist on the deconfessionalization of Lebanon, which would imply a reduced role for sectarian politics and practices more generally, the Shi’i community — through the elaboration of family/personal status law distinct to the sect and through the increasingly public performance of religious rituals during the mandate period and after¹⁴¹ — became more and more sectarian over the years.

In closing this section, we should note that the French played a role not only in the formation of Maronite identity but also, by their combined action and inaction, directly influenced Shi’i identity in Lebanon as well. But it is the Lebanese themselves who have arranged the elements of their experiences under the French mandatory power and through the independence period up to the present into programs for distinct identities that are nevertheless intended as applicable at the national level and, therefore, to members of other sects. At its root, this is a contest for Lebanon, for how Lebanese history should be understood and for what Lebanon should be made to become.

The Nature of Power-Sharing Arrangements and the Problem of Ethnicity: An Application of Roeder’s Analysis

Ethnic diversity is seen by Roeder as an almost (if not totally) insurmountable obstacle to the consolidation of a democratic state. Indeed, Roeder insists that “in the postcommunist world, stable democracy has triumphed only in countries that have solved their nation-ness problem. That is, democratization has been most successful in states that are both older and more homogenous. No states that are both new and diverse are democracies. Close examination shows that this pattern is due more to the continuing problems of nation-ness than to the newness of the states.”¹⁴² Indeed, while Lebanon might be seen by some to pose a challenge to an application of Roeder’s analysis of post-communism to the Middle East – as Lebanon has been popularly (and

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.
¹⁴¹ Ibid. Norton elaborates on the same point in discussing the evolution of Ashura rituals. See Norton, “Ritual,” 141.
¹⁴² Roeder, 860.
sometimes academically) understood to be fairly democratic – its government often fails to function at the most basic level, and the problem of “nation-ness” appears yet to be resolved.

Roeder has little faith in the potential for institutionalized power-sharing to yield democratic government in the context of significant ethnic diversity. For Roeder, significant ethnic diversity is understood to exist when the state’s largest ethnic group constitutes less than 80 percent of the total population. If this represents the standard for sufficient homogeneity, Lebanon is clearly far from realizing it. Ultimately, Roeder concludes – on the basis of the post-communist data set as well as other empirical evidence – that

crisis and instability inhere in the structure of power-sharing arrangements because inclusive and partitioned decision making gives rise to three problems: it privileges ethnicity as a basis for solidarity and conflict; it fosters divergence of preferences among ethnic groups; it creates institutional weapons that can be used against other ethnopoliticians and to tear apart the state. Thus power-sharing institutions contain the seed of their own destruction (emphasis added).

Many long-time observers (in the academic, political, and “lay” spheres) of the Lebanese case would assuredly argue that there is no better characterization of the Lebanese religio-political configuration than this. Perhaps the only modification necessary is a substitution of “religion” or, more appropriately (given the presence of so many sub-traditions under each religious tradition’s umbrella), “sect” for “ethnicity,” although even this modification is partial given the discussion above of how Maronites formulate their religious identity in distinctly ethnic terms.

To address the excerpted passage more directly, confessionalism has succeeded in privileging sect over other, more inclusive identities: it is through sect that access to the levers of power is granted, through confessional identity that individuals understand their place within the national community, and through the lens of sectarian competition that the potentials for cooperation and conflict are often read. Political preferences are indeed understood in sectarian terms in Lebanon, and confessional elites are able to maintain the electoral support of their constituencies even in the apparent absence of measurable progress. Despite the relative failure of the government and, more specifically, the confessional elites within that government to achieve stated political goals, the Lebanese still typically vote according to their sectarian identities. And, as was recently demonstrated when Hizbollah and its coalition – which enjoys

\[143\] Ibid.
\[144\] Ibid, 868.
veto power (the very veto Roeder critiques) – withdrew from the government over an unsettled dispute and thereby caused the government’s collapse, the power-sharing formula guarantees that disagreements can just as easily and, in fact, more easily, be solved by refusal to cooperate as to agree on a compromise.

The Lebanese themselves clearly understood some of the problems inherent in the consociational model, as Lebanon was not in fact supposed to remain a confessional state. The Ta'if Agreement of 1989, drafted after the devastatingly bitter contest between Lebanon’s Christians and Muslims, called explicitly for Lebanon’s deconfessionalization in favor of a more integrated institutional model. At some level, then, there must have been general agreement with the notion that “power sharing institutionalizes ethnic [here, sectarian] differences and thus increases the likelihood that these differences will become the primary points of cleavage in all subsequent disputes.”

Here, it is useful to follow Roeder’s analysis point-by-point, considering how his thesis is well suited to the Lebanese case. Continuing from where we left off above, Roeder claims that, “first, inclusive and partitioned decision making guarantees ethnopoliticians a place at the bargaining table of politics – particularly the bargaining over constitutional redesign – from which they can press their agendas.” 145 Indeed, in Lebanon the equivalent of such ethnopoliticians – sectarian elites – are virtually the only real players at the bargaining table. Although a trend toward new, non-sectarian expressions of identity is noticeable among the university population of Lebanon, for example, it is again Hassan Nasrallah, leader of Hizbollah, who many observers claim is the most powerful figure in contemporary Lebanese politics. Importantly, it is often the sectarian leaders who deliver on the promise of providing much-needed services to their constituencies, while the national government fails to meet the needs of its population. Thus, confessional elites are able to insist on their own efficacy while simultaneously undermining the mechanisms of a national government ostensibly built on the ethics of cooperation and compromise.

Roeder continues: “Second, in order to gain access to these seats at the table, ethnopoliticians are likely to find that they must outbid one another in their appeals to the ethnic [here, sectarian] community, making ever more extreme claims about what they will win at the

central bargaining table.””146 Such “outbidding,” which Roeder is careful to point out is not inevitable, but is made more likely in a context of power-sharing, has played its role in Lebanon as sectarian elites translate the demands of their communities onto the national stage. “Third, politicians with other agendas that might cut across ethnic [sectarian] issues – such as class or profession – are likely to frame their demands as ethnic [sectarian] issues in order to gain access to the privileged centers of decision making.”147 In Lebanon, it is the politicians who are able to speak in national terms but whose loyalty to sect ultimately remains unquestioned who are often most successful. “Non-sectarian” political elites typically still find themselves allied with explicitly sectarian parties in an effort to win seats in parliament.

A modified version of Roeder’s conclusion (with sect/confession substituted for ethnicity) is directly applicable to the Lebanese case, if we are to believe the primary and secondary literatures: “In this institutional environment all politics become… [sectarian] politics; all politics come to involve more extreme issues of national rights.”148 Indeed, not only are national rights debated in Lebanon, but the very identity of the nation remains in question. While from my own (albeit limited) experience, and from my reading of the survey literature, it appears that many Lebanese share a high degree of national pride and are committed to the values of cooperation and compromise amid their great diversity, the institutional context within which political elites operate succeeds only in reinforcing the very sectarianism many Lebanese claim to disavow. While we might not go so far as to say that Lebanon’s “social mosaic” represents a collection of separate nations, it is clear that the programs for identity tend to differ significantly between sects, and that the confessional model itself does little to encourage the bridging of the divides created and maintained in the sectarian contest for Lebanon.

A Contest of Identities: Implications for Lebanese Politics

Given the implications of Roeder’s claims in the Lebanese context, we might draw some basic conclusions about the possibility for democratic consolidation and national integration in Lebanon. While the existence of multiple – and even competing – cultural systems is commonplace in many contemporary states, deep socio-religious divisions in Lebanon are reinforced by an institutional configuration which effectively guarantees that sect will always

146 Ibid, 869.
147 Ibid.
148 Ibid.
win the day, and that even cooperation and compromise will be defined in confessional terms and will not necessarily reign in the tendency toward disintegration. Competing programs of confessional identity in Lebanon are not restricted to the sub-national level; instead, each of these identities is variously put forward as the identity of the Lebanese, as the ideal for the Lebanese state. Because the implicit and explicit claims of these competing programs come into conflict with one another so directly – not only over the question of sect, but also of ethnicity, of cultural heritage, and of national belonging – it has proven difficult for the Lebanese to truly come together as a nation.

In the absence of social integration, a power-sharing agreement was forged which was intended to make coexistence possible, but which nevertheless – in its disproportionate privileging of communities and its ultimate political dysfunction – succeeds in demonstrating the legitimacy of Roeder’s critique of power-sharing models. It is in this problematic context of institutionalized sectarianism that scholars have insisted on the need for the Lebanese to reimagine their shared history as a basis for a more universally applicable, more truly national identity. Although Roeder’s analysis leaves us with little optimism, it is important to remember that the ethnic diversity (if not, of course, the sectarian diversity) of the Lebanese is an element of an imagined identity. While we cannot overstate the transformation of which the next generation of Lebanese leaders might be capable (particularly because the attitudes of youth tend to shift over time and can of course become more conservative\(^{149}\)), it does appear that many of today’s university students, at least, define their Lebanese-ness in somewhat different, arguably more open and inclusive terms. Educated Lebanese youth have begun to imagine themselves as Lebanese in new ways and, although the narratives of Phoenicianism and of Shi’i historical marginalization have not been abandoned, my own preliminary research seems to suggest at least a possibility for new forms of compromise, of increased tolerance, and ultimately of interest in avoiding a relapse into violent sectarian conflict, several episodes of which today’s Lebanese youth have already survived in their own short lifetimes and wish not to relive.

\(^{149}\) “Conservative” is defined here as the basic opposite of “liberal” per Magdol’s analysis.
CHAPTER THREE

By way of introduction to the data that follows, I would like to invoke Geertz’s admission about anthropological writing, which applies equally to my own research findings:

In finished anthropological writings… this fact – that what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people’s constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to – is obscured because most of what we need to comprehend a particular event, ritual, custom, idea, or whatever is insinuated as background information before the thing itself is directly examined… There is nothing particularly wrong with this, and it is in any case inevitable. But it does lead to a view of anthropological research as rather more of an observational and rather less of an interpretive activity than it really is. Right down at the factual base, the hard rock, insofar as there is any, of the whole enterprise, we are already explicating: and worse, explicating explications.150

Geertz emphasizes the interpretive versus purely observational nature of the anthropological project and acknowledges that the ethnographic method is somewhat self-limiting.151 In the same way, my own results are colored by interpretation, particularly regarding which questions I included in my interview questionnaire and in the language I used to communicate them. Ultimately, I am an outsider attempting to observe complicated relationships and to interpret meanings located “between the lines” of conversation.

That being said, I made an effort to select a representative sample152 for this study and to avoid guiding participants in any particular direction. I chose the American University of Beirut

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150 Geertz, 9.
151 Ibid, 15.
152 A few words on how I selected my sample: As a first-time researcher, this project represented a bit of an experiment. When I arrived in Beirut in March 2011 I printed flyers which provided my in-country contact information and a brief description of my research project. (Copies of the flyer and of the consent form I provided each interviewee are available upon request.) I then proceeded to camp outside the main gates of AUB, politely asking students if they would be willing to sit for a 35- to 45-minute interview about religion, politics, and identity in Lebanon. I also wandered into coffee and donut shops near campus, asking those who appeared to be university-age if they might be interested in helping me with the project. Fortunately, broaching such topics upon first meeting is not generally considered so impolite in Lebanon as it is in the States – in fact, often the first substantive question one is asked by a new acquaintance seeks to determine one’s religious/sectarian affiliation. After speaking with me about the project, many students appeared very enthusiastic and expressed that they considered such a project timely and worthwhile – even students who did not have room in their busy schedules to meet with me for an interview. A number of students also volunteered to recruit their friends on my behalf, and went to great lengths to make sure we made contact.
population for this project because AUB has a reputation for producing leaders in the political and social worlds. Additionally, the language of instruction at AUB is English. Given that my Arabic is beyond weak, it was important to make every effort to transcend the language barrier. (Of course, it is easy to argue that a language barrier can never be satisfactorily overcome.) I will provide additional information about individual respondents below, but I should note that I will not be able in this paper to cover responses to all background questions, even some which I believe are relevant to the results (for example, details of interviewees’ upbringing).

I will focus here on the responses to a selection of interview questions which I consider most relevant to the themes of the paper. For the sake of space, I must exclude a number of equally compelling lines of inquiry. I will include each question (and related sub-questions) of interest in italics before presenting my findings. It should be noted, however, that students did not always respond in full to these questions (which was their stated right). This fact is reflected in the results presented below. The full interview questionnaire can be found in the Appendix, and in a future paper I plan to consider the results of this research project in greater detail.

The Formation of Religious and Religio-Political Identities in Lebanon: Research Findings

With which religious community do you identify? Are your university friends mostly members of your own sect/religious community, or are most of your friends members of other sects/religious communities? Do you discuss the topics of religion/sect or politics with university friends?

However, I acknowledge the shortcomings of selecting a sample population in such a haphazard way, and I also acknowledge that while the method resulted in a somewhat random sample, there are most assuredly biases at work – biases which amount to much more than an affinity for donuts and coffee, since such shops were where I often went to attract volunteers. One important example of a potential bias comes to mind: when I scheduled the interview with the Druze participant, I suggested we meet at the Starbucks on Hamra Street, as it seemed to be a popular hangout for AUB students. He met me outside the coffee shop at our agreed time, but then politely requested that we relocate to another café, promising to explain when we arrived. I followed him to the café, where he introduced me to a bit of allegedly common wisdom: many Lebanese believe a portion of Starbucks’ profits are funneled to the Israeli government, and specifically to the Israeli military. Although I was unable to confirm or disconfirm this theory after the fact, the student had wanted to avoid patronizing a business offering material assistance for Israeli designs in the region. If this is indeed a belief held by a significant number of Lebanese, particularly Lebanese of the Druze or other sects, it is very possible that the research participants I met in Starbucks had certain political dispositions connected to their own sectarian backgrounds. There are certainly other examples of unintentional biases which might have resulted from my method of selecting a sample, and which reinforce the importance of increasing my awareness of and sensitivity to context in future stages of the project.

153 I conducted all interviews in Ras Beirut during the week of March 7-12, 2011.
My sample included fifteen Lebanese AUB students\(^{154}\) (listed in order of when they were interviewed, and with their current year in school included in parentheses): an 18-year-old female Christian (sophomore), a 19-year-old female Shi'a (sophomore), a 23-year-old male atheist who was formerly a Maronite Christian (third-year medical student), a 21-year-old female non-practicing Shi'a (third-year) who is Lebanese-American, a 27-year-old male Christian (who graduated two years ago) who spent part of his childhood in the United Arab Emirates, a 20-year-old male secularist (sophomore) who also holds a U.S. passport, a 22-year-old male Sunni (first-year graduate student), an 18-year-old male non-practicing Shi’a (first-year) who identifies as a secularist, a male Baptist Christian (sophomore) who interviewed with a male non-practicing Shi’a (they are childhood friends), a 24-year-old male Marxist (working on a second Master’s at AUB), a 20-year-old male Druze secularist (senior), an 18-year-old female Sunni (first-year) who is Lebanese-American, a 20-year-old female Sunni (second-year) who is also Lebanese-American, a 20-year-old male Sunni (second-year), and a 19-year-old female Sunni (second-year). Thus, at least all major religious communities in Lebanon were represented.

Although all fifteen students proceeded to self-identify with a religious community (at least in terms of their background/upbringing if not in reference to their present commitments), a number of students hesitated to lump themselves in with those same groups. In fact, more students than not offered their religious/sectarian identities but immediately followed up with the admission that they prefer not to be identified as such. A couple of students also distinguished between the religious identity listed on their Lebanese identity card and the reality that religion played a minimal role in their lives. Responses seem to suggest that students are very aware of how readily identifying with a particular religious community effectively makes them participants in a sectarian system most interviewees critiqued. Some students seemed almost at pains to demonstrate that their own interpretation of what it means to identify as a member of a religious sect is much different than what it has meant for their parents’ generation, thereby emphasizing (some explicitly, others implicitly) that the present generation of students desires to be seen as distinct from their predecessors. Importantly, many students drew a line between the categories of “religious” and “sectarian,” positing the religious label as one that signifies belief,

\(^{154}\) There is a single exception here: in the only joint interview I conducted – the pair of childhood friends – the non-practicing Shi'a was enrolled at the Lebanese American University, not at AUB. As a result, any questions about the AUB campus/experience were directed toward his knowledge/experience of LAU.
practice, and/or upbringing, while sectarian was translated as the intentional premising of particularistic religious goals/preferences in the public space. The definition of sectarian, then, assumed negative content for many students. A number of students found it especially troubling that non-practicing members of various religious communities would simultaneously identify as atheist yet “play” religious when it came to politics. The willingness to fight (verbally but also physically) on behalf of one’s religious community even as a non-practicing member was seen by a handful of students as indicative of a central problem in Lebanon.

Most students reported that their friend-groups were mixed, composed usually of members of their own religious community as well as “representatives” of other communities. For most students, discussing the topics of religion/sect and politics with friends was important, but they emphasized that this must be done in a civil and respectful manner, explicitly in contrast to how questions of politics and religion are often treated in conversations between “other” Lebanese. Many students said that they not only discuss religion and politics with friends, but that the primary point in those conversations is how problematic the divisions among the Lebanese have been historically as well as in the contemporary period. In reference to the question of discussing politics with friends, the male Druze respondent explained that “living in Lebanon, you’re obliged to get into politics… There is nothing called in Lebanon… [a] straight… line that’s separated from the two challenging… parts in Lebanon”155 (by “challenging parts,” the student was referring to the political and non-political, presumably religious, spheres). On the other hand, a couple of students preferred to avoid such conversations with friends altogether, convinced that disagreement was essentially unavoidable and that it is therefore best to keep religious and political opinions private.

Do you think access to political power is more restricted for some sectarian communities than others? Please explain your response. Do you believe your own religious community has fair and proportional access to political power?

155 A number of ellipses will appear in citations of students’ responses. These ellipses often represent the typical “filler” words we employ in conversation, especially in conversations that require some reflection before one can offer a response. When a student was hesitant in responding it was typically, I think, both a function of discomfort speaking about complex issues in a non-native tongue (at least for some students, who expressly apologized for the “poor” quality of their English even when it was actually quite excellent) and a natural byproduct of being put on the spot by probing interview questions.
Students were divided roughly in half in responding to the questions of whether there is disparate access to power among sects and whether the student’s own sect had fair representation. Many found proportional representation based on sect problematic, but still believed it was the best option given deep social divisions in Lebanon. In reference to the question of whether proportional representation is fair in its contemporary instantiation, the 19-year-old Shi’a woman said, “I think it’s unfair because you can’t judge someone over its [sic] religion but… we should do that in Lebanon because… [it] would create problems if we don’t because in our minds we all consider religion as something very important. So it would be difficult to convince people that religion isn’t something important in politics, but it’s the best solution now just to let everyone agree on it.” The same student remarked that most non-Shi'i Lebanese consider Hizbollah and even the broader Shi'i community to be terrorists.

The former Maronite who is now an atheist summarized the predicament of the three major sects in Lebanon: “now the Shi’ites are going up, Maronites are going down, Sunnis are struggling to stay where they are.” He implied that this was a problem. Another student (the male Christian who grew up in the UAE) believed that representation was not fair, but that things had begun to change. In reference to the requirement that the president must always be a Maronite Christian, for example, the student claimed that “it’s obvious that this is no longer going to be the case… or at least that there are thoughts towards changing them [sic].” However, the non-practicing Shi'i student at the Lebanese American University (who interviewed with his Baptist friend, a student at AUB), insisted that the sectarian model safeguarded Lebanon’s threatened communities, particularly the Christians, and that it therefore should remain so that all Lebanese can feel some sense of security.

This question in particular led many respondents to evaluate the character of the sectarian model itself, in advance of being prompted to do so. In describing the situation of political parties in Lebanon, the Druze secularist claimed that, contrary to when secular parties commanded real power in the past, “what you have now are parties of religions and not parties of

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We should pay attention to relatively unexpected responses in our effort to avoid over-generalizing about the political preferences of members of any given sect in Lebanon. While the Shi'i LAU student is non-practicing, it still would be reasonable – based on the preferences of many other non-practicing Shi'is who nonetheless ally themselves with Hizbollah – to assume that his politics are in line with the sectarian milieu within which he was raised. However, here that is not the case. Such seemingly counter-intuitive positions may illustrate an individual’s “idiosyncrasies” or, on the other hand, they may illustrate a wider trend away from more traditional identification patterns.
the community, and the society as [a] whole in Lebanon… and that’s the main problem.” He went on to discuss how the division of spoils by the Europeans in the post-war period resulted in fragmented societies and, ultimately, in the legacy of sectarianism in Lebanon (which the student attributed to French meddling). Borders were arbitrary – “I think the man that was cutting the cake, if he sneezes or something, that he might have given Lebanon some thousand kilometers in excess!” – and, according to the student, the French in particular exercised their interest in keeping Lebanon a divided society by encouraging infighting among the Lebanese, by pitting sect against sect through planting the seeds of mutual suspicion.

Interestingly, in discussing the role of sectarianism in the lives of Lebanese, a number of interviewees distinguished between the situation in Lebanon versus of Lebanese living abroad. Two students in particular emphasized how the Lebanese people come together as Lebanese when living outside the country. Religious/sectarian divisions only become/remain important in Lebanon. This will be discussed more extensively below.

Do you participate in politics? If yes, how so? If not, why?

Most of the respondents reported being politically involved, and the majority proceeded to cite their participation in campus politics as an example of their wider political engagement. Campus elections at AUB are hotly contested, and by more than one account there is a great deal of pressure on students who would prefer not to become involved to vote on election day anyway. A couple of students who had not become involved in politics of their own volition nonetheless described episodes of intense peer pressure to participate, leading the 18-year-old Lebanese-American Sunni, for example, to pretend to vote at the polls without actually casting a ballot. Voting habits are openly discussed – much to the chagrin of some respondents.

In detailing the degree of their political involvement, respondents cited other examples in addition to campus politics. The non-practicing Shi’i man from LAU had participated in recent protests by supporters of the March 8 coalition, while his Baptist Christian friend attended the same protests but on behalf of the opposing camp (March 14). The Druze secularist found it important to explain that he participates in politics not because of others’ expectations, but because of ethical responsibilities. He likened Lebanese society to a human body, and each individual to a part of that body, a cell whose distinct function must be performed in the interest
of the body’s overall health and balance. In offering her answer, the 20-year-old Lebanese-American Sunni woman focused on the discrimination women face in the social and particularly political fields. She actively participates in feminist politics, for example by attending protests staged by the organization No Rights No Women. An issue of particular interest is the inability of a Lebanese woman to pass her Lebanese nationality on to her children if she marries a non-Lebanese (as this is against the law). The young woman sees herself as working on behalf of other women who desire political change in Lebanon.

_Do you regularly attend religious services or participate in religious activities? Did you regularly attend religious services or participate in religious activities throughout your childhood or when you still lived with your family?_

Most students reported what we might consider “moderate” levels of participation in organized religion, citing for example the occasional study of the Qur'an or Bible, regular prayer, fasting at designated times, and the like.157 Interestingly, many students seemed to evaluate their levels of participation as too low, indicating that they should work harder to be active participants in their religious communities (although typically from a devotional perspective, not in political terms). Most of these same students participated in religious activities during their childhood, attending mass or mosque, for example, or taking lessons in their sacred texts. Only a couple of students cited intensely religious or “conservative” family backgrounds. On the whole, most students who considered themselves active participants in religion were less so at the present time than during their childhood, but evaluated their slightly more religious upbringing either in neutral terms or in contrast to a more “liberal” approach to religion in their early adulthood.

Meanwhile, a number of other students indicated that they do not participate in religious activities at all, and – as we might expect – some of these same students reported having a

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157 It is worthwhile to note Norton’s comment on this score: “In Beirut, where members of Lebanon’s 18 recognized sects palaver, work, and live cheek to jowl, religious practice and ritual, as opposed to sectarian identity, is often tucked away from public view in mixed areas. Lebanese are astute in discerning cues and clues that reveal an interlocutor’s sectarian roots and cultural identity but at least until recent decades public religious ritual was often spurned in order to avoid provoking sectarian tension.” This might partially explain religious students’ self-reported “failure” to practice. Norton adds that the Shi’is’ public performance of Ashura in particular is a relatively recent phenomenon in Beirut. See Norton, “Ritual,” 141.
relatively non-religious upbringing and classified themselves as members of a particular sect only in terms of their family heritage or because it was the label on their state ID card.

In your opinion, what are the most important criteria for membership in your own sectarian/religious community? What values or beliefs are most important to your own community, in terms of religious identity and in terms of political participation? Do you agree with those priorities?

This set of questions garnered some thoughtful responses. The 18-year-old female Christian prioritized honesty, arguing that honesty should define membership in all religious communities. A number of students distinguished between what they believe the older generation considers central to community membership and the values of the new generation. For example the 19-year-old Shi’a woman pointed to more traditional requirements such as daily prayer, critiquing the fact that people are judged based on such acts. Because she opts not to wear the hijab, she says others assume she is not a “true” Muslim, even though she is a believer. For her, being a “good person” was more important than itemized requirements like prayer five times per day. The 23-year-old former Maronite who is now an atheist cited what he considered asinine distinctions, illustrating how many are fickle and disingenuous when it comes to religion, converting from Christianity to Islam, for example, to acquire a legal divorce. Others emphasized the idea of religion-as-heritage, arguing that many identify as members of a particular religious community not as believers but for social and/or family reasons. The 20-year-old male secularist whose father was born Muslim critiqued his mother’s identification with the Greek Orthodox community, arguing that she is not in fact “really religious” and that her identification with that community has become a bit of a running joke in their family. He insisted that religion was a matter of birth: what your parents are, or more specifically what your father is, you become also (at least on paper). The 24-year-old Marxist who is completing a second Master’s degree claimed that membership criteria hinge more on social questions than on “anything religious.” The male Christian who grew up in the UAE asserted that one’s upbringing makes all the difference, particularly in the tendency towards or away from religious extremism. For him, someone “bombarded by… religious beliefs” in her/his earlier years “would obviously turn out either one of the extremes, either completely hate religion and everything to do with it or [the] other way around, be a very devout religious person.”
Most students ultimately considered religion a private matter (ideally, if not in fact) and insisted that membership in a religious community should be defined on individual terms. This seems to confirm what one student suggested in response to another question, i.e. that the value of individualism has become increasingly important for the new generation. Many acknowledged a basic set of practices within each community but considered belief to be paramount. In this way, a number of students reiterated their more liberal attitudes toward religious belief/practice compared to their parents’ generation. Belief was also the deciding factor in reference to the Sunni/Shi'i split, according to the 20-year-old Lebanese-American Sunni woman.

Importantly, the 20-year-old male Sunni was the only respondent to insist on a political dimension to membership in a religious community. For him, being Sunni requires that one supports Sunni politicians, particularly Saad Hariri: “we know here in Lebanon Saad Hariri is the president of what the Sunni speak for, so he [the Sunni] should love” Hariri. He adds that, in politics, “we should try to choose the one who is neutral, who is good, who loves our religion.” On a more “ecumenical” note, the Druze secularist man, whose community is considered closed to all except those who are born into it, “concluded that all religions, they call for the good and they tell you no, don’t do the bad.”

Do you consider yourself a practicing member of your religious community? How would you define a practicing member of your community? Do you think your definition matches that of others in your community? Why or why not?

Many students found this question particularly difficult to answer. In responding, they often critiqued their own failure to practice, citing examples of how they should behave. Others still referred back to belief when questioned about practice, insisting that one’s belief in certain moral or ethical standards (and, presumably, one’s acting on such standards: “someone who actually lives his belief,” according to the male Marxist doing his second Master’s) are more important than practices as traditionally defined. The Christian man who grew up in the UAE insisted that “it’s changing so much, the word practicing. [A] practicing individual is no longer what a practicing individual used to be back then.” For him, today’s practicing member should be defined according to whether she/he “can… provide… so to speak, an effective argument to support the things that might… not like attack, but oppose specific issues in that belief system, in
that religion. So someone who’s able to support it completely no matter what” is a practicing
member.

The former Maronite atheist argued that only 20 percent of Lebanon’s Christians are
actually practicing, while “maybe 60 or 70 percent are believers. Those who practice, it’s defined
here in Lebanon as those who go to church.” (Others – about 10 percent, he claimed – are
atheists like himself.) This sentiment was mirrored by a number of other students who
distinguished between practicing members of a community and non-practicing members who are
nonetheless still believers, providing nuanced explanations for the difference. However, the
former Maronite went on to explain that in the Muslim community, 70 to 80 percent actively
practice their religion – at least by his own estimates. In distinguishing between the Sunni and
Shi'i communities, he explained that the “Shi'ites didn’t used to have very strong political power
before the civil war, so they were… scattered, and they were poor, so a lot of them turned to
communism.” Importantly, he claims that “from those people who practice [of all religious
communities], the vast majority are sectarian.” Here we have illustrated what appear to be
several relatively common perceptions among Maronite Christians, although of course a former
Maronite who is now an atheist would not represent the wider community on a number of other
important points.

In your opinion, does membership in a religious/sectarian community mean or involve
something different in Lebanon than it does in other Middle Eastern states? What about
compared to Europe or the United States?

Most students readily admitted that religious/sectarian membership is different in the
Lebanese context than elsewhere. Many also considered Lebanon to be better off precisely
because of its religious diversity and its relative religious and political freedom. The Shi'ite LAU
student pointed to his Baptist friend across the table in asserting that Lebanon is special because
there is communication between the sects and the possibility for genuine friendship. His friend
replied, “I’m just friends with everybody, I don’t care about religion.” Whereas in the West
being religious makes one “inferior,” he continued, in Lebanon someone is more accepted for
being religious, apparently regardless of what variety of “religious” that may be.
Others offered more negative evaluations of Lebanon in comparison to its neighbors: “here, the struggle in Lebanon is between religions themselves… Everybody… becoming part of a certain sect, let’s speak politically, is trying to get more power and resources for him[self],” claims the former Maronite who is now an atheist. Interestingly, the same student also claimed that religious practitioners in Europe (in his example, the Czech Republic) are “isolated,” even “weird” – presumably because they represent such a minority in society. Whereas in Lebanon it is “weird” if your religion does not define you in the public space, in Europe the opposite holds. For the Druze secularist student, sectarianism is an unfortunate feature of Lebanese socio-political life. Whereas in the U.S. state or nation and sect are distinct, in Lebanon this is not the case. However, the student was also convinced that if a Lebanese person lives outside the country for a number of years, she/he loses most sectarian biases.

Some students illustrated the difference in Lebanon by pointing to the fact that even employment opportunities are dependent – sometimes almost solely – on the sectarian membership one can claim. According to the 20-year-old Sunni woman, even at AUB there are admissions quotas for each of the country’s sects. The focus for most respondents, however, was sectarianism itself: the primacy of sect in Lebanese political life makes the state unique. Additionally, many cited a felt obligation on the part of Lebanese to support her/his religious community in politics. The 20-year-old male secularist (who also holds a U.S. passport) attributed the persistence of sectarianism largely to outside interference. The same student claimed that, while in the United States, for example, you would not identify with a religious community if you did not believe in its tenets, in Lebanon people claim sectarian identity even in the absence of basic belief. However, he also demonstrated American misunderstanding of religious difference (compared to what he considered a general awareness of sectarian difference in Lebanon), citing an American Baptist professor at AUB who did not consider Catholics to be Christians – much to the entertainment of the student.

A number of students focused on the question of democracy in differentiating Lebanon from other countries. In comparison to other states in the Middle East, Lebanon typically fared well in students’ estimations: the Lebanese democratic tradition makes it superior to the autocracies/dictatorships elsewhere in the region, most reported. But Lebanon did not do so well when contrasted with the U.S. or Europe. According to the 18-year-old Christian woman, in
Lebanon “we have the freedom… to talk, but there is no democracy,” whereas Europe has both freedom and democracy.

However, other students saw little substantive difference between religious/sectarian membership in Lebanon versus elsewhere. The 22-year-old Sunni man differentiated between membership in a religious community and the operationalization of religion in the Lebanese political sphere, arguing that to be Sunni in Lebanon in a religious sense is basically the same as being a Sunni elsewhere. The Christian man who grew up in the UAE recognized that extremism can be found everywhere, including in the West. But in comparing his experience of growing up in the Gulf with his experience living in Lebanon, he explained that because the Gulf is mostly Muslim, “you can’t really expect… to go into church and hear about politics,” whereas in Lebanon the fusion of politics and religion is “almost inevitable because of the fact that… it’s almost… like a big melting pot for all religious differences… it’s [impossible] to not be surrounded by, um, to not hear about it at church or mosque.”

*In your opinion, what has been the primary cause of violent conflict in Lebanon over the last 20 years? Do you believe religion plays a central role in conflict in Lebanon, or is religion a mask for other sources of disagreement?*

Most students considered religion/sect to play some role in conflict in Lebanon, although they varied on the question of whether it is religious differences themselves which pose the main problem, or the manipulation of those divisions by a selfish political elite, by religious leaders, or by outside players. For example, the 20-year-old secularist man explained that “in Lebanon you have political interference from many different countries, different powers… and so along with the fact that it’s an identity crisis [that] causes problems, it’s also masked as… their religious differences.” For him, the salience of religious differences in the public space is *solely* about politics, not about religion itself. According to the 19-year-old Sunni woman, ostensibly religious sources of conflict “definitely mask other political ideas.” For the 24-year-old Marxist man, conflict is a question of ideology, not of religion. While sects have been opposed to one another historically, “there are always different catalysts” for conflict. The 20-year-old Sunni woman pointed to “a lot of factors,” “like globalization and Westernization.” Particularly problematic was the “humiliation” that resulted from globalization for the Lebanese, who
through contact with the West began to get a taste of negative Western assessments of the Lebanese and of Middle Easterners more generally.

The 22-year-old male Sunni graduate student worried that while “it’s OK to have a wide variety of… different religions living together… this living together, this is not, uh, it doesn’t work here, I don’t know why.” The Shi'i LAU student blamed sectarian conflict on “barbarian thinking” and his friend, the male Baptist student, agreed. For the 18-year-old Sunni woman, “the civil war is… the base of everything today… I think that the problems between all… religious communities in Lebanon are related to the civil war… and since the civil war, people are frustrated and so, they’re angry.”

Has your university education impacted your understanding of politics in Lebanon, the Middle East, and more broadly? How so? How would you compare the Lebanese political system to the political systems in the region and beyond? Does the Lebanese political system function more or less effectively than other political systems? Please provide details. (Note: I address the comparative component of this question more directly in discussing students’ evaluations of the Lebanese system.)

Most respondents believed their education – or their broader experience at AUB – to have had some impact on their understanding of politics. According to the 18-year-old Christian woman, “When I entered… university I realized that I’m not the only one who wants… a little bit of change that concerns politics.” She cited the calm, democratic behavior of AUB students during election time as evidence of this fact. The 22-year-old Sunni man considered attending university “a big step”: the university represents “a downscaled Lebanon. So you have people of… all parties around us and… it just made the concept real of how to… deal, you know, to deal with… other people, people of other parties who are in our… community and how to live together or coexist.” The key theme here was diversity: most students emphasized that the political and broader social diversity of the campus environment had impacted their understanding of politics and of what it means to coexist in Lebanon. For many, the experience of diversity contrasted sharply with the relatively homogenous environments of their childhood, and exposure to diversity was typically judged to be positive, although for a few it reinforced their perceptions of the divisions in Lebanon they had already come to hold.
The 24-year-old Marxist graduate student argued that his education had had a moderating effect on his politics: when he entered university, his ideological commitments were very strong, but throughout the course of his studies (which were focused on the history and politics of the modern Middle East) he became “more understanding of… the ideology [of Marxism] itself.”

The 20-year-old Lebanese-American Sunni woman was raised to be aware of the world around her and to be proud of the Lebanese element of her heritage, but coming to AUB allowed her to learn from her classmates, to “talk about politics and religion… without fighting.” Not having to watch Al Jazeera for news about Lebanon, but to actually experience such developments in an environment of her peers has had a significant impact on her perceptions, she said. The 20-year-old Sunni man explained that the main accomplishment of AUB is in “allowing you to understand the… meaning of democracy, how to respect others, how to listen to another, how to have civil points of view, bas, in a more democratic way.” For the 19-year-old Sunni woman, her time at university “definitely” changed her perspective: “When I was in school, it was a very small bubble. Even though there were people from different sects, they weren’t religious at all or they didn’t have political views, whereas in college I was exposed to people with really extreme political views and who… just I really had no idea it existed, honestly.”

On a more ambivalent note, the 19-year-old Shi’a student cited the campus elections as an illustration both of AUB students’ “civility” and of why she herself prefers to stay out of politics. She argued that politics plays too significant a role in the lives of students. The 21-year-old non-practicing Shi’a woman was turned off of politics after taking political science courses at the university. She explained that the freedom of expression people enjoy in Lebanon is a positive, but that the system is ultimately dysfunctional. A number of students had not taken courses in politics or related subjects at the university, but cited their experience on AUB’s diverse and lively campus as a significant influence on their shifting perceptions. Many saw student elections as “a reflection of the society,” in the words of the 20-year-old male secularist. The same student was also alarmed to discover that, while it is generally believed that the educated are more difficult to “herd” between political parties, many students switched sides from one election year to the next. The same student cited a former prime minister in asserting that “Lebanon is a country that has a great deal of freedom and a very small deal of democracy.” He explained that while many preferred to believe that Lebanon is the only democracy in the region, and
consequently also the most forward-looking among the Arab states, Lebanon is in fact “the most backward society in the region due to the… sectarian nature” of politics.

Only one student offered a pessimistic evaluation of the content of university education in particular: the former Maronite who became an atheist critiqued courses offered on the AUB campus which “try to make everybody happy and everybody love each other. This is not reality… I’m sorry… so don’t try to convince me that yeah, we are one Lebanese. OK, you know that everybody hates everybody?” He also explained that, because many students’ university educations are themselves funded by religious parties, those students remain loyal to their communities and do not change their political commitments in significant ways. Most students, he explained, spend only three years at university, and “within these three years, people… either they come here, they have friends of their own cultural beliefs and graduate and they don’t have time to mingle, other people who are interested in politics, they join groups, active groups, some of those might get… into debates and discuss their opinions, so the best-case scenario that a university would do is… giv[e] people from different beliefs the opportunity to discuss with each other their differences.” He continues, “the best thing that you can do is to have people… agree on their differences and talk about them frankly to each other. But don’t expect people to become moderate because of university, no. It doesn’t happen.” Even given the student’s negativity, his response evidences the fact that the university experience provides opportunities for cultivating a more open mind – at least in the estimation of most interviewees.

*Has your university education impacted your understanding of religion? Has it influenced your understanding of the religious divisions in Lebanese society? Please explain. Has your university education impacted your understanding of your own religious identity, or of your values more generally? Explain.*

Most students replied that their university education did not change the way they viewed religion, but many then proceeded to cite examples of how the religious diversity of the AUB campus in particular had impacted their perceptions. Through contact with their classmates, students claimed to have become more understanding, more liberal, more respectful of others’ traditions. Most students claimed to know more about other religious traditions as a result of their time at AUB, and to better understand not only how Lebanon is divided along sectarian lines, but how to transcend those divisions in mutually respectful conversation.
In reference to the evolution of their own religious identities, most students pointed back to their improved understanding of Lebanon’s diverse “social mosaic” (to invoke Barakat). Some students also felt encouraged to question their religious traditions in the university environment, to reevaluate what they had inherited from their parents. The 22-year-old Sunni man explained that, after his encounters with religious classmates, he felt more compelled to participate in his own religious community. Meanwhile, the Shi’i LAU student actually felt his secularist views had become more extreme during his time at university: “In my village where [it] is like, one color, I didn’t care, but now I feel I have to take a place.” The Druze secularist felt a university education did little to impact the perspectives students had already formed prior to attending university. However, he credited AUB with prohibiting students (and faculty) from discriminating against their peers on a sectarian basis. The 20-year-old Lebanese-American Sunni distinguished between the religious and political “spheres” of the campus environment: “So, we’re very open, so I feel like… people can push aside their religious differences and they’ll be fine, but then when it comes to politics I feel like we use it as… a tool to push our interests, push our parties and our views… on other people, and then I think that’s where religion goes wrong. I don’t agree… I’ve understood [in my time at AUB]… kind of the comparison, how we use religion and sectarianism in our government as compared to the way we live our lives.”

The 20-year-old secularist man claimed to have encountered a great number of fellow students who identified with a religious community but, in terms of beliefs, identified as atheists. The same student provided examples of what he considered hypocritical behavior, such as drinking alcohol while claiming to be Muslim. But he also felt his experience at university had broadened his mind and made him more tolerant – for example, he used to joke, “what’s wrong with your beard, you look like a Brotherhood guy!” but after attending AUB for some time his opinion about the appropriateness of such comments changed. “Usually I saw a person with these scary beards, you know, and… I don’t want to talk to this guy, but it’s actually just an appearance thing, don’t judge a book by its cover, you know?”

**In your opinion, do the Lebanese share a basic understanding of Lebanon’s history? Please explain. Have you read the work of Kamal Salibi? Do you agree with his argument in A**
House of Many Mansions that each of Lebanon’s sects has a different view of Lebanese history and that these differences discourage the development of a Lebanese national identity?\(^{158}\)

Most students agreed that the unanswered question of history is a central obstacle to the development of a shared identity. The 21-year-old non-practicing Shi'i woman explained Lebanon’s origins as a state – “I think originally it was a Christian project, Christians and Druze” – in agreeing with Salibi’s position. She goes on to talk about how Lebanese nationalism was historically strong among Maronites, and that even the educated women of her village identify first as Shi’i, not first as Lebanese. In her opinion, Lebanese might prioritize their national identity on surveys or in conversation because that is what is expected: “if you really press people and go and ask people, maybe they’ll say it to your face because you’re foreign, they want to make it seem that way, maybe it’s because I’m Shi’a asking somebody else who’s Shi’a, but I really don’t think that’s the case [that they are Lebanese first] at all, I think they identify with their sect.” The 20-year-old secularist man agrees with this sentiment, arguing that no one wants to publicly admit to being sectarian even though everyone in fact is. He explains that Lebanese nationalism is political, as evidenced by the Maronite slogan “Lebanon first.”

The Christian man who grew up in the UAE believes history plays an important role, but “that it’s not the only factor. Because history is one thing, history is the past, it’s not the future… and it’s not, well, it’s actually going on right now… In a way, what you’re surrounded by… so I think that if the current… population right now gets… together to decide on something specific and that they sit down and decide to come to a conclusion that there might actually” be agreement. “The only problem, I think… with that argument is the fact that if you look back in history you don’t have a specific, unanimous source for the history, so that might be a little problem. But yeah, I do see a sense, in fact it’s almost undeniable, there is definitely a sense of logic to that [Salibi’s] argument.” The 19-year-old Sunni woman also agreed with the fact that there is little substance to Lebanese national identity, but mentioned (as did another interviewee) that Lebanese identity does assume some substance outside Lebanon.

\(^{158}\) I referred explicitly to Salibi’s argument in the interview because he is a well-known historian and was a professor at AUB. However, most students had not read his work (although many had heard of him), so I summarized his argument for them in a similar (although more conversational) way as I have presented it in an earlier chapter.
However, the 18-year-old Christian woman disagreed with Salibi’s argument: “I think every Lebanese, all the Lebanese know that they have, they are sharing the same history, they are sharing the same independence, the same… political… events that happen, that happened in the past. But when it comes to religion, they think that, everyone in the world thinks that… the religion he belongs to is the… history, has its own… history. Everyone thinks that… when it comes to their history, but for the Lebanese history it’s the same, I guess. It’s the same.” Thus, while she insists on a shared history, her own response demonstrates some degree of ambivalence.

The former Maronite atheist cited the Ta’if Agreement as an example of how Lebanon’s communities come to have competing views of historical developments: “There was the Ta’if Agreement… which was supposed to say that, hey, nobody lost, we are all friends, uh, actually… the Muslims won a lot via the Ta’if and the Christians lost a lot. One of the things that the Muslims want was the nomination of Lebanon as an Arabic [sic] country, which was disagreed upon throughout the history. So, uh, yes, the Lebanese people, each one has his own perspective… of the identity of Lebanon, everybody wants it his way, and eventually whatever your own… history, whether today, 10 years ago, 20 years ago, it depends on who’s… winning, and who’s forcing his opinion on the other. For example, one year ago… March 14… [was] the majority. Lebanon was… officially supposed to be pro-West, et cetera, now Lebanon became pro-Iran and Syria. I don’t know after five years where it will become [sic].” He goes on to argue that the Lebanese “don’t agree on a vision for the future, not only a common history, and the Lebanese people, they come from different backgrounds. They Shi’ites come from the Yemen and these… places… Christians were previously pagans in Mount Lebanon or Christianized with time, and… some of them would like to believe that they are Phoenicians.” Because of these different backgrounds, he says, he can actually identify members of different communities based solely on their physiognomy – their height, coloring, even “cubic heads.”

Importantly, the 24-year-old Marxist student – who has studied Middle East politics and history – agrees with Salibi’s sentiment and adds that “[a]nother aspect of why there is no national identity is simply because you have no nation.” This accords with an earlier discussion about national versus state identities in Lebanon (see Chapter One). For the Druze secularist student, history as a category is contested. He believes Salibi’s argument is “100 percent true”:
“If you ask me, who am I… and you ask anyone passing by in the street, you will have totally different answers.” His own perspective is informed by the ideology of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, and he discussed its founder’s seminal arguments at great length. The 20-year-old Sunni woman concurred with the interpretation of Salibi’s argument as well: “I agree that we are very, very proud to be Lebanese, but when you come to it, we, everybody does have their own understanding of history and their own powers and their own issues and, maybe… their own self-identification issues, I know I struggle with my own.”

From your studies and/or from your firsthand experience, do you believe there is such a thing as a Lebanese national identity? If so, please describe its content/meaning. If not, what do you think are the obstacles to the development of that identity?

Most respondents cited “superficial” (in the words of interviewees themselves) elements of culture that the Lebanese share in common, but found it difficult to describe the substance of a national identity beyond that level. Take, for example, the response of the 19-year-old Sunni woman: “No [there is no Lebanese national identity]. And if… there is unity, it’s on very superficial things, not on any core values in the state.” (For her, a core value would be respect of the state and its monopoly on power. There are two opposing camps on this point, she explains.) The 18-year-old Christian woman described Lebanese identity as based on many cultures living together, but could not describe the content of national identity in any greater detail. The 27-year-old Christian man referred to Lebanese identity as “a box full of specific objects” – objects specific to each sect. But he goes on to claim that Lebanese identity, on a more substantive level, is about “a sense of belonging, a sense of sticking together, a sense of… wanting to, to be part of the solution, not part of the problem.” The Shi'i LAU student emphasized that “being Lebanese is… like… a really diverse religious community… like, someone’s, uh, wearing a hijab or whatever, she looks at the one and she’s wearing a miniskirt and she accepts her now.” He believes the ability of the Lebanese to be friends with each other regardless of sectarian identity is what defines Lebanese identity, particularly for the next generation. His Baptist friend agreed, citing their friendship in spite of “opposite religions and opposite political views” as evidence.

The 24-year-old Marxist does not believe there is a coherent Lebanese national identity, and believes its absence is due to “nature of the Lebanese state.” The 18-year-old Sunni woman thinks it is a problem that two Lebanese can believe they are totally different from one another.
She thinks people should make an effort to come together, but that the problem is “people here don’t really listen to others.” The 20-year-old male secularist explains that while he carries a Lebanese ID card, “I don’t believe that there’s something called a Lebanese nationality.” He described the boundaries demarcating Lebanon as artificial, based in a Maronite desire to have a viable state, and claims that pan-Syrianism is a more legitimate ideological position than Lebanese nationalism. For him, Lebanon’s continued existence as distinct from Syria represents a form of “isolationism” that is to no one’s benefit. In fact, he believes that Lebanese national identity is “based upon Christian fascism.” The 24-year-old Marxist student agrees with the fact that many see themselves not as Lebanese, but as Syrian. The former Maronite who is now an atheist gave the example of a solution proposed to settle the civil war: make Lebanon a federation composed of 12 states, the laws of each of which would be determined according to the religion of that state. He then points to what he sees as the problem facing the Lebanon of today: “I had one friend conversation with one Shi'ite and he told me, ‘Listen, let me tell you something… Why would we, the Shi'ites, agree to… divide powers, when we can wait 20 years and control all Lebanon? This is why we want a unified Lebanon. Because sooner or later we will become more than 50 percent and we will control it all. Why do you want us to agree to such a division which is limiting our potential?’” This speaks to a sentiment somewhat widespread in the Maronite community.

_In your opinion, do the Lebanese see themselves primarily as members of their own sect, or as citizens of the Lebanese state? Do you think the answer if different for different religious sects? Do you identify with your religious community or as a Lebanese?_

Most respondents were convinced that, when the Lebanese are honest, they identify first and foremost with their sect. However, almost all students themselves identified first as Lebanese, thereby distinguishing again between their own generation and that of their parents (although a couple of students did acknowledge that others would identify them first as members of a particular sect). Notable exceptions were the 24-year-old Marxist, who identified himself first as an atheist, and the 20-year-old secularist, who identified as Syrian. The 18-year-old Christian woman considers her Lebanese identity more important than her Christian identity, which is “more international” in character. In her estimation, “religion… asks for you to be… loyal to your country, so being Lebanese is very important,” and prioritizing national over
religious/sectarian identity is necessary for progress in Lebanon. Although the former Maronite who is now an atheist claimed that Muslims are more likely to prioritize their religious identity than are Christians, most other respondents thought this trend was generally true of every one of Lebanon’s communities. However the 19-year-old Sunni woman offered the following response: “I think it would change from community to community. I cannot speak for other sects… but I do think, for example, there are a lot of Christians who don’t consider themselves Arab. So they would view themselves as maybe Christian, Lebanese, and perhaps Phoenician. Um, then a lot of Muslims, and there are a lot of Christians who do consider themselves Arab.” Again, the Phoenician myth of origins and the question of ethnicity more generally are highlighted.

The 27-year-old Christian who grew up in the UAE believes the tendency to identify with sect over the nation is generational: the older generation would claim a Lebanese identity “but they would immediately follow that up with their religious [identity]… because… religion and politics were so intermixed… but then if you look at the new generation, I think that, at least… what I most frequently see is that they identify themselves as Lebanese first and foremost.”

What is your overall evaluation of the present (confessional/consociational) political system in Lebanon? How effective is the Lebanese government in delivering basic services to people? Does it seem to you that disparities in access to basic services correspond to sectarian divisions – or, in other words, does the government “play favorites” or otherwise deliver services to one or more groups at the expense of other(s)?

The 18-year-old Christian woman considers Lebanon to be like an “internal mafia”: the Lebanese people cannot really know what is going on in government. And in her estimation, the government is terribly ineffective when it comes to delivering basic services. This sentiment was mirrored by virtually every respondent, all of whom found the system to be dysfunctional. The 20-year-old secularist student’s accusation that the present political system “magnifies, increases sectarian division” among the Lebanese was representative of the general position on the question. Most students found fatal flaws in the political system as it presently exists, although just shy of half of respondents still thought it was the best option for ensuring peace at least in the short term. But the 22-year-old Sunni grad student argued that “it’s not a good way of life,” that long-term stability should be emphasized over the day-to-day existence of the present period.
The same is true of disparate access to basic services, i.e. that there was general agreement, although some students thought this had less to do with sectarian affiliation than geography (it is important to note, however, that in Lebanon geography and sectarian affiliation are often directly connected). Scheduled power outages were the most commonly cited example of the neglect of some of Lebanon’s communities. Students also pointed to the corruption of political leaders, who were accused of siphoning off Lebanon’s resources for their own benefit.

The 19-year-old Shi'i woman worried that another civil war could erupt in Lebanon due to the instability of the political system. The 24-year-old Marxist claimed the present system is maintained “[b]ecause everyone has an interest, everyone internally has an interest in keeping Lebanon as a weak state, as a divided state. So I think the system has in itself the seeds of its failure… [it] can’t keep from failing.” This “seeds of failure” argument takes us back to Roeder’s analysis of the nature of power-sharing arrangements which are forged in contexts of significant diversity (indeed, social dis-integration). The 20-year-old Sunni student insisted that his generation “should teach our children a different way than our parents taught us.”

Even students who felt the sectarian system should be maintained still found plenty of room for reform. For example, the 19-year-old Sunni woman stated the following: “I am for sectarian representation, but uh, I do believe the attitudes of people need to change… because like you said, you can cooperate with other sects… it is possible to coexist… but people’s attitudes I think first have to change.”

Concluding Remarks: The Next Steps

As was demonstrated by the first two chapters of this paper, today’s Lebanese university students are faced with a tense religio-political environment in which national identity and the character of the Lebanese state represent fundamentally contested categories. It is a fragmented political society, a “social mosaic,” to which the next generation of leaders are presently responding, which defines the formative years of their political engagement. The results of my own research project suggest that university students are responding in creative (if not entirely new) ways to the problems they perceive within their political society. Even those students who support the maintenance of the status quo, who are pessimistic about the future prospects of the Lebanese state, appear to have been influenced by the university environment in compelling
ways. Many students are engaging meaningfully with the problems their generation faces, (re)formulating their religious identities and (re)defining the political commitments on their own terms.

Still, we are left with the question of how permanent is the impact of a liberal education on Lebanon’s next generation of political and social leaders. In the next phase of this project, I hope to explore the question of education’s impact in greater detail, asking questions which can be more nuanced as a result of this preliminary work. In the words of John Dewey,

Educating is the fundamental method of social progress and reform. … All reforms which rest simply upon the law, or the threatening of certain penalties, or upon changes in mechanical or outward arrangements, are transitory and futile. … But through education society can formulate its own purposes, can organize its own means and resources, and thus shape itself with definiteness and economy in the direction in which it wishes to move.159

This passage represents an incredibly optimistic, even idealistic, take not only on the potential impact of education, but also on what its function in society – particularly in facilitating societal change – should be. Dewey’s comments therefore comprise a normative argument about the role education should be made to play, a role which simultaneously underlies the motivations of many university educators while also presenting a number of ethical dilemmas (many of which have been subject to post-modern critique). By citing Dewey here, I do not intend to suggest that I support his argument without question. However, I find the passage relevant in light of what students themselves revealed in our conversations: while many students have lost faith in their government to function effectively at even the most basic level (let alone to instigate a wide-ranging transformation of a dysfunctional status quo), they point to trends among their classmates, to the changes they have themselves undergone during their time at university, in outlining what might be possible for the future. They credit the university with promoting an atmosphere of increased tolerance, if not also increased understanding – and this is true, again, even of many of the more “pessimistic” students I interviewed.

If we grant Dewey’s argument purely on the basis of Lebanese students’ own responses to interview questions, the way forward for Lebanon rests with those students, particularly with the politically engaged among them who are willing to work for a brighter future despite the

significant challenges they face. And if Dewey is correct, we also have an obligation to ensure that the content of liberal education continues to promote open-mindedness, critical engagement, and creative thinking, because – according to this argument – in education lies the way forward.


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APPENDIX

Interview Questions for March 2011 Research in Beirut

Introductory Notes:

Participants will be handed a consent form before the interview begins summarizing the purpose of my research and detailing their rights as participants, including the right to confidentiality and the right to cease participation at any point before, during, or after the interview. The consent form will also include my contact information (e-mail address and US telephone number) in case participants have questions about how data will be used or if they determine they would like to have their data removed from the record and destroyed. Research participants must be at least 18 years of age and any volunteer under 18 will be respectfully asked not to participate. Additionally, for the purposes of this study participants must be citizens of Lebanon; thus, volunteers will be asked to disclose their nationality before the commencement of the interview. Finally, the consent form will indicate that interviews will be recorded using an electronic device and that material will be transcribed for use in analysis. To protect participants’ confidentiality, I will not request that a signed copy of the consent form be returned to me. Instead, participants will keep the copy of the form. I will only record given (not family) names for my own purposes and, in any presentation of my research (written or oral) I will use pseudonyms for participants. Please see my application to the Institutional Review Board for details on how data will be protected against breaches of confidentiality.

It is important to note that, because of the sample population for this study, a translator will not be necessary. All students at the American University of Beirut speak English fluently, and English is the language of instruction at AUB. I recognize that drawing my sample from this population presents a number of obstacles to generalizability, but I am confident that the advantages of studying this population outweigh the disadvantages.

By conducting interviews with Lebanese students, I hope to provide qualitative evidence of contemporary youth attitudes regarding religion and politics in Lebanon. I plan to use interview material to evaluate academic claims about the political present and future of the Lebanese state. My goal is to conduct a minimum of 15 to 20 in-person interviews with Lebanese students at AUB from a variety of religious backgrounds. If I am unable to complete a sufficient number of in-person interviews during my weeklong stay in Beirut, I might disseminate the same interview questions as are featured below via e-mail to students at AUB (in accordance with the university’s policies for contacting students). However, before contacting any potential participants via e-mail, I will submit a modified form of this application to the IRB for approval. Regardless of how information is collected, the substantive content of my questionnaire will not change. However, because an interview is – at its most basic level – a conversation, the wording of the questions below might change in response to the interviewee’s input.

A final note: Interview questions are organized below for my own convenience. I have intentionally included more questions than I will have time to ask in the interest of being as comprehensive in my application to the IRB as possible. I will have the script memorized before I conduct interviews so that I can remain flexible and responsive in conversation with the participant. I reserve the right to take questions out of order or to exclude questions from the interview for reasons of time or as a result of the interviewee’s responses (which are likely to come out of order). Participants will not be handed a copy of the interview script, although they will be permitted to view it at their request.

Interview Questions:

Message to the interviewee (will be read before commencement of interview): In this interview I will be asking questions about your views regarding religion and politics. I will ask questions about your current views, your
upbringing and education, and your understanding of your community’s beliefs and values as well as the beliefs and values of other communities in Lebanon. If at any time I ask a question with which you are uncomfortable or which you prefer not to answer, you are free to decline comment. Please keep in mind that responses will be confidential in that your full name will not be linked to your responses, and please answer questions as openly and honestly as you are able.

General:

1. Could you please provide your age and nationality, your current year in school, and the focus of your university studies? What are your plans for after university graduation? (Note: If the student is not a Lebanese citizen, she/he will be respectfully asked not to participate in the study.)
2. From which geographic region are you? City/village? Where does your family currently reside?
3. With which religious community do you identify? (If interviewee answers only “Muslim” or “Christian”, she/he will be asked to further specify to which sect she/he belongs.)
   a. Are your university friends mostly members of your own sect or religious community, or are most of your friends members of other sects or religious communities? Do you discuss the topics of religion/sect or politics with university friends?
4. Do you think access to political power is more restricted for some sectarian communities than others? Please explain your response. Do you believe your own religious community has fair and proportional access to political power?
5. Do you participate in politics? If yes, how so? (For example, through voting, participation in political demonstrations or organizations on or off campus, etc.) If not, why?

Religious Identity:

6. Do you regularly attend religious services or participate in religious activities? Did you regularly attend religious services or participate in religious activities throughout your childhood or when you still lived with your family?
7. In your opinion, what are the most important criteria for membership in your own sectarian/religious community? What values or beliefs are most important to your own community, in terms of religious identity and in terms of political participation? Do you agree with those priorities?
8. Do you consider yourself a practicing member of your religious community?
   a. How would you define a practicing member of your religious community? Do you think your definition matches that of others in your community? Why or why not?
   b. Did you listen primarily to religious music during your childhood and/or when you lived with your family? What about now?
   c. What books do you remember being exposed to in primary school and at home? Was the content of those books religious? (Please include explicitly religious texts – for example, the Qur’an or Bible – in this list.) How do they compare to what you read now?
9. In your opinion, does membership in a religious/sectarian community mean or involve something different in Lebanon than it does in other Middle Eastern states? What about compared to Europe or the United States?
10. In your opinion, what was the primary cause of the 2006 war? Other violent conflicts? Do you believe religion plays a central role in conflict in Lebanon, or is religion a mask for other sources of disagreement?

Education:

11. What is your main source of domestic news? International news?
12. Do you read academic literature about Lebanon? If so, please provide some examples and/or summarize the contents of that literature.
13. Has your university education impacted your understanding of politics in Lebanon, the Middle East, and more broadly? How so?
   a. How would you compare the Lebanese political system to the political systems in the region and beyond? Does the Lebanese political system function more or less effectively than other political systems? Please provide details.
14. Has your university education impacted your understanding of religion? Has it influenced your understanding of the religious divisions in Lebanese society? Please explain.
a. Has your university education impacted your understanding of your own religious identity, or of your values more generally? Explain.

15. How would you describe the religious values of the AUB faculty? The student body?

16. How would you describe the political values of the AUB faculty? The student body?

17. In your opinion, do the Lebanese people share a basic understanding of Lebanon’s history? Please explain.
   a. Have you read the work of Kamal Salibi? Do you agree with his argument in *A House of Many Mansions* that each of Lebanon’s sects has a different view of Lebanese history and that these differences discourage the development of a Lebanese national identity?

18. From your studies and/or from your firsthand experience, do you believe there is such a thing as a Lebanese national identity? If so, please describe its content/meaning. If not, what do you think are the obstacles to the development of that identity?
   a. Do you think academics are correct in arguing that the development of a Lebanese national identity is important, or can Lebanon enjoy political stability without a sense of shared identity? Can the present political system guarantee stability if political representation is adjusted to the demographic realities of today’s Lebanon?

**Political Participation:**

19. In your opinion, do Lebanese people believe that elected leaders who do not belong to their own sect accurately represent them in politics? To what sect do the representatives from your home district belong? Do you believe they represent your values and/or political opinions?

20. Do you think Lebanese living in districts with representatives from a sect other than their own participate in elections?

**Role of Religion/Sect in Politics:**

21. How would you describe the role of religion or sect in Lebanese politics today? Do you think it has changed in the last 20 years (since the close of the civil war period)?

22. In your opinion, what role should religion or sect play in the Lebanese political system?
   a. What is your evaluation of the National Pact? Do you think its basic formula is outdated, or do you believe it can be made to work in today’s Lebanon?

23. Do you think the role of religion in politics has decreased or increased in your lifetime? Please explain.

24. In your opinion, do the Lebanese people see themselves primarily as members of their own sect, or as citizens of the Lebanese state? Do you think the answer is different for different religious sects? Do you identify first with your religious community or as a Lebanese?

25. In your opinion, are people more or less willing to cooperate across sectarian lines for shared political goals?
   a. What would you define as the shared political goals of all Lebanese, regardless of sect, or do such shared goals even exist?
   b. Do you believe the Syrian withdrawal and the investigation into Hariri’s assassination have brought the Lebanese people closer together politically or further divided them?

26. What is your overall evaluation of the present (confessional/consociational) political system in Lebanon?
   a. How effective is the Lebanese government in delivering basic services to its people? Does it seem to you that disparities in access to basic services correspond to sectarian divisions – or, in other words, does the government “play favorites” or otherwise deliver services to one or more groups at the expense of other(s)?

27. Are you familiar with Western academic or popular evaluations of Lebanon (regarding religion/sect, politics/government, conflict/(prospects for) peace, social sphere, etc.)? Do you think this literature accurately represents what goes on in Lebanon? Why or why not?

**Other**

28. Is there any additional input you would like to offer that was not already expressed in response to the interview questions?