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The Inevitability of Identity: Lebanon, Nationalism and the Failure of an Idea

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Cover Page Footnote

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Examining Lebanese historical identity, Sandra Mackey muses that, “Lebanon was split at its very soul…at the crossroads of West and East”, immediately illuminating the depth of the conflict over the Lebanese nation. Indeed, Lebanon, arguably more than any other Middle Eastern state, has been wracked by conflicting narratives of identity and nationhood. At the most philosophical level of this conflict, the civilizations of East and West struggled for ownership of Lebanon’s identity. More specifically, throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, Maronites, Sunnis, Druze, Shia, and Greek Orthodox have all fought, bled, and died to secure a modicum of community and security. Throughout this confusion, a unique political system arose, wobbled, and finally collapsed in a spasm of violence of identity and nationhood. Ultimately, this system was unsuccessful because it did not seek to illuminate or alleviate the fears, goals, and beliefs of each community.

Prior to the civil war, Maronite Christians were more dedicated than any other Lebanese sectarian community to the creation of a unique Lebanese nation- distinct from surrounding Arab countries, and ostensibly secular but with an immutably secure social station for Maronites. The fervor of the Maronites was based upon an amalgamation of historical and perceived threats providing the foundation for communal identity, existing upon both the spiritual and physical levels. Since their inception with the persecution of the Syrian monk Maron and subsequent flight to the Lebanese Mountains in the 6th century, Maronites have existed as a minority population. The historical overlap of migrating Muslim communities traveling from the Arabian Peninsula to Lebanon with the gradual decline of the Crusades- and Western European interest in the Middle East-
created an undeniable sense within the Maronite community that they represented the last bastion of Christian faith within the Arab world. Religion was also the strongest link between the Maronites and Western allies, particularly with the Papacy and France. Considering the mid-20th century, the Islamic question of Arab nationalism only served to reinforce Maronite religious identity.

The 1860 massacre of the Maronite town Dayr al Qamar by Druze militants provided a physical historical flashpoint which solidified the Maronite identity of persecution and isolation. Perhaps the irony of the massacre best encapsulates the complications of this identity: the massacre itself certainly does represent an example of a stronger and religiously-distinct community oppressing the Maronites. The Druze, however, were also a persecuted religious minority who, in reality, historically have held a much more precarious position in Lebanese society than the Maronites have (if better consolidated). Considering the context, the threat to the Maronites was real; but it was also enhanced to represent the entire Muslim community, and was consciously manipulated in order to alter perceptions against the Maronites as a community of power. For despite this deeply-held identity of persecution, the Maronites would indeed dominate Lebanese society and politics for most of the 20th century, before succumbing to the ravages of the civil war.

Recognizing the need for a larger Lebanese identity superceding their own communal one, the Maronites constructed a national narrative of ancestry from the Phoenicians. This ‘Mediterranean’ identity is based shakily upon Phoenician merchants who did establish towns and small trading posts on Lebanese shores many centuries before; 19th and 20th century Maronites, however, led by the intellectual Tannus al
Shidyaq, revived and greatly embellished this identity to serve as a unifying concept for all Lebanese. This identity was obviously problematic, even when restricted to only the Maronites, particularly considering the Syrian origin of Maron himself. This Phoenician notion has proved resilient within the Maronite community, however, simply because it presents a narrative somewhat grounded in historical fact that allows for the construction of a nation distinct from Arab Muslim, Arab Christian, or Western European history.

In addition, the Maronites maintained diplomatic and metaphorical links to the Western world, particularly during the French Mandate of 1920-46. The struggle to maintain a foreign power alliance has been a fundamental tenet of Maronite policy since the Crusades, and the historical draw of this struggle resulted in a mixing of Maronite culture with French. Such an amalgamation girds the perceived supremacy of the Maronite community over that of the Lebanese Muslims- as arbiters of modern Western culture, particularly coveted technologies and sciences. This is a dual perception: employed by Maronites to portray themselves as superior to Lebanese Muslims, and as equals to Europeans; and existing within the Maronite mind as proof of Maronite uniqueness, significance to Lebanese culture, and, most importantly, unremitting isolation relative to other Lebanese communities. Pierre Gemayel, Maronite leader of the notorious Phalange militia, proclaimed, “Lebanon is a mission”, and the Maronite community often conducted itself in such a manner.

Of the Lebanese Muslim sects, Sunni Muslims have been dominant for most of Lebanese history, only now facing the threat of a surging southern Shia culture. Interestingly, however, Lebanese Sunnis have historically had relatively less political power than Maronites despite their numerical superiority, and have even often been
overshadowed by charismatic Druze leaders. This relative insignificance—particularly during the civil war—is primarily due to three factors: Lebanese Sunni nationalist claims being overshadowed by Nasser’s pan-Arabism; lack of cohesiveness and unifying apprehension relative to Maronite and Druze minorities; and dearth of political leaders capable of both navigating Lebanese politics and leading militias in times of gritty guerilla war. As a result, Sunnis have often been dominated by particularly Maronites throughout Lebanese history.

Sunni identity as distinctly Lebanese—differentiated from Maronite claims—suffered from both the lack of urgency of the Sunni community relative to that of the Maronites, and from the appeal of Arab nationalism. Although the 1932 census delineated a Lebanese populace split almost evenly between Christian and Muslim communities, it was widely acknowledged by both sects that Muslim birth rates would erase numerical neutrality within the decade. This unstoppable trend both dulled Sunni need for the construction of a Lebanese identity as a means of communal protection, and sharpened Maronite fears of inevitable Muslim dominance. In turn, this inexorable progression fostered what seems to be a historical sense of leniency on the part of Sunnis towards political and social claims of Maronites— an implicit Sunni recognition of Maronite fear and inevitable triumph. This leniency, however, allowed Maronite leaders to guard the Constitution created by 1932 census which—politically favored Christians—for far longer than was numerically justifiable.

Lebanese Sunnis were also swept up in the wave of pan-Arabism that washed over the Middle East through the guidance of Nasser in the 1950s. Pan-Arabism had two significant effects in Lebanon, both of which politically marginalized Sunnis. Arab
nationalism denied or suppressed Sunni attempts of creating a Muslim Lebanese identity as an alternative to that promoted so stridently by the Maronites. Like many other Arab states of the time, Lebanon in relation to Nasser’s Arab nationalism was subject to the emotional fervor aroused by such pan-nationalism, but also to the political realities of subordination to Egypt faced by most smaller Arab states. This reality, and the very attempt at constructing such a Sunni-Arab identity across the Middle East, united Maronites, Druze, Shia, and Greek Orthodox Lebanese in opposition. These sects fought particularly voraciously against any political or social link to Syria, understandably fearing that non-Sunni communities would gradually lose their already tenuous hold upon political power. Thus, the imposition of a greater pan-Arab identity actually hindered consolidation of any Sunni Lebanese identity.

Partly as a result of these two trends remarked upon above, the Sunni community also simply lacked political leaders of Maronite and Druze caliber. Sunni zuama-Lebanese religious-political bosses operating through charismatic authority and well-established political lineages- were unable to operate both as smooth political actors and brutally courageous military leaders. Leading Sunni political families did not produce a leader comparable to Kamal Jumblatt, Camille Chamoun, or either Gemayel. When unwieldy super-national constructions such as pan-Arabism collapsed with onset of the civil war, Sunnis lacked both a cohesive, unified, and desperate identity, and any outstanding leaders who might have filled such a gap.

The Druze present a fascinating image of communal resilience and unified religious solidarity juxtaposed with a largely ambiguous impact upon Lebanese identity and history- both traits resulting from cultural and religious nuances. A small and highly
distinct branch of Shiism, the Lebanese Druze bear similarities to the Maronites, particularly as a religious minority with little hope of future growth. The major distinction and nuance of Druze culture is willingness to compromise spiritually (at least superficially) in order to survive, largely due to a lack of any ally comparable to the French-Maronite relationship. If the Maronite community is under threat from encroaching Islam, the Druze are truly isolated from both Muslims and Christians. Such a context allowed for the growth perhaps the most cohesive Lebanese sectarian identity, committed to one thing only: survival. Along with the Druze historical ability to compromise one’s tenets when necessary, Druze fighter and leaders earned a reputation over the 19th and 20th centuries as being the fiercest warriors in Lebanon. Even Pierre Gemayel’s Phalangist militia proved unable to defeat Kamal Jumblatt’s forces during the civil war—despite the fact that the Druze only making up six percent of the Lebanese population.

This fierceness, however, did not typically extend into the political realm of Lebanese history, as the Druze have typically opted to remain apart from Sunni and Maronite political maneuvering. Despite often warring with Maronite clans, the Druze through the 20th century freely made and broke alliances with both sides when the circumstances seemed fit. Such behavior and identity allowed for survival, but had less of an impact upon Lebanese identity and national construction than did particularly Maronite ideas. 20th century Lebanon was ideologically dominated by Arab nationalism and the opposing sectarian reaction, and Maronite Phoenician-European ideals pitted against Islam. Pragmaticism perhaps allowed to Druze survive, remaining an inconspicuous community except in times of war, but also denied the Druze status upon
the intellectual battleground. Kamal Jumblatt, the most significant 20th century Druze leader, held political aspirations to gaining the Christian presidency or the Sunni prime minister seat, but with the outbreak of civil war quickly returned to the fundamental identity of religious-political warlord. Druze identity, while remarkably resilient and sturdy, remained bereft of greater moral, cultural, or spiritual claims which might be applied to the state of Lebanon, and therefore had little positive impact upon Lebanese identity.

Prior to the civil war, the Lebanese Shia remained largely marginalized in the poor, rural south, typically ignored by both Maronite and Sunni politicians. They would, however, become extremely significant in the decades following the war until today, and will be discussed later. Greek Orthodox played an ambiguous role in the construction of Lebanese identity during the 20th century. Similarly to the Shia, the Orthodox were relatively politically marginalized, and were of little consequence during the civil war. Greek Orthodox intellectuals, however, were instrumental in promoting Lebanese identity as part of “Greater Syria”, distinct from either the Lebanese state or pan-Arabism. The Parti Populaire Syrien- the primary pro-Syria Lebanese political part- was founded by the Greek Orthodox Antoun Saadeh, which although significant ideologically never became a powerful political force. Both Maronites and Sunnis were simply too adamantly opposed to such a union with Syria.

The two most important events in Lebanon before the civil war were the 1932 census and the National Pact. The census provided the initial formal and political division of Lebanon into sectarian communities- the first step towards Lebanon’s identity as functioning political unit defined by religious interests. In addition, the census reflected
both the power and growing weakness behind Maronite demands. The Maronites were able to obtain a slim majority, but were only able to do so by relying on inclusion of expatriate Lebanese Christians. Moreover, the result reflected the will of the French government controlling Lebanon at the time, which provided critical support for the Maronite community. Both the actual numeric representation of the census and the implicit strengths and weaknesses it revealed would reemerge with the National Pact of 1943.

The National Pact of 1943, which became the basis for Lebanese governance until the civil war and Taif Agreement, was constructed upon the statistics of the 1932 census, and the various fears of the major Lebanese communities. The Pact’s most significant measures were awarding a 6-5 Christian-Muslim ratio in the Lebanese legislature, the presidency to the Maronites, the prime ministership to the Sunnis, and the speaker of the parliament to the Shia. Thus, the Pact sought to strike a balance between the major sectarian and ideological conflicts, above all maintaining Lebanon’s status as an independent country bound fully to neither East nor West. Unfortunately, being based upon the 1932 census ensured that the Pact represented a population and power situation that was rapidly fading into the past. Most fittingly, the Pact was actually never formalized in writing, but simply became the accepted implicit document guiding Lebanese politics. The implicit status of the most important political document in Lebanese history symbolizes the inability of the various sects to construct a national identity coherent enough to be formalized and comprehended by anyone not firmly enmeshed in the wiles of Lebanese politics.
Nevertheless, the Pact lasted through the presidential crisis of 1958, which exemplified inherent strain upon the Lebanese political system- nearly broken by the influence of Nasser’s Arab nationalism. Black September of 1970, however, and the resulting influx of PLO refugees and fighters into Lebanon would lead to the Lebanese civil war and the collapse of communal politics. The PLO intruded upon the Lebanese national identity in several ways: presenting an armed and highly aggressive ally to Sunni Lebanese, gravely frightening for Maronites; angering Sunnis and other Muslims themselves by marauding through Lebanon, while simultaneously seeking political and ideological support in the campaign against Israel; and fatally, bringing into question both the numerical legitimacy of the critical 1932 census, and all the underlying assumptions. The schizophrenic Lebanese political system finally crashed to ground, bringing with it thousands of dead and a ravaged countryside.

Without delving too deeply into the actual events of the war, the most significant and obvious implication of the war was the utter destruction of any remaining belief that idealized Lebanese national identity- based upon sectarian communities, but ostensibly secular, and unique from East and West- was untenable. The Maronites retreated from aspirations to Western identity, consolidating in the mountains amongst the most uncompromising, religiously-devout, and aggressive clans. Mackey describes one monk ominously declaring, “We know how to be terrorists if we have to”, displaying the depth of primal identity brought out by the carnage of militia war. The Druze engaged in similar tactics, which, however, they were more at ease with, and were thus more effective overall. Israeli and Syrian intervention destroyed lingering myths of Lebanese independence from East and West, while the massacres of Sabra and Shatila- carried out
by the Phalange, abetted by the IDF- renewed the specter of religious and civilizational warfare of Christian versus Muslim, West versus East.

The result, symbolized by the Taif Agreement of 1989, was largely defeat for Maronites, and the withdrawal of Western powers from the competition for Lebanon’s soul. The redistribution of political representation accorded more power to Muslims, fittingly. More importantly, however, aspirations to a complex but unified, fractious but fundamentally stable Lebanon died away. The communal fears and narratives, long simmering underneath a thin and unstable political barrier, had burst asunder, with the Maronites as the defeated. With the defeat of the Maronites went Western foreign powers as well. The Europeans had long since retreated from support for the Maronites, but the Marine barracks bombing and the assassination of Bashir Gemayal ended US and Israeli attempts to seek an active hand in Lebanese affairs. Israel would continue to assault Hezbollah in coming years, but never again would declare allegiance to a Lebanese faction and engage in nation-building. Lebanon, through bloodshed and death, entered a new, Muslim-dominated iteration.

The Shia resurgence in recent decades has fittingly paralleled this new paradigm. Emerging from more than a millennium of political marginalization, the Shia have arisen alongside the clerics of the Iranian Revolution. Hezbollah has consolidated itself from a kidnapping organization during the civil war into an extremely well-funded and disciplined faction. Hezbollah often employs the rhetoric of the Iranian Revolution, has successfully co-opted the Palestinian cause from Sunni groups, and has spread through social and humanitarian branches similar to those of the Muslim Brotherhood. Today, Hezbollah and Amal- another prominent Lebanese Shia organization- compete with
Sunnis for political and social influence. These groups are setting the ground for new conflicts of Lebanese identity: rather than Christian and Muslim, Sunni and Shia- a conflict that is being reflected in Iraq as well. The battle for Lebanon’s soul, it seems, has not ended, but only entered a new iteration.